

PSYCHOSOCIAL DEFICITS ASSOCIATED WITH TEENAGERS BORN AND RAISED IN A "SMALL-HOUSE" FAMILY SETTING IN CHERUTOMBO IN MARONDERA, ZIMBABWE

Shingirai Paul Mbulayi, Simon M. Kang'ethe

The family as a sacrosanct conduit of care and protection, as well as a forum for the socialisation of children is increasingly being threatened in Zimbabwe by the exponentially growing impact of the small-house phenomenon (clandestine extramarital affairs). This article reports on a qualitative study, which established that being born and raised in a small-house family is associated with feelings of rejection, loneliness, loss of identity, low self-esteem, poor social intelligence and social stigma. These psychosocial deficits have been noted to contribute to developmental and emotional challenges for children, which can have undesirable social outcomes. This discussion is intended to support service providers and families to effectively safeguard the wellbeing of these children.

SKangethe@ufh.ac.za

Mr Shingirai Paul Mbulayi, Postgraduate student, Department of Social Work/Social Development, University of Fort Hare, Alice, South Africa.

Prof. Simon M. Kang'ethe, Department of Social Work/Social Development, University of Fort Hare, Alice, South Africa.

**Keywords:** Socialization, Social stigma, cultural taboo, moral bankruptcy, clandestine relationships, concubine/mistresses, emotional turbulence

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**Shingirai Paul Mbulayi, Simon M. Kang’ethe**

Shingirai Paul Mbulayi, Orcid Id: 0000-0002-7412-6234

Simon M. Kang’ethe, Orci Id: 0000-0001-91500235

Mr Shingirai Paul Mbulayi, Postgraduate student, Department of Social Work/Social Development, University of Fort Hare, Alice, South Africa.

Prof. Simon M. Kang’ethe, Department of Social Work/Social Development, University of Fort Hare, Alice, South Africa.

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### INTRODUCTION

Globally governments and child welfare organisations have made significant inroads in advocating, positioning and safeguarding the welfare of children through the promulgation of international conventions and their subsequent domestication in national constitutions and policy frameworks (UNICEF, 2014; Francis, 2007). These efforts have been largely informed by the realisation that childhood psychosocial experiences have far-reaching implications for children’s emotional, social and behavioural development (LeVine, 2018). Evidence from different corners of the world demonstrates that these efforts are paying dividends, given the significant improvements in the global indicators of child welfare, including improvements in school enrolments, reduction of child malnutrition and starvation (UNICEF, 2014) as well as a reduction of child mortality rates associated with traditional child-killer diseases (Kyu, Pinho, Wagner, Brown, Bertozzi-Villa, Charlson & Fitzmaurice, 2016). Nevertheless, despite these achievements, children born out of wedlock are reportedly still being disenfranchised as a result of familial, religious and social factors associated with their membership of unofficial and sometimes secretive families that are considered to be culturally taboo and thus deemed to be morally bankrupt (Giancarlo and Rottmann, 2015; Muchabaiwa, 2017; Mushinga, 2016).

Although the practice of having clandestine relationships has always been part of all societies since time immemorial (Giddens, 2013), it is only in recent times that the phenomenon has grown to such an extent as to threaten the sanctity of the traditional marital union and its function of raising healthy children, whether socially, morally, physically and culturally (Mushinga 2016; Muchabaiwa, 2017; Giddens, 2013). Mutseta (2016, citing Zeitzen (2008) and Nyamnjoh (2005)) notes that the practice of having clandestine extramarital relationships is a worldwide phenomenon, albeit known by different names in different societies. For example, in Europe it is referred to as having a concubine or mistress; in Senegal it is known as *diriyanke*, while in Kenya it is commonly referred to as *mpango wa kando*. Notwithstanding the wide acknowledgement of the detrimental impact of these stealthy relationships on the sacredness of the marital institution and to general family life (Muchabaiwa, 2017), there is still very little attention devoted to the psychosocial harms of these unorthodox extramarital unions caused to the children born and raised in these families. The predicament of the children born and raised in small-house families is particularly severe, because of the dearth of research targeting these children as possible victims of these socio-cultural taboo unions (Muchabaiwa, 2017). The bulk of the available literature on these secret extramarital unions is largely confined to their moral (Mutseta, 2016), social and economic (Muchabaiwa, 2017) consequences; other commentaries are based on pseudo-scientific studies and anecdotal reports, which hardly capture the true scope and magnitude of the plight of the children born and raised in these families.

While the social and moral impact of clandestine extramarital unions cannot be over-emphasized, the effects of this phenomenon on the psychosocial wellbeing of teenagers born and raised in these families are particularly devastating. This is because the teenage years coinciding with the developmental stage of adolescents are naturally characterized by emotional turbulence associated with bodily, psychological and maturational changes as the young person develops a new and more stable identity (Sinha & Modi, 2017). The concern is that the moral, social and cultural stigma and the strong sense of alienation associated with clandestine affairs may be co-opted into forming identities of teenagers born and raised in these marriages. This is a huge concern in Zimbabwe where the phenomenon of clandestine marital affairs has been noted to be increasing.

This article will first focus on the background of the phenomenon of teenagers raised in small-house family settings, followed by the problem statement that guided the research for this article. This is followed up by an outline of the theoretical framework for the interpretation of the phenomenon under investigation. Then the research methodology will be presented, together with an outline of the purpose of the study and a description of the study domain. This will be followed by an outline of the research findings, informed by a discussion of the literature. Finally, a conclusion and some recommendations will be offered.

## **BACKGROUND**

In Zimbabwe's colloquial language, "small-house" is a derogatory term used to describe an extramarital affair, which implies a naturally polygynous setup, except that it is conceived and maintained secretly without the knowledge and blessing of the families of the partners as per cultural prescriptions (Mushinga, 2016). Muchabaiwa (2017) argues that the small-house phenomenon in Zimbabwe is a contemporary practice in which the Western concept of monogamous marriage is upheld nominally, but in actual fact the husband retains another clandestine family elsewhere. Living Zimbabwe (2008) adds that a small-house in contemporary Zimbabwe describes a secret sexual relationship where the girlfriend acts as a second wife, and in the process receives a number of benefits such as living expenses, a monthly allowance, shopping sprees and dinner dates, among other things as would happen within a monogamous relationship.

Recent research in Zimbabwe and beyond has shown that *small-house/ concubine/ mistress* households have become highly active domains of reproduction and child rearing, a significant shift from common extramarital affairs where sexual relations are mainly for pleasure and financial gain and not necessarily for reproduction (Mushinga 2016; Mutseta, 2016). This shift has seen more children being born and raised in households where their parents' relationships continue to be kept a secret. Analysts and social commentators have questioned the impact of this marital arrangement on the wellbeing of children born and raised in these families. There is a considerable body of literature indicating that children hailing from households where their parents have secretive extramarital affairs face a range of challenges, including poor socialisation (Muchabaiwa, 2017), poor attachment (Shaver, Mikulincer, Sahdra & Gross, 2016), low self-esteem and inadequate confidence as well as low social intelligence (Marigold, Cavallo, Holmes and Wood, 2014), and they usually harbour feelings of rejection and ineptitude (Muchabaiwa, 2017). Mushinga (2016) established that children born and raised in small-house families face strong social rejection by those to whom they should naturally belong, including their extended families. Additionally, Mutseta (2016) posits that children born out of wedlock often lose their natural identities, as they are often registered under their mothers' surnames. This is unfortunate, because in Africa the issue of identity is of great importance, as it is believed to be the direct link between an individual and his/her ancestors who provide protection and security. Moreover, without their fathers' surnames, children risk losing any benefits through inheritance in the event of the death of their biological parents, especially their fathers.

Despite the acknowledgement that children in small-house family settings are being negatively affected, a clear understanding of the specific deficits they face is not evident in the literature. This, then, informs the problem formulation that is described here.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Children born and raised out of wedlock face a multiplicity of psychosocial deficits, which puts them at a competitive disadvantage in relation to their peers (Golombok, 2014; Richards, 2012). People have been socialised to perceive and treat those who engage in extramarital affairs, as well as their offspring, with contempt, rejection and prejudice, which has devastating psychosocial impacts on children born and raised in these unions. According to Sigmund Freud's psychodynamic theory, negative psychosocial experiences among children can lead to serious socio-emotional wellbeing issues, which may result in low self-esteem, poor attachment and unstable sense of belonging, identity crisis, feelings of ineptitude, and general unhappiness in their later lives (LeVine, 2018; Newman & Newman, 2017). With the small-house phenomenon reaching high levels in Zimbabwe (Muchabaiwa, 2017; Mushinga, 2016), the psychosocial experiences and deficits associated with children born and raised in these family setups are a cause for concern, which requires empirical research in order to safeguard the wellbeing of children. It is therefore crucial to explore the psychosocial deficits associated with children raised in small-house family settings to establish measures that can mitigate the psychosocial deficits detrimental to the health and wellbeing of these vulnerable children.

## **THEORETICAL APPROACH: BOWEN'S FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY (BFST)**

This paper is conceptualised in the light of Murray Bowen's (1988) family systems theory (BFST). According to Titelman (2014a), BFST is a natural systems theory of relationships that construes the family as an emotional unit whose members are mutually interdependent and constantly regulating each other. BFST falls within the ambit of functional theory, from where it borrows its functional approach (Titelman, 2014b). The core tenets of the theory are discussed below.

### **The individual influences and is influenced by the family unit**

BFST conceptualises the family as a complex, dynamic, and changing collection of parts, subsystems and family members (Fiske, & Taylor, 2013; Titelman, 2014c). The theory posits that family members are constantly being influenced and influencing each other either directly or indirectly to behave, think or act in a certain manner (Kolb, 2014). In the context of the study that informed this article, the BFST is crucial in interpreting how relational exchanges in small-houses as emotional units impact on the psychosocial wellbeing of teenagers who were born and raised in these families.

### **Behaviour as a by-product of socialization by progenitors**

The theory asserts that voluntary and involuntary actions or decisions taken by individuals are often the products of learned behaviours through socialisation by his/her progenitors (Titelman, 2014c). Bjorklund and Causey (2017) argue that parents play a critical role in the way that their children view and interpret social reality, and how they also engage in that social reality. The learned behaviours acquired from progenitors are easily impressed into the working memory of children, because they serve a variety of practical purposes and also merge sympathetically with socialised behaviours and expectations which would have been transmitted over generations (Kolb, 2014; Fiske, & Taylor, 2013). Central in the family systems theory is the belief that understanding the way in which an individual's behaviour is shaped by his or her progenitors helps to mitigate and sanction negative behaviours, and enhances the ability of the individual to forge an independent identity without mindlessly following in the footsteps of their progenitors (Titelman, 2014a; Becvar & Becvar, 2017).

### **Emotional cut-off**

Summers (2016) writes that, on the one hand, the complex positive relational exchanges between family members define the family unit as a resource and support structure, while on the other hand, poor relational exchanges may result in the manifestation of emotional clashes. In family systems where positive emotional exchanges are maintained, family stability is achieved, while poor or blocked emotional exchanges can trigger frustration and disquiet that might lead to emotional cut-off by some members (Titelman, 2014a). Becvar and Becvar (2017) contend that the concept of emotional cut-off describes the way in which people with unresolved emotional issues manage them by reducing or

totally cutting off emotional contact with significant others. Unfortunately, in the case of young children who are unable to sever relations through emotional cut-off, this could mean permanent emotional and behavioural damage that could be carried over into their adulthood. This aspect of the theory is instrumental in assisting the researchers to explore and gain access to the overt and covert reactions and perceptions of teenagers who were born and raised in small-house families.

## **RESEARCH METHODS AND STUDY SETTINGS**

### **Purpose of the study**

The study that informed the discussion in this article was the culmination of an informal community engagement initiative undertaken by the principal researcher to unravel the psychosocial deficits of the small-house phenomenon as it affected teenagers born and raised in such households. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to explore the psychosocial deficits among teenagers consequent upon being born and raised in a small-house family set up, with the express intention of supporting service providers to effectively safeguard the wellbeing of these children

### **Research design**

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, using exploratory and explanative research designs. To enrich the quality of data gathered, the study used a participatory methodology in the form of in-depth interviews (Haggerty, 2016). The choice of the research approach and designs was informed by the realisation that the subject matter investigated by the study was subjective and could only be explored through qualitative methods, which are often intrusive, to tap into the perceptions, opinions, feelings, attitudes of research subjects as informed by the interpretive paradigm (Neuman, 2011). The exploratory dimension of the study was necessary, given that the phenomenon under investigation is relatively new (Silverman, 2016).

### **Research instruments**

The study made use of a pre-drafted interview guide to inform and guide data collection from the selected participants. The interview guide consisted of thirteen open-ended questions that guided the interview process. All the questions were formulated around the psychosocial deficits and experiences associated with being born and raised in a small-house family setup. The researchers had the liberty of changing the order of the questions, based on the flow of the discussion as per the provisions of in-depth interviews (Silverman, 2016). To follow up on new emergent ideas, the researchers had the flexibility to probe and track ideas, and follow up on both verbalised and non-verbalised communication by participants during the course of the interview process (Neuman, 2011).

### **Sample selection criteria, data collection and procedure**

Sampling was done through convenience sampling, using the purposive sampling strategy (Silverman, 2016). Purposive selection was used to select only teenagers born and raised in small-house family settings in the Cherutombo high-density suburb of Zimbabwe. The researchers wished to sample and interview the parents of the teenagers, but resource limitations, their unavailability and unwillingness to be interviewed made it impossible to do this. More so, although the study had targeted twenty teenagers, only twelve ended up participating. This was because some parents refused to allow their children to participate and some of the teenagers personally declined to participate even after securing their parents' consent.

Interviews were conducted in a sourced office at a local high school. It was the researchers' view that conducting the interviews at the participants' domiciles was likely to face incessant disruption as some teenagers would worry about being heard by their parents talking about their negative experiences. This could lead to possible conflicts between the parents and their teenage children. The principal researcher made some debriefing assurances to the participants that he was there to emotionally address all their concerns in the event of any challenge emanating from the study.

The interviews were conducted by the principal researcher, who spoke the same language as the participants. Furthermore, the principal researcher was well trained in conducting exploratory interviews. To enable efficient data capturing, the researchers sought and were granted permission by participants and their parents to record the proceedings of the interviews using a tape recorder. The researcher supplemented the tape recording by writing down observed non-verbal cues which were considered crucial in giving context and an emotional dimension to the narrated experiences, feelings and challenges. The interviews used probing and rephrasing to verify and clarify issues.

### **Data analysis**

Data analysis was jointly done by the two co-authors and it involved transcribing the audio recordings and collating the huge piles of the jotted-down notes (Kaplan, 2017). The data-collation process was important, as some parts of the transcriptions had a mixture of Shona and English. Luckily, the principal researcher's native language is Shona, hence it was easy to translate all transcriptions into English. The cleaned transcripts were then loaded into ATLAS.ti software, where they were sorted into specific codes, then into code groups, which enabled the identification of emergent themes and subthemes that formed the basis of the analysis (Woods, Paulus, Atkins & Macklin, 2016). The ATLAS.ti software extracted all important codes and code groups, including their accompanying quotations, which were then used to inform the write-up (Woods et al., 2016). Information from the notes on the non-verbal cues was critical to inform interpretation of some of the findings.

### **Ethical and legal requirements**

Pursuant to the goal of conducting an ethical study, the researchers entered the research field guided by Fisher's (2016) assertion that a virtuous study must strive for fairness, trustworthiness, respect for human rights, protection of individuals from harm, and confidentiality of sensitive and private information. The researchers sought the informed consent of all participants prior to contracting them into the study (Haggerty, 2016). Given the young ages of the participants, permission was also sought from their parents. Confidentiality was considered paramount, because of the sensitivity and social stigma attached to the small-house phenomenon in Zimbabwe. Accordingly, participation in the study was anonymous and confidential (Kaplan, 2017). The principal researcher also observed and upheld ethical protocols by acknowledging all the authors whose work the researchers used (Haggerty, 2016).

### **Research domain**

Data for this study were collected in the Cherutombo high-density suburb of Marondera in Mashonaland East Province of Zimbabwe. Data collection took place in October 2017. The choice of the research domain was influenced by a number of factors, including population diversity in terms of socio-cultural and economic backgrounds. Cherutombo was also selected as it was highly convenient to the first author, who hails from Marondera. This ensured easier access to participants and also cut transport and other costs associated with the research project, as the principal researcher stayed at his home during the course of the data-collection process.

## **FINDINGS**

The following themes with regards to psychosocial deficits associated with teenagers from small-houses were identified.

- Teenagers from small-house are teased for being members of morally despised families
- Teenagers from small-houses are alienated from their extended families
- Teenagers from small-houses feel lonely and frustrated
- Teenagers born and raised in small-houses are subjected to excessive parental control
- Teenagers born and raised in small-houses are deprived of their true identities

**TABLE 1**  
**DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF PARTICIPANTS**

AGE				GENDER		LEVEL OF SCHOOLING				NUMBER OF SIBLINGS		
10 – 12 years	13 – 14 years	15 – 16 years	16 – 18 years	Male	Female	Primary	High School	Technical College	University	1 – 2 siblings	3 – 4 siblings	5 – 6 siblings
--	7	3	2	5	7	1	7	3	1	10	2	--

### **Teenagers from small-houses are teased for being members of morally despised families**

The study revealed that a majority of the sampled teenagers disliked being identified and labelled as children from small-houses. Study participants believed that the term was derogatory and gave the impression that their families, and by extension they themselves, were “abnormal and immoral”. Furthermore, participants highlighted that being identified as children from the small-house caused them to be shunned and ostracised by their peers: One girl said:

*“I go to the same school with the children from my father’s other family and sometimes when they see me, they call me the daughter of a husband snatcher and because of this, I always avoid them because they always humiliate me in front of my friends...”*

Another boy said:

*“You know I hate it when they call me a child from the small-house. I think before I am my mother’s child, I am a human being and this thing of identifying me with my parent’s so-called mistake is very wrong and hurtful.”*

These statements demonstrate that teenagers who hail from small-houses face a lot of stigma as members of a small-house family. Growing up with such stigma can potentially damage children’s self-confidence, self-esteem and social standing in society. Worse still, the feelings that they are being punished for their parents’ mistakes might trigger negative behaviours including, rebelliousness, self-loathing, delinquency and other attention-seeking behaviours.

### **Teenagers from small-houses are alienated from their extended families**

Findings from the study showed that participants were both physically and emotionally alienated from both their maternal and paternal families. The table below summarizes the nature of contacts and relationships between participants and their maternal and paternal extended families.

**TABLE 2**  
**RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN TEENAGERS AND THEIR FAMILIES**

	Have regular contact with them	Only have contact during family functions	Know them but don’t contact	Don’t know them at all
<b>Maternal</b>	7	3	2	0
<b>Paternal</b>	2	1	4	5

The data presented in Table above shows that children from small-houses have estranged relationships with both their maternal and paternal families. However, it seems that the most severed relationships are those between the teenagers from small-houses and their paternal families compared to their maternal families. Participants explained this disparity by indicating that their parents try as much as possible to hide them from their paternal relatives for fear of exposing their parents’ clandestine

relationships to their fathers' legal wives. However, there is some level of leniency accorded to small-houses by the maternal relatives of the teenagers. The following comments from the interview transcripts confirm that the teenagers were alienated from their families:

*"I have never seen my father's side of the family, my father always tells me that he will introduce me to them when the time is right ... I think he is afraid that if I get in touch with my relatives, the secret of his relationship with my mother will reach his first wife and thus cause problems for him."*

*"Well, I have never met my father's parents, but I know my mother's side of the family and they really like me, my uncles really love me."*

*"Personally, I am hurt by the fact that my father tries very hard to hide me from the world and other members of his family to the extent of letting me adopt my mother's surname, what will happen if he dies? I will have no one to help me."*

The statements above show not only that children from *small-houses* are alienated from their natural support structures, but also the inherent feelings associated with being denied access to their extended families.

### **Teenagers from small-houses feel lonely and frustrated**

Participants noted that being the only children in their families was emotionally draining and often caused them to feel depressed as they have no one with whom to share their intimate joys, achievements, sorrows and frustrations. Participants indicated that their loneliness is exacerbated by the fact that their parents tend to be over-controlling to the extent of denying them a chance to have friends. One boy had the following to say:

*"I always wish I could have a sibling to talk to, at times my parents fight and I don't know how to deal with the situation alone, but if I had a sibling, we would share ideas."*

Another girl added that:

*"My mother always disallows me to have friends and without a sibling, sitting at home alone is quite depressing. I often have the same routine every day."*

From the statements above, it can be deduced that the teenagers from small-houses are often subject to loneliness, which makes them despondent. Without much to do and living in boredom, the children, especially teenagers who are at the experimental stage in their development, may be enticed to join the wrong company or engage in negative social behaviours.

### **Teenagers born and raised in small-houses are subjected to excessive parental control**

Study findings established that the teenagers faced the challenge of overbearing control by their parents. Participants felt that their parents were overly involved in decision making, especially over issues associated with the choice of friends. Although it is culturally common for parents in Zimbabwe to be overprotective over their teenage girl children, this study showed that for the Cherutombo teenagers, control was generally exercised over both girls and boys. Participants mentioned that the control exercised by their parents over them was self-serving. The following are some of the dominant opinions expressed by the participants:

*"It is quite difficult, up until now I don't really have a stable friend, my mother is always paranoid that my friends want to get closer to know our family secret that my father has another family elsewhere and possibly expose us..."*

*"My dad is super protective over me, especially where it concerns boys; maybe he fears that I may become someone's small-house ha-ha-ha..."*



*“I bet, my mom thinks that if I talk to boys, they will make me pregnant ... every time I get lengthy lectures on how she wants me to do things right by getting married and having a wedding... I think that was one of her dreams, she is living that dream through me...”*

The above statements have one thing in common – all participants felt suffocated by parental control. The statements also demonstrate that the parents are trying to rectify their own mistakes of being involved in clandestine relationships by overly controlling their children. While the intention behind controlling their children may be constructive, over-controlling children deprives them of an opportunity to develop their own capabilities of making independent decisions.

### **Teenagers born and raised in small-houses are deprived of their true identities**

It emerged that one of the most significant emotional deficits experienced by teenagers born and raised in small-house family environments was that they were often deprived of their true identities. Pursuant to keeping their relationships a secret, small-house fathers often opt to have their children adopt their mothers’ surnames, thereby depriving them of their right to retaining their true identities. Two male participants had this to say:

*“I have to use my mother’s surname, otherwise people will start to speculate and expose that my father has a small-house and a child out of wedlock. ”*

*“When I look at it, it seems my father thinks that paying rent and buying food for us is enough, he seems not to understand that, for me taking my mother’s surname is tantamount to losing my true identity.”*

The issue of family identity is highly regarded in Zimbabwean society. Without their true and legal identity, which links them to their fathers in a patriarchal and cultural society such as Zimbabwe, children are likely to lose out on their father’s inheritance. Moreover, with distorted identities, they may fail to establish a firm sense of cultural belonging. True identities are especially crucial in traditional families where there is a firm belief that protection from all forms of harm is provided by family ancestors who use true identities to ensure safety and protection of their subjects.

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

### **Demographics**

The findings of this study have established that children born and raised in small-houses are not a homogeneous group; they vary in terms of various psychosocial, emotional and physical dimensions. Demographic data collected indicated that the phenomenon of being raised in a small-house family is gender skewed and thereby affects more female than male children. This finding concurs with the Zimbabwean national population statistics, which show that there are more females than males in the country (Lund & Roberts, 2018). Moreover, Lawn, Blencowe, Oza, You, Lee, Waiswa, Lalli, Bhutta, Barros, Christian, Mathers & Cousens (2014) explain that generally there are high birth rates for girls as compared to boys, as well as high mortality rates among boys than girls. These factors could possibly provide a reason why this research found more girls born and raised in small-houses in comparison to boys. The study further established that the Cherutombo teenagers who were interviewed were in their early adolescence (13 – 14 years). This finding is particularly concerning given that adolescence is a sensitive life stage of human development when children develop unique identities (Giancarlo & Rottmann, 2015). Disruptive psychosocial stressors at this stage of child development may lead to undesirable social and behavioural outcomes.

However, on the positive side, the study findings attested that the teenagers from Cherutombo who hailed from small-houses were all enrolled in academic programmes. This trend is quite dissimilar from the findings of other generic population studies, which show that not all children in Zimbabwe can afford to study because of widespread poverty which renders many unable to afford the costs of education (Lund & Roberts, 2018). However, the finding that 100% of the study participants were attaining some form of education can be explained in terms of Mutseta’s (2016) assertion that small-houses are often guaranteed of

financial support. This is because failure by fathers in the small-house to provide adequately for their clandestine families often results in the small-houses seeking legal recourse in the form of child maintenance, which in many instances blows the cover on the infidelity and thus exposes the husbands to undesirable social, marital and financial challenges and obligations (Mapuranga, 2016). In retrospect, the fact that these teenagers were acquiring some education could prove to be a positive factor for their psychosocial resilience. Downey, Condron and Yucel (2015) contend that educated people are more resilient and better able to deal with psychosocial stressors than the uneducated.

Furthermore, study findings revealed that the Cherutombo teenagers from small-house family institutions were teased for being members of morally despised families. Worryingly, Giancarlo and Rottmann (2015) point out that children are sensitive to stigma and ridicule, and in the event they experience these negativities, they react by becoming emotionally, physically and socially withdrawn. Moreover, Zhou, Mo, Luo, Yue & Rozelle (2016) express the view that socially excluded children often present with negative social symptoms, including unhappiness, suicidal ideation and rebelliousness that may be accompanied by negative social behaviours such as prostitution, crime, substance abuse, gang membership and teenage suicide. Additionally, Giancarlo and Rottmann (2015) found out that children are very sensitive to their social environments, they mind what their significant others think of them and they use social feedback to inform and shape their own identity and self-esteem. In the case of the Cherutombo teenagers who were born and raised in small-house family institutions, it was evident that they had internalised negative connotations of marriage and family. This could imply irreparable damage to their self-esteem and general confidence in their future lives. Summers (2016) poignantly writes that in many instances, when faced with difficult life situations in which they feel helpless, children may solicit alternative solutions from unconventional places and people. For teenagers from small-houses, this could mean early marriages (Giancarlo and Rottmann, 2015) or inappropriate relationships which could give them a sense of detachment from the socially embarrassing home situation. Furthermore, the literature confirms that households of concubines or mistresses constitute some of the most dysfunctional and alienated family institutions (Mutseta, 2016; Mapuranga, 2016). This is because such unions are socially construed to be morally bankrupt and ethically undeserving of respect (Mugweni, Pearson & Omar, 2015). Teenagers from Cherutombo small-house families reported that they were sometimes ridiculed by their peers for being children of “husband snatchers”.

Study findings showed that the majority of the investigated teenagers were alienated from their extended families, with some not even aware of the existence of their extended families and some forbidden from making contact by their parents. This is unfortunate as extended families remain a very important cog in the African family system. This finding is particularly worrying given Fiske and Taylor's (2013) study which established that feelings of alienation in childhood compromise the sense of belonging and identity formation. According to Kochalumchuvattil (2010), identity formation is one of the important developmental processes through which individuals establish a sense of self by identifying their purpose and significance in terms of their abilities and uniqueness. Gilligan, Rogers and Tolman (2014) add that identity formation which falls within the ambit of the adolescents' developmental stage is often a difficult process, both for the individual and his/her family. Gilligan et al., (2014) further assert that many teenagers are assisted by their nuclear families including extended family members to negotiate the difficulties of their adolescents. However, without the support of their extended families, the investigated teenagers in Cherutombo were facing a daunting adolescence in which they were alienated from the very people who should be supporting them. This could have been particularly difficult for the Cherutombo teenagers, given that the process by which they assume their identities as young Africans is communally sanctioned in that individual identities are dependent on mutually shared social norms and values, which in many instances are the domain of the extended family. Furthermore, for the Cherutombo teenagers raised in small-houses the challenge of identity formation was even more difficult, given the highly charged social environments in which the teenagers were attempting to position and establish themselves as unique beings who are independent of the flaws of their parents or circumstances in which they were conceived.

Findings of the study indicated that teenagers from small-houses were lonely and frustrated. The study found that the investigated teenagers were the only children between their parents and this caused them loneliness and frustration as they lacked siblings with whom they could share intimate moments. Being the only child in a family has been found by researchers to be one of the leading causes of poor socialization of children (Downey et al., 2015). These scholars go on to state that children who grow up without any siblings tend to display poor social skills and exhibit signs of unhappiness including self-mutilation, depression and generalized social anxiety. The finding that a majority of the investigated Cherutombo teenagers were the only children in their families is particularly worrying, especially when juxtaposed with the sharp rise in teenage suicides recorded in Zimbabwe (Tshuma, 2017). Perhaps there is a link between this trend and teenage suicides.

This study established that teenagers from small-houses were subjected to overbearing and suffocating control by their parents. Unfortunately, excessive parental control has been found by Giddens (2013) to be a leading cause of low self-esteem and confidence. Additionally, Kolb (2014) writes that children who are highly controlled by their parents fail to establish firm attachments and often present with attention-seeking behaviour. More so, Zhou et al., (2016) posit that children who grow up under excessive parental control often seek validation from others and can be easily socialised into negative social behaviours. For the teenagers from Cherutombo, this could imply higher vulnerability to peer pressure and its attendant negative social outcomes.

The study also found that children from small-houses were deprived of their true identities as their parents' attempt to conceal them from extended families. The teenagers were forced to adopt their maternal surnames against the prevailing patriarchal practices in Zimbabwe, which stipulates that children should be registered under their fathers' surnames. Kochalumchuvattil (2010) writes that this has a grave impact on the children, who are likely to lose their fathers' inheritances in the event of death. LeVine (2018) adds that a true patriarchal name in Africa is considered paramount, with those who do not have their father's surnames often losing their heritage.

## **CONCLUDING RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL SERVICE PROVIDERS**

This article has provided an overview of the psychosocial deficits associated with children born and raised in small-house family institutions. The study has established that being raised in a small-house family setup has far-reaching psychosocial, emotional and developmental deficits for the wellbeing of children. While the phenomenon of small houses is spreading among people of different socio-economic statuses, the developmental deficits to the children need to be mitigated. The fear is that the rapidly growing generation of small-house teenage children who are about to emerge into adulthood will follow in their parent's footsteps.

Furthermore, perhaps there is a need for the authorities in Zimbabwe – especially those with moral and social authority such as church leaders, government officials and NGO leaders – to consider mobilising and initiating a national moral regeneration programme. The programme should promote morality in marital unions and emphasise the detrimental impact of extramarital relationships on children. It is also crucial that the moral rejuvenation programmes are cognisant and appreciative of the fact that children who are already born in small-houses are not themselves at fault; hence they should advocate for families to be tolerant and sensitive to the social, cultural, moral and economic needs of children born out of wedlock. More so, there is need for psychosocial service providers such as social workers to design strategies for cushioning children growing up in small-house houses. This may include designing communal intervention programmes aimed at providing social stimulation to children, especially those in small-houses. There is also a dire need for more research on children born and raised in small- house setting currently and in the near future.

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