

African Gender Studies Quarterly



EDITORIAL

Advancing the Science of Human Development in a Changing World

Human development is neither linear nor isolated. It unfolds through continuous interactions among biological processes, psychological experiences, interpersonal relationships, cultural meanings, social structures, and the environments in which individuals live. The five contributions featured in this issue of *Optimal Development* collectively reinforce this understanding, demonstrating the importance of interdisciplinary scholarship in explaining behavior, promoting wellbeing, and addressing contemporary developmental challenges.

A major strength of this issue is its attention to behavior as both a product of development and a potential target for meaningful change. The paper traces the evolution of behavioral science from Pavlov and Thorndike to B.F. Skinner and Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) provides an important historical and conceptual foundation for understanding how behavior can be systematically studied and modified. Its application to the acquisition of two-word phrasal minds in a Nigerian child with autism demonstrates the practical value of evidence-based behavioural intervention while drawing attention to the need for cultural validation and contemporary neuro-affirming ethical practices. The emphasis on assent, dissent, and technological integration is particularly relevant to the future development of behavioural science.

The issue also examines behaviour within broader social and developmental contexts. The systematic review of adolescent sexual health demonstrates that knowledge does not automatically translate into safe sexual practices. Peer pressure, socioeconomic circumstances, family communication, cultural norms, substance use, and media exposure interact to shape adolescent sexual behaviour. This knowledge-behaviour gap highlights the need for interventions that extend beyond information provision to address the environments within which young people make decisions.

Similarly, the review of gender differences in psychopathology illustrates the complex pathways through which psychological difficulties develop across the lifespan. Although females tend to demonstrate greater vulnerability to internalizing disorders and males higher rates of externalizing difficulties, the paper appropriately cautions against deterministic interpretations. Gender interacts with biological maturation, psychological processes, and sociocultural experiences, underscoring the need for an integrative biopsychosocial-developmental framework.

Culture emerges even more explicitly in the study of Nigerian youths' understanding of Koro syndrome. Limited awareness and the influence of spiritual interpretations on help-seeking demonstrate how cultural beliefs can shape mental health experiences and decisions about professional care. These findings call for culturally responsive

mental health education that neither dismisses indigenous belief systems nor permits misinformation to obstruct appropriate care.

Finally, the exploration of the baby mama phenomenon brings family structure, stigma, psychological well-being, and social change into the conversation. The paper highlights the stress experienced by mothers, the challenges associated with social stigma, and the potential developmental implications for children growing up in diverse family arrangements. Importantly, it invites a more nuanced examination of family diversity rather than simplistic assumptions about what constitutes a successful family.

Taken together, the five contributions demonstrate that **optimal development requires more than understanding individuals in isolation**. Behaviour, Mental Health, Sexuality, Family relationships, Disability, and Cultural beliefs are embedded within social systems that can either constrain or facilitate human flourishing. The scholarship presented in this issue therefore calls for interdisciplinary, culturally grounded, developmentally sensitive, and ethically responsible approaches to research and practice.

African Gender Studies Quarterly is committed to creating a scholarly platform where diverse perspectives converge to advance knowledge of gender and human development across the lifespan. We invite researchers, practitioners, educators, policymakers, and scholars across disciplines to continue generating evidence that does not merely explain human behaviour, but contributes meaningfully to the creation of conditions in which individuals, families, and communities can flourish.

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