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Identity narratives of black domestic workers' adult children partially reared by their parents' white employers

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Abstract

This study has investigated the identity narratives of a particular group of young black adults who lived during their childhood with their domestic worker parent(s) or grandparent, while at the same time being incorporated to some significant extent into the homes and lives of their parent(s) or grandparents' white employers. The research sought to reveal how this unique home environment, positioned within the socio-political context of a changing South Africa, might have impacted on the identities these participants construct for themselves. The study is qualitative in design and uses an interpretivist, phenomenological paradigm, privileging the speaker and their lived subjective experiences. Identity was viewed as fluid, multiple and constructed in contextual and relational ways. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with eight adult participants, male and female. These were transcribed and a narrative analysis of the form and a thematic analysis of the content was undertaken. The research revealed the strong influence of childhood contexts and relationships, together with social discourses of whiteness and blackness, on the identity narratives of these participants. It brought to light the dislocation from cultural roots and the effects of western culture on their identity positioning. It illuminated the complicated and sometimes contradictory identity subjectivities these participants narrate and yet at the same time revealed the suggestion of new identities and ways of being, that are different from the past, for these participants in South Africa today.

Keywords: Identity; young black South Africans; domestic workers; white employers; race; culture; narrative; qualitative research.