

# Exploring Closeness in Parent–Adolescent Relationships in A Semi-Rural Western Cape Community

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**Abstract:** *Despite increasing international attention on parent–adolescent relationships (PAR), research remains limited in marginalised communities, particularly within the South African context. The objective of this study was to explore the nature of closeness in PAR in a semi-rural, low-income Coloured community in the Western Cape Province of South Africa. This study was exploratory in nature and utilised a cross-sectional research design. Fifty families (67 parents and 50 adolescents) participated in this research study. Quantitative instruments included the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment Mother and Father Versions (IPPA), the Revised Inventory of Parent Attachment (RIPA), and the Relationship Closeness Inventory (RCI), adapted and translated into Afrikaans to suit the cultural and linguistic context. Statistical analyses involved descriptive statistics, reliability assessments via Cronbach’s alpha, and two-way ANOVA for group comparisons. Findings indicated that most female participants reported close mother-daughter relationships, while male participants reported relatively close father-son relationships. Mothers generally spent more time with adolescents, while father-daughter relationships were perceived as less close. Although fathers were more engaged than documented in earlier South African studies, maternal bonds remained stronger. This study supports the relevance of attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1969) in understanding PAR. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how parent-adolescent closeness is experienced and interpreted in non-urban, under-researched populations.*

**Keywords:** Parent–Adolescent Relationships, Closeness, Attachment, Rural South Africa, Coloured Community

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## 1. Background to the study

Adolescence signifies a pivotal phase in human growth, marked by substantial physical, cognitive, and psychosocial changes (Santrock, 2021; Steinberg, 2020). Throughout this transitional period, adolescents seek increased independence while simultaneously managing and redefining their relationships with both parents and peers (Laible et al., 2022; Martorell, 2025). Numerous studies highlight the fundamental importance of parent-adolescent relationships (PAR) in influencing adolescents’ emotional, psychological, and social development (Branje, 2018; Lansford et al., 2021; Moretti & Peled, 2021).

The key elements of PAR encompass closeness, autonomy, and various developmental advantages. Closeness pertains to the emotional connection between parents and adolescents,

which remains crucial during this period despite changes in dependency (Allen & Tan, 2020; Laursen & Collins, 2021). Parents act as essential attachment figures, providing emotional support, security, and guidance as adolescents navigate the increasing complexities of their social contexts (Allen & Miga, 2021; Brumariu & Kerns, 2022). Concurrently, autonomy emerges as a significant developmental objective (OpenAI, 2025). Adolescents start to assert their independence; however, this does not lessen the significance of parental ties; instead, it requires a shift in relational dynamics (Laible et al., 2022; Steinberg, 2020). Research suggests that parents who respond with warmth, adaptability, and consistency foster both autonomy and closeness, which are essential for healthy adjustment (Day & Lamb, 2021; Lansford et al., 2021). The benefits of strong parent–adolescent relationships are extensive. Secure and close relationships with parents have been linked to better academic outcomes, reduced involvement in risky behaviours, and more positive interpersonal relationships in adulthood (Fraley & Roisman, 2020; Martorell, 2025; Pascuzzo et al., 2020). Additionally, adolescents who feel supported by their parents demonstrate greater emotional regulation, lower levels of anxiety and depression, and improved social competence (Brumariu, 2023; Moretti & Peled, 2021).

Despite the critical nature of PAR, there are notable gaps in the literature, particularly within the South African context (Eloff & Ebersöhn, 2021; Swartz et al., 2020). Most existing studies are grounded in Western, industrialised populations, resulting in a limited understanding of the diverse cultural and socio-economic dynamics that shape family relationships in South African semi-rural communities. This study addresses this gap by exploring closeness in parent–adolescent relationships within a low-income Coloured community in the Western Cape, South Africa. The term “Coloured,” while historically rooted in the discriminatory classifications of Apartheid, continues to be used today in both self-identification and demographic reporting. Scholars such as Laubscher (2003) argue that the term should be understood as representing a particular socio-cultural context, rather than a homogeneous racial identity. In this study, the term is employed with sensitivity, not to reinforce apartheid ideologies, but to acknowledge the lived realities and socio-political differentiation still present in post-apartheid South Africa (Adhikari, 2020; Seekings, 2022).

The focus is on a semi-rural farm-working community in the Western Cape, a setting that remains underrepresented in South African family research (Bray et al., 2020; Bojuwoye & Sylvester, 2021). This community is predominantly inhabited by Afrikaans-speaking Coloured individuals and is marked by significant socio-economic hardship. Health services are scarce, with mobile clinics visiting only once per month, and the population faces high rates of tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, and teenage pregnancy (Ginsburg et al., 2023). Educational attainment is low, with illiteracy rates ranging from 20% to 30%, exacerbating the cycle of poverty, unemployment, and psychosocial stress (Eloff & Ebersöhn, 2021; Smit, 2023). Additionally, the community grapples with pervasive challenges such as substance abuse, Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders, and intimate partner violence (Matthews & Abrahams, 2020; Parry et al., 2022).

Given these intersecting difficulties, it is vital to examine how closeness in parent-adolescent relationships functions within this particular socio-cultural and economic setting. This study aims to generate much-needed insight into family dynamics in under-resourced, semi-rural contexts, and to contribute to a more inclusive understanding of adolescent development and relational resilience in South Africa.

## **2. Conceptualisation of parent-adolescent closeness**

There are multiple approaches through which scholars define closeness in the context of PAR. For instance, Laursen and Collins (2021) describe parent-adolescent closeness as the emotional connection that exists between a parent and their adolescent, characterised by mutual affection, trust, open lines of communication, and perceived support. Other researchers characterise closeness as the extent of warmth, empathy, and shared understanding that exists between a parent and adolescent, which is often evident in the adolescent's readiness to share personal information and the parent's level of responsiveness (Lanz et al., 2022). It is widely recognised within attachment theory that a close relationship between parent and adolescent serves as a secure foundation from which adolescents can pursue autonomy, distinguished by emotional availability, physical presence, and consistent responsiveness (Allen & Tan, 2020). It is posited that parent-adolescent closeness functions as a protective factor against mental health issues, stemming from continuous expressions of warmth, sensitivity, and emotional connection (Cui et al., 2023).

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Research problem**

Research is very limited regarding closeness in South African PAR, particularly in marginalised communities. This study therefore explored closeness in PAR in one semi-rural, low-income community in the Western Cape Province of South Africa.

### **3.2 Research objectives**

The objective of this study was to investigate closeness in PAR with these individuals who are otherwise locked out of mainstream dialogues due to poor socio-economic standing. Specific research objectives included: examining both parent and adolescent perspectives on closeness, measuring levels of trust, communication, and alienation, and assessing time spent together and shared activities.

### **3.3 Research design**

This study was exploratory in nature and utilised a cross-sectional survey research design. Specific questionnaires were used for both parents and adolescents and will be discussed shortly.

### **3.4 Participants**

The school where adolescent participants were recruited was the local secondary school that most of the targeted community's adolescents attend. This school was therefore used to access this community's adolescents. Adolescents were classified as early adolescents (12 – 14 years old), middle adolescents (15 – 16 years old) and late adolescents (17 – 19 years old). Inclusion criteria for the adolescent participants included: attending the secondary school in the identified community; aged 12 to 19; Afrikaans-speaking and living with their parents; obtaining informed consent from parents; and parents participating in the study. Criteria for parent participants included: living in the identified community; biological parents or stepparents of their adolescent child; Afrikaans-speaking and having their adolescent child residing in their home.

It was hoped to recruit a maximum number of 120 adolescent volunteers and their parents, but the recruitment efforts produced a smaller number of 50 families (67 parents and 50 adolescents) participating. Although many of the adolescents seemed quite keen to participate

in the survey, a limited number of parents completed and returned the informed consent forms and questionnaires. Despite appeals via letters to parents and asking the adolescents to remind their parents to complete their surveys, the parents' response rate remained low. An overall parental response rate of 20% was achieved. One factor which could explain the low response rate is that parents' limited literacy hindered their understanding and completion of the consent forms and questionnaires.

### 3.5 Measurement

The following instruments were utilised in the study: *Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment: Mother and Father Versions* (IPPA), *Revised Inventory of Parent Attachment* (RIPA), and the *Relationship Closeness Inventory* (RCI). The questionnaires are currently not standardised for South African populations. Therefore, they were adapted to suit the specific context and translated into Afrikaans. The following questionnaires were completed by the adolescents:

#### (a) Demographic questionnaire

A self-designed demographic questionnaire was completed by the adolescents and parents, with the aim of eliciting information such as gender, age, language, religious affiliation, place of residence, employment status, income bracket, etc.

#### (b) Relationship Closeness Inventory (RCI)

The RCI, developed by Berscheid et al. (1989), is a 75-item 7-point Likert-type scale designed to measure interpersonal closeness through three core dimensions: frequency of interaction, diversity of shared activities, and strength of mutual influence. It demonstrates strong psychometric properties, particularly in the diversity ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ) and strength ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ) subscales, though the frequency subscale shows lower internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.56$ ). Test-retest reliability is high for frequency ( $r = 0.82$ ) and strength ( $r = 0.81$ ), and acceptable for diversity ( $r = 0.61$ ), with an overall reliability of  $r = 0.82$ . The RCI shows excellent construct, predictive, and discriminant validity, effectively distinguishing between close and non-close relationships and predicting relational stability. In subsequent studies, especially those examining parent-adolescent influence, internal consistency scores were exceptionally high (e.g.,  $\alpha = 0.97$  for parental influence on thoughts, feelings, and behaviour), supporting its use across diverse relational contexts.

#### (c) Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA)

The IPPA, a psychometrically sound instrument, was designed by Armsden and Greenberg (1987) to measure attachment to parents (subscales: trust, communication and alienation). The format is a 5-point Likert type questionnaire, and the length consists of 25 items. All three subscales are scored independently. Total attachment scores for mother and father are the sum of all items after reverse-scoring certain items. Higher scores indicate more attachment (Touliatos et al., 2001). It was developed for use on samples between ages 16 to 20 years old; however, it was used successfully in several studies with adolescents as young as 12 (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). The trust, communication and alienation subscales had internal consistency alphas of 0.91, 0.91 and 0.86 respectively. Test-retest reliability coefficients over a three-week interval were excellent, with 0.93 for the prototype parent attachment (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). The IPPA has excellent concurrent validity. Additionally, scores correlate well with several measures of psychological well-being, including self-concept, self-esteem, positiveness, life satisfaction, problem-solving, and locus of control. Scores are negatively correlated with depression and loneliness. Furthermore, the IPPA also has good known-groups validity with scores discriminating delinquent from non-delinquent youngsters (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987).

The following questionnaires were given to the parents: (a) **Demographic questionnaire** (as above), (b) **Relationship Closeness Inventory** (as above), and (c) **Revised Inventory of Parental Attachment (RIPA)**

The RIPA was designed by Johnson et al. (2003) to measure parents' attachment to adolescent children. The format is a 5-point Likert type questionnaire, and the length consists of 30 items. All three instruments are scored independently. Total attachment scores for mother and father are the sum of all items after reverse-scoring certain items. Higher scores indicate more attachment (Touliatos et al., 2001). It was standardised on a population of 212 adult participants, and 89 adolescent participants from a Midwestern state in America. Reliability analysis was conducted by computing Cronbach's alpha for each of the RIPA sub-scales. Reliability coefficients are as follows: trust/avoidance 0.91, and communication, 0.72. No additional tests for reliability were conducted. According to Johnson et al. (2003), five additional items were added to the original IPPA to increase the face validity, as these items addressed issues unique to parents. Construct validity was evidenced by correlations with measures of family conflict, support, and cohesion. Validity analysis was conducted by correlating the subscale scores of both the RIPA and the IPPA with the outcomes related to attachment. Validity analysis provided initial evidence that the RIPA does measure parental attachment. No further findings on validity could be located (Johnson et al., 2003).

### 3.6 Data collection

Surveys were distributed through schools with ethical permissions secured. Data were collected manually and anonymised.

### 3.7 Data analysis

For statistical analysis, the *Statistica* package was used. Descriptive statistics was performed using measures like means, standard deviations, frequency tables, and histograms. Reliability analysis was conducted using Cronbach's alpha. For comparison of the different variables, correlations were calculated. Comparisons between different groupings were done using two-way ANOVAs. A probability value of 0.05 was used in all the analyses to test for significance.

### 3.8 Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the relevant Ethics Committee of Stellenbosch University, as well as the Committee for Human Research (CHR) situated at the Health Sciences Faculty, Stellenbosch University. The goals of this study, as well as the survey and interview methods were explained to the participants. To ensure that the language would be reasonably understandable to the participants all of the measuring instruments were translated into Afrikaans. The researcher also required that the adolescents and parents sign assent and consent forms, to show an acceptance to be part of, and full understanding of the research procedures. Participants were informed of the benefits of this study, the researcher's and supervisor's name, and the possibility of a debriefing session, if requested. The participants could withdraw themselves from the study at any time, without any negative consequences.

## 4. Data findings

**Table 2: Two-way Repeated Measures of Analysis of Variance for Trust (RIPA)**

Source	Df	F	p
Parents' gender	12	0.11	0.74
Child's gender	44	0.88	0.35
Parent's gender x child's gender	12	0.00	0.96

There was no significant difference between the parents' scores on the *trust* subscale. Mothers' and fathers' scores were relatively similar, and no significant differences existed, as  $p = 0.74$ . The child's gender did not influence how much trust the parents had in the children; no significant differences were found, as  $p = 0.35$ . The interaction effect was not significant, implying that the parent and child gender effects could be investigated independently.

**Table 3: Two-way Repeated Measures of Analysis of Variance for Communication (RIPA)**

Source	Df	F	p
Parents' gender	13	0.06	0.80
Child's gender	44	0.00	0.95
Parent's gender x child's gender	13	3.08	0.78

Regarding the *communication* subscale, there was no significant difference between the parents' scores. Not only did the child's gender not influence how parents communicated with their children, but also, the interaction effect was not significant. There were no significant differences between mothers and fathers' scores for male and female children.

**Table 4: Two-way Repeated Measures of Analysis of Variance for Alienation (RIPA)**

Source	Df	F	p
Parents' gender	13	0.36	0.56
Child's gender	44	0.22	0.64
Parent's gender x child's gender	13	3.02	0.11

Table 4 indicates that there was no significant difference between the parents' scores on the *alienation* subscale. Mothers' and fathers' scores were relatively analogous. The child's gender did not influence how angry and isolated the parents felt towards their children; no significant differences were found, as  $p = 0.64$ . The interaction effect for alienation was also not significant. Finally, there were no significant differences between mothers and fathers' scores for male and female children.

**Table 5: Two-way Repeated Measures of Analysis of Variance for Parental Experiences (RIPA)**

Source	Df	F	P
Parents' gender	13	0.35	0.56
Child's gender	44	0.53	0.47
Parent's gender x child's gender	13	0.79	0.39

Table 5 shows that there was no significant difference between the parents' scores on the parental experiences' subscale. No significant difference existed between mothers' and fathers' scores on the parental experiences' subscale, and there were no significant differences between mothers and fathers' scores for male and female children. Moreover, the interaction effect was not significant.

**Table 6: Two-way Repeated Measures of Analysis of Variance for RIPA Total Score**

Source	Df	F	p
Parents' gender	12	0.12	0.74
Child's gender	44	0.36	0.55
Parent's gender x child's gender	12	0.00	0.98

There was no significant difference between the parents' scores on the *total* score. Mothers' and fathers' scores were relatively similar. No significant difference existed between mothers' and fathers' scores on the parental experiences' subscale. In addition, there were no significant differences between mothers and fathers' scores for male and female children.

**Table 7: Comparison Between Mothers' and Fathers' Subscale Scores (IPA)**

Source	Mother	Father
Trust	4.24	4.03
Communication	4.10	3.75
Alienation	3.34	3.02
Total	4.02	3.76

Table 7 indicates that mothers scored higher than fathers on *all* of the subscales, including the total score. The following section will highlight various ANOVA tables.

**Table 8: Two-way Repeated Measures of Analysis of Variance for Trust (IPA)**

Source	Df	F	p
Child's gender	48	1.68	0.20
Parents' gender	29	1.39	0.25
Child's gender x parents' gender	29	0.39	0.53

There were no significant differences between the sons' and the daughters' scores on the *trust* subscale, as  $p = 0.20$ . There were no significant differences between how much trust sons and daughters had in their parents, as  $p = 0.25$ . No significant differences existed regarding the interactionality between the children's and the parents' genders, as  $p = 0.53$ .

**Table 9: Two-way Repeated Measures of Analysis of Variance for Communication (IPA)**

Source	Df	F	p
Child's gender	48	1.70	0.20
Parents' gender	29	2.40	0.13
Child's gender x parents' gender	29	0.73	0.40

There were no significant differences between the sons' and the daughters' scores on the *communication* subscale. There were no significant differences between how sons and daughters communicated with their parents. No significant differences existed regarding the interactionality between the children's and the parents' genders, as  $p = 0.40$ .

**Table 10: Two-way Repeated Measures of Analysis of Variance for Alienation (IPA)**

Source	Df	F	p
Child's gender	48	3.67	0.06
Parents' gender	29	4.56	<b>0.04</b>
Child's gender x parents' gender	29	0.46	0.50

There were no significant differences between the sons' and the daughters' scores on the alienation subscale. Noting the information in the tables, it is evident that a definite trend emerged, whereby no major differences were found between sons' and daughters' scores on the three subscales.

There was a significant difference between how much feelings of anger and isolation sons and daughters had toward their parents, as  $p = 0.04$ . Furthermore, as can be seen in Figure 1 mothers (3.34) scored significantly higher on the alienation subscale, as opposed to fathers

(3.02). The mean difference was 0.32, with a standard deviation of 0.15, indicating statistical significance. Adolescents, therefore, had stronger feelings of anger and isolation towards their mothers, than their fathers.

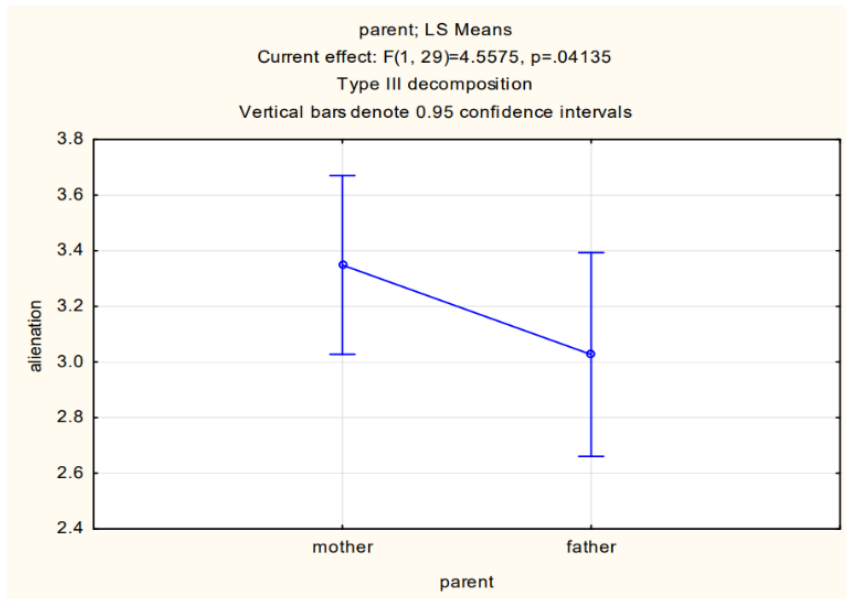


Figure 1: Comparison between mothers' and fathers' alienation scores ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Table 11: Two-way Repeated Measures of Analysis of Variance for Total Score for IPA

Source	Df	F	P
Child's gender	48	0.20	0.65
Parents' gender	28	4.09	<b>0.05</b>
Child's gender x parents' gender	28	0.26	0.61

There were no significant differences between the sons' and the daughters' total scores. There was a significant difference between total scores for mothers and fathers, as  $p = 0.05$ .

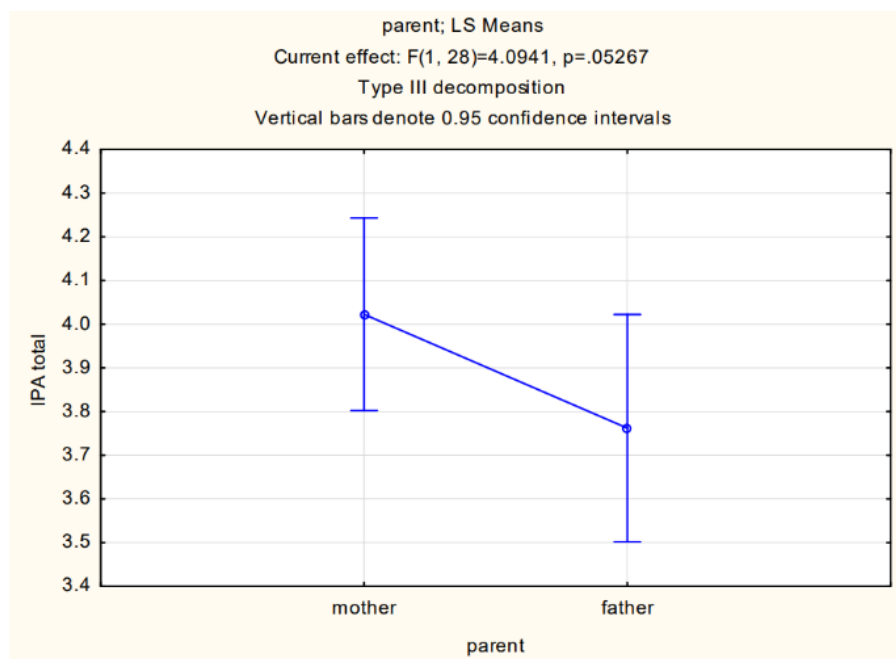


Figure 2: Comparison between mothers' and fathers' total score on IPA ( $p < 0.05$ )

Figure 2 indicates that a significant difference existed between mothers' (4.02) and fathers' (3.76) total scores, with regards to the IPA. There was a mean difference of 0.26, with a standard deviation of 0.13, indicating statistical significance. Thus, mothers in general, received higher scores, which indicated more attachment between parent and child.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Demographic information

In this current study, 64% of the adolescent participants were female and 36% were male; 70% of the parents were female and 30% were male. This indicates a gender bias that should be kept in mind when interpreting the results. Another aspect to consider is that 42% of the adolescent participants were between the ages 12 to 14 years old, indicating that many of them were young. The fact that many adolescent participants were young *and* female could have also impacted the results.

The majority of the participants was Afrikaans-speaking and self-identified as Coloured. This finding is in line with other studies conducted in similar communities indicating a mainly Afrikaans-speaking community, populated by Coloureds (Booyesen & Harker, 2021; Cupido, 2022; Petersen & Mphande, 2020; van der Westhuizen & Sanger, 2023). The bulk of them resided on farms. They were employed either as farm labourers or domestic workers.

In this sample, 78% of the men were employed, while 72% of the women were employed. This indicates that less women were economically dependent on their husbands or male partners. Engelbrecht's (2011) study found a 25% employment difference between men and women in her sample and suggested that possibly more women were economically dependent on their husbands or male partners, and as a result, makes them more vulnerable to economic abuse, and possibly other types of abuse as well. In the current study unemployment rates were relatively low, a finding which is consistent with studies amongst rural agricultural Western Cape populations by Western Cape Government (2025). These researchers theorised that poverty rates in such communities continue to remain high and unemployment rates low. A possible explanation that these researchers offer is that while many farm workers are employed, they still earn very low wages, which keeps them in a state of poverty. This explanation could also be applicable to this present study. There was a clear distinction between traditional male occupations and traditional female occupations, as most of the women reported unskilled occupations such as domestic workers who cleaned, ironed, did kitchen work, or looked after children, while most of the men were more involved in skilled labour such as tractor-driving, irrigation of farms, and winemaking. This finding is in agreement with previous research on low-income, semi-rural farms in the Western Cape Province (Engelbrecht, 2011). Scholars such as Casale (2004) and Rogan and Alfers (2019) maintained that feminised occupations are constructed as low skilled because the skills required are those that women are "naturally" supposed to have, in contrast to the occupational skills that men acquire. Thus, feminised occupations have oftentimes been devalued, with many women performing paid work which mirrored their unpaid work in their homes. Although some women in this current study were employed as manual farm labourers, most of them worked domestically while most men were farm labourers, which is consistent with the Western Cape Government (2025).

Many of the participants identified themselves as Christians, who regularly attended church. They identified with several church affiliations, but no one church was dominant. This is similar to findings conducted by Engelbrecht (2011). The participants' religious orientation may have impacted on how they responded to research questions.

Almost half of the parents were married and almost half were not, and 60% of the adolescents had parents who cohabited together but were not married. Most parents reported only primary school level education. Specifically, 45% of mothers and 48% of fathers completed primary school, and most of them did not complete high school. This finding is similar to that of Lesch and Anthony's (2007) study, who researched a similar community. Although the completion of primary school education does not indicate illiteracy, one cannot be sure how good the participants' reading and writing skills were. It is therefore possible that these results could indicate limitations regarding parents' literacy skills. London (2002) also noted that many Western Cape farm workers have very low educational levels and Van Dongen's (2003) qualitative study with several adult farm workers showed that many of them possessed very limited reading and writing skills.

In sum, most of the participants were Afrikaans-speaking and Coloured. Many parents were married to each other. Even though less than half of the parents were not married to each other, cohabitation was prevalent. Most parents had at least two children living with them in their homes. Many parents were employed, with men performing mostly skilled labour, and women unskilled labour. The majority of the participants was Christian, and regular churchgoers. Most of them had low educational levels and earned low incomes.

## **5.2 Parents' attachment to adolescent children**

Tables 2 - 6 indicate that no statistically significant differences existed between mothers' and fathers' subscale and total scores. The child's gender did not correlate with the parents' attachment to their children. Also, mothers and fathers did not have significantly different scores for their male and female adolescents. This indicated that there were no differences in the mothers' and fathers' sense of closeness/attachment to their adolescents.

Forty-five percent of parents reported almost never getting frustrated with their children and 52% reported never constantly yelling and fighting with their children. Sixty-one percent reported almost never feeling angry with their children and 65% reported almost never getting easily upset around their children. Research shows that adolescents and parents do experience a certain level of storm and stress. This is considered quite normal, yet frequent, high-intensity, angry fighting is not normative during adolescence (Steinberg & Silk, 2020). The findings in the current study corroborate such a tendency as many of the parents reported not taking part in high-intensity, heated arguments with their children, but also that their relationships are not immune to conflict. The general lack of intense PAR conflict may be indicative of PAR closeness within this research group.

Twenty percent reported that their children did not trust their judgment and 14% reported that their children did not care about their point of view. These findings may be explained by the fact that adolescents challenge their parents' views much more than in previous developmental phases (Elkind, 1967). Adolescents' cognitive skills do sharpen during this phase in their lives; they are able to reason more logically and question issues that they may not have in a previous developmental phase. Therefore, it makes sense that all of these adolescents are in the stage where they are not simply blindly trusting their parents' judgment or caring about their points of view.

Forty-nine percent of the parents reported feeling cared for by their children and 50% of parents reported that their children could tell when they were upset about something. This could possibly indicate that many of these parents believed that their children were emotionally attuned to their feelings, moods, and needs.

Forty percent of parents reported that they share their problems with their children and 40% reported being able to talk to their children about their difficulties. The vast majority of parents did not. One plausible explanation for this could be that it is culturally inappropriate for these parents to share their difficulties with their children. However, one must remember that many of the parents in this study were female, and it is commonly known that mothers usually find it easier to talk about their problems with their children (Tu & McHale, 2024). For example, Mosavel et al.'s (2006) study with South African mothers and daughters found that 70% of mothers asked their adolescents for advice, and 93% stated that they actually would listen to their daughter's advice. Eighty-six percent of the mothers said that they talk about many things to their daughters, although this study did not specify if "many things" entailed mothers' sharing personal problems. Some recent research findings are beginning to portray a more reciprocal representation of the mother–daughter relationship (Li et al., 2023). The latter researchers furthermore suggest that adolescent children, including daughters, can be instrumental in influencing and supporting their mothers in a variety of ways (as cited in Mosavel et al., 2006). Perhaps parents in this study still considered their adolescents to be "children" who should not be confronted with their parents' personal problems.

Fifty-one percent of parents enjoyed physical displays of affection from their teenagers, compared to 13% who actually opposed it. Bleakly et al. (2024) remind us that adolescents are oftentimes quite self-conscious about receiving physical forms of nurture from their parents. It is normal for teens to shy away from physical displays of affection from their parents during this stage in their lives, yet in this case, 13% of the parents possibly also felt self-conscious about showing this type of affection towards their teenagers. However, the finding indicates that slightly more parents are quite comfortable with showing physical displays of affection towards their teenagers. In general, the majority of parents in this study indicated that they reported feeling very attached to their adolescents.

### 5.3 Adolescents' attachment to parents

Table 7 showed that mothers scored higher on all three subscales, as well as the total score. This finding is consistent with other international studies, which shows that mothers and adolescents generally tend to be closer (Mastrotheodoros et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2023).

Tables 8 - 11 indicate that no statistically significant differences were found between adolescents' scores for mothers and fathers on the trust and communication scale. However, Table 10 shows that adolescents felt stronger feelings of anger and isolation towards their mothers, even though they reported higher attachment scores for their mothers than their fathers. Mikulincer and Shaver's (2005) comments about emotionality in close relationships could shed some light on these findings. These researchers spoke about the diversity and intensity of both positive and negative emotions. It is possible that the closer the relationship, the more individuals will experience both positive and negative emotions. It could be argued then that because adolescents reported being closer to mothers, they also felt stronger levels of anger and isolation towards their mothers. This creates a challenging paradox.

With regards to the IPA, selected individualised items will be briefly discussed, as these overlap with the following themes identified in the interview data: Adolescents strongly felt that both their parents respected their feelings (78% mothers; 78% fathers). This is in line with another South African study: the vast majority in Mosavel's et al. (2006) study also highlighted the importance of adolescents feeling respected by their parents. When asked to rate the extent to which the parent did a good job as a parent, however, 62% of adolescents reported that their mothers did a good job as a parent, while only 47% of them felt that their fathers did a good

job. There was a 15% difference. The apparent confidence that they had in their mothers was demonstrated in some of the other results: More adolescents (52%) preferred getting their mother's point of view on things that concerned them. Sixteen percent of adolescents reported almost never wanting to get their father's point of view regarding issues that concerned them. In addition, slightly more adolescents (54%) felt that their mothers cared more about their opinions when they discussed things, compared to their fathers. More adolescents felt more comfortable discussing their problems with their mothers rather than their fathers. Seventy percent of adolescents reported that they could always count on their mothers when they needed to get things off their chests. Nineteen percent of adolescents indicated that it was almost never true that they could count on their fathers. Being able to count on one's parent is imperative for a young adolescent. Adolescent attachment researchers believe that most adolescents wish and need to maintain their parents as attachment figures, and they continue needing parental support and comfort, especially during distressing times in their adolescence (Coulombe & Yates, 2022). The findings in this study suggest that some adolescents felt that they could not count on their fathers for much needed support and comfort during this stage in their lives.

Studies have shown that adolescents are more likely to report feeling closer to their mothers for various reasons, including more frequent emotional communication and time spent together (Ioffe et al., 2020). Various researchers have found relationships between quality of the mother-adolescent relationship and attachment security (e.g., Allen et al., 2003) and perceived maternal availability (Leiberman et al., 1999). Barrocas (2006) argues that in these stronger, higher-quality relationships, there may also be higher levels of trust between mothers and their adolescents. Adding to this, Benoit and Parker (1994) have found that secure mothers tend to have secure children. Thus, it could be argued that mothers who are available, specifically emotionally, are those who have children who perceive them to be this way, as well as feel as if their children are able to satisfy some of their emotional needs (Barrocas, 2006). Adolescents in this study generally appeared to report feeling closer to their mothers in that they felt more at ease self-disclosing and emotionally conversing with their mothers. A possible explanation why adolescents generally felt closer to their mothers could be that they felt more at ease to share issues of concern and also that they felt listened to and that their opinions were valuable. They may not have had similar feelings towards their fathers primarily due to the less intimate father-adolescent relationships. It seems therefore that the cultural shift to more engaged, nurturing and emotionally expressive fathering has not taken place yet in this sample of fathers.

However, regarding attention, it seems that the adolescent participants did not feel very attended to by their parents as only 55% and 49% reported that their mothers and fathers respectively would ask them if something were bothering them. Also, only 50% felt that they received enough attention from their father and 30% felt that way about their mothers. The difference regarding the latter finding could perhaps indicate that adolescents had higher expectation of attention from their mothers than their fathers, probably because mothers and adolescents seemed more attached to each other than fathers and adolescents.

## **5.4 Time spent together**

### **5.4.1 Parental time spent with adolescents**

Parents reported spending approximately 335 minutes weekly with their adolescents, and adolescents reported spending approximately 307 minutes weekly with their parents. This is much less than reported by other studies. For example, Updegraff et al. (2006) showed that parents in a Mexican sample reported spending 720–1200 minutes weekly with their adolescents. The current study's results regarding time spent with children may be partly due to some of the parents' work situations, as interview participants indicated that many domestic

worker mothers had to work after normal work hours, leaving them with less time for their children.

Parents reported more time spent with adolescents than the adolescents reported. The average times that children reported spending with their parents were slightly lower for both mothers and fathers. One possible explanation for this discrepancy is the phenomenon of over-reporting found in many surveys, where respondents tend to report more socially desirable behaviours (Lavrakas, 2008). Parents who want to portray themselves as “good” may overestimate the actual time spent with their children, including routine tasks like food preparation and chores, which children may not perceive as quality time. Another explanation is that adolescents typically experience a decline in feelings of warmth, support, and closeness to parents during adolescence (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992), leading them to report less time spent with parents. Frequent parent–child contact does not necessarily indicate high-quality parenting; rather, the quality of interaction is what supports positive adolescent outcomes (Chai et al., 2020; Zhang, 2020).

#### **5.4.2 The gender effects**

According to both parents and adolescents, mothers spent more time with adolescents than fathers, despite high employment levels (72% of mothers; 78% of fathers). This aligns with international studies showing adolescents spend more time with mothers (e.g., Phares et al., 2009). In this study, mothers reported 190 minutes and fathers 145 minutes weekly with their adolescents. Adolescents also perceived mothers spending more time with them; 169 minutes (daughters) and 138 minutes (sons).

Updegraff et al. (2006) also found Mexican mothers spending more time with adolescents, with a 300-minute weekly difference. Claes (1998) reported that Canadian, Belgian and Italian adolescents spent more minutes per week with their mothers than fathers. Recent cross-cultural research continues to support this: a Dutch proximity-tracking study found adolescents averaged around 3.5 hours per weekday with mothers versus 2.5 hours with fathers (Janssen et al., 2022), and a tri-country time-use diary study across Finland, Spain and the UK confirmed adolescents spend significantly more daily time with mothers than fathers (Gracia et al., 2020).

Phares et al. (2009) demonstrated that mothers spend significantly more time than fathers with their adolescent children on both weekdays and weekends. Recent data reinforce this: U.S. mothers averaged 3.8 hours/day with adolescents versus 3.0 hours for fathers in 2021 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022), and time-use studies continue to show mothers maintain higher involvement in caregiving and affective engagement with teens (Negraia et al., 2018).

Adolescents may report their mothers spending more time with them partly because they perceive mothers as more accepting and emotionally close; feelings strongly supported by studies showing that maternal parenting is viewed more positively by teens (e.g., perceived maternal attributes exceed paternal ones in warmth and acceptance) (Liu & Wang, 2020). Global literature supports that adolescent feel closer to mothers Almeida and Galambos (1991) noted that fathers spend more time in summer due to longer days and recreational opportunities. Data collection in this study took place during winter in South Africa, which may have limited fathers’ involvement.

Additionally, Bengtson and Roberts (2000) argue that mother–child bonds grow stronger over time, while father–child bonds often do not. Mothers reported spending slightly more time with sons than daughters, contrary to Updegraff et al. (2006), who found same-gender parent–child

time more common. Nkosi and Daniels (2007) highlight patriarchal dominance in rural South Africa, where sons may be prioritised. Strelbel et al. (2006) support this, noting male dominance and traditional gender roles. Mothers may spend more time helping sons with daily needs.

Fathers spent significantly more time with sons than daughters, consistent with findings by Mammen (2011) and Phares et al. (2009), which suggest fathers prefer recreational time with sons. Curtis (2014) discusses how fathers often withdraw from affectionate behaviours as their daughters enter puberty, feeling uncertain about appropriate physical contact and emotional engagement. This withdrawal can lead to emotional distance, with daughters perceiving their fathers as less available or supportive during a critical developmental period. This study found that mothers generally spent more time with adolescents than fathers, and both parents spent more time with their sons than with daughters.

### **5.4.3 The time-of-day effect**

From the data findings, parents reported spending more time with their adolescents in the afternoons and evenings. This finding is to be expected as mornings are usually taken up by adolescents getting ready for school and spending the morning at school. Adolescents also reported spending more time with their parents in the afternoons and evenings, and less time together in the mornings. Thus, parent-adolescent congruence was high. Moreover, parents reported spending relatively the same amount of time with their sons and daughters in the mornings and evenings, however, in the afternoons, significantly more time was spent on sons. Again, the gender preference was an issue here. Furthermore, adolescents reported that their mothers spent more time with them in the evenings, in contrast to fathers.

Most fathers who were employed in this study worked during regular business hours, but some mothers worked in the mornings and had “free” time in the afternoons, before returning to their “after hours” jobs. This could possibly explain why mothers seemingly more time had to spend with their children alone. Evenings are usually the times when the whole family is together within close proximity and more challenging to have alone parent-adolescent time.

### **5.5 Shared activities**

In Russell et al.’s (2010) study, all of the adolescents reported the importance of parental closeness in doing things together and discussing problems. Paulson et al. (1991) observed that both mother–adolescent and father–adolescent pairs generally engage in activities such as chores, caregiving, housework, and recreation. Recent studies continue to support this, highlighting that both parents participate in these activities, although the division of labour may differ between them (Vagni, 2019). This was found to be true amongst the research participants. Mothers and adolescents agreed regarding four particular shared activities: attending church/religious functions, cooking and having meals, and doing housework and homework together. For mothers, attending church was rated the most common activity (72%), while adolescents deemed watching television together as the most common activity (78%). These findings are congruent with Mosavel et al.’s (2006) study with South African English, Afrikaans, and Xhosa-speaking urban mother and daughter dyads. Similarities included having a meal together, watching television together, cleaning the house, and visiting family together. This finding is to be expected, as they may be considered typical mother-daughter activities in South African working-class Coloured families.

The attendance of church and religious functions seems important family activities for the participants in this study, and it seems that in this regard they practise their religion actively. Lesch and Anthony (2007) also found that religious affiliations and regular attendance at

church services and related events were important to their Coloured, semi-rural participants and suggested that these seem to be important social mechanisms of community, status and also reputation in the community. Adolescents reported television watching as the most common activity shared between parent and child. It is possible that the adolescents' reports are more credible, as it seems more likely that parents and children would watch more hours of television than hours attending church, which was the most common mutually shared activity reported by the mothers.

Doing household chores was rated as the second most common activity that mothers and adolescents engaged in, as reported by the adolescents. Through the interviews, it was repeatedly mentioned that parents and adolescents really enjoyed cooking together and thereafter sharing the meal. Some studies indicate that mothers continue doing the majority of household chores (e.g., Offer, 2013; Offer & Schneider, 2011), and in this current investigation, both adolescents and parents frequently engage in these activities. This could indicate that a culture of doing household chores seems to be the norm in this community. As some of the mother's work in the evenings as well, it would make sense for everyone in the family to pitch in regarding household chores.

Sixty-four percent of adolescents stated that they discussed things of a personal nature with their mothers, yet this activity was not strongly rated amongst the mothers who completed the surveys. The participants in Crockett et al.'s (2009) study likened the mother-daughter relationship to a close friendship, and daughters also pointed out that they shared secrets with their mothers and appreciated being able to reveal intimate details of their lives in confidence. Therefore, this finding could indicate that daughters felt that issues of a personal nature were discussed, but mothers did not feel the same way. In Fuligni's (1998) study, Asian American and European American adolescents reported the importance of parental closeness in doing things together and discussing problems with each other. Thus, spending time together engaging in various activities is important, but it also needs to be cemented by meaningful communication, which was of particular importance for adolescent girls. Mothers in this community could possibly not have been comfortable in self-disclosing personal information, as it may have appeared inappropriate within this cultural context.

When comparing what the fathers said to what the adolescents said, agreement exists between four particular items: attending church/religious functions, cooking and having meals, talking to each other about personal matters, and visiting family together. It is worth noting that when comparing mother-adolescent dyads to father-adolescent dyads, it is clear that the activities shared between mothers and adolescents tend to have a focus other than on each other. In other words, when attending church, the focus is on worshipping God; when doing housework, the focus is on chores; and when doing homework, the focus is on the adolescent's schoolwork. Thus, it can be concluded that regarding mother-adolescent activities, the focus is rarely on spending meaningful quality time together focusing on one another, as opposed to the emphasis being certain activities. This finding differs slightly from the findings of the most common activities between fathers and adolescents. For the fathers, attending church/religious functions and cooking and having meals together were also more often reported, but they also reported talking to their children about personal matters as common activities.

This discovery stands in contrast to a multitude of studies that highlight adolescents' inclination towards emotional closeness with their mothers rather than their fathers (Ioffe et al., 2020; Mastrotheodoros et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2023). For instance, Steinberg and Silk (2002) posited that due to the greater amount of time adolescents spend with their mothers, they are

more likely to engage in discussions about personal and emotional issues with them, whereas fathers tend to maintain a more distant role, typically being consulted for practical assistance or information. In support of this notion, recent findings by Janssen et al. (2022) indicated that adolescents allocate significantly more time each day in close proximity to their mothers compared to their fathers, which is associated with increased maternal disclosure and emotional sharing.

Furthermore, Claes' (1998) cross-cultural investigation demonstrated that adolescents from Canada, Belgium, and Italy exhibited a preference for confiding in their mothers, with friends often being the recipients of their most personal disclosures. Fathers were less frequently the subjects of such confidences, a trend that aligns with contemporary research findings across various cultures (Gracia et al., 2020). Nevertheless, contrary to this prevailing trend, the results of the current study indicate a more robust communication dynamic between fathers and adolescents, with both parties reporting regular discussions of personal issues as a shared activity. This discrepancy suggests the potential for evolving norms in father-adolescent relationships or context-specific factors that may be enhancing paternal engagement. Lamb (2010) states that in the past, fathers were often seen as being on the periphery of their children's lives, but this finding suggests that fathers in this investigation are not that disengaged in their children's lives. Not only do they engage in a variety of shared activities, but they also choose to be more intimately involved in their lives, e.g., through personal or intimate conversations. Several researchers have noted that a cultural shift took place within psychological research: from the disengaged breadwinner/unemotional disciplinarian to the "new father" who is expressive, nurturing, and intimately involved in his children's daily lives (e.g., Cabrera et al., 2018). Gathering from the data findings, it would certainly appear as though rural South African Coloured fathers in this community would be classified in the category of "new father" as they not only spend time with their children, but also engage in a variety of activities with their adolescents.

In another recent study, Moodley and Lesch (2023) explored father-adolescent daughter relationships in low-income, rural South African communities. They found that while some fathers engaged in recreational activities with their daughters, the overall relationship was characterised by traditional roles and authority figures, with limited emotional closeness. This contrasts with earlier findings by Collins and Laursen (2004), who suggested that father-adolescent relationships often had a recreational nature.

An interesting finding in this current investigation is that 44% and 50% of fathers and adolescents respectively said that they discussed things of a personal nature. This aspect was not reported as common amongst the mothers. Activities that were rarely engaged in between parents and adolescents included going to the movies, restaurants, parties, bars, etc. This is to be expected as the participants were from a low-income community, who most probably struggled to make ends meet. Another possible explanation could be that the bulk of the participants have Christian values and perhaps the aforementioned activities are not deemed socially acceptable in their culture and in the community.

## **6. Conclusion**

This research aimed to investigate the characteristics and experiences of closeness in parent-adolescent relationships (PAR) within a low-income, semi-rural Coloured community located in the Western Cape Province of South Africa. The results provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how closeness is formed and expressed in a socio-culturally specific

environment, highlighting both similarities with international studies and distinct local dynamics.

At the core of the research was the examination of emotional connections, time spent together, communication, and shared activities, all of which serve as key indicators of closeness as defined by attachment theory. The results confirmed that robust mother–adolescent relationships were reported more frequently than father–adolescent relationships, a pattern consistent with global literature. However, the existence of involved and emotionally available fathers in this context challenges the dominant stereotypes of paternal disengagement in South African families. This represents a particularly significant and optimistic finding, indicating that despite socioeconomic challenges, relational resilience is both possible and evident.

Adolescents consistently expressed greater trust and comfort in confiding in their mothers, yet they also reported feelings of alienation towards them—illustrating the intricate emotional landscape of close family relationships. The time spent together was generally limited, which may reflect the economic pressures and time constraints that define life in marginalised communities. Nevertheless, both parents and adolescents indicated participation in meaningful shared activities, such as attending church, performing household chores, and engaging in personal conversations. These findings highlight the interaction between structural limitations and the agency exercised by families to sustain connection and mutual support. The study contributes to a growing body of scholarship advocating for culturally responsive understandings of attachment, moving beyond Eurocentric paradigms to consider how closeness is enacted in communities shaped by historical inequality, poverty, and patriarchal norms. It also highlights the ongoing value of attachment theory as a conceptual lens for understanding adolescent development, even in non-Western settings. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that closeness in PAR is not only achievable in resource-poor communities but is often maintained through creative adaptation, shared faith practices, and reciprocal emotional investment. These findings offer valuable implications for future interventions, family support services, and researchers aiming to understand and strengthen parent–adolescent bonds in similarly marginalised settings across South Africa and beyond.

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### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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