PERSPECTIVES OF SINGLE MOTHERS ON THE SOCIO-EMOTIONAL AND ECONOMIC INFLUENCE OF 'ABSENT FATHERS' IN CHILD'S LIFE: A CASE STUDY OF RURAL COMMUNITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The absence of father in child's life is a challenge in South Africa which is often related to family dysfunction and leads to other social problems. The aim of this study was to explore the perspectives of single mothers on the socio-emotional and economic influence of 'absent fathers' in child's life at a rural community. This study used qualitative approach and multiple case study design. This study constituted of single mothers from a rural community who were purposively sampled. The study used semi-structured interviews to collect data and data was thematically analysed. Absent fathers' is a serious challenge and its often visible amongst the children on how they interact with the society different from those that come from families with both parents. Children with absent fathers' experience emotional challenges as they often envy the benefits that the fathers give to their children and that cause emotional glitches to the children. Also, the absence of the father leaves a gap in meeting the basic needs of the children as their single mothers' struggle to put food on the table on their own and at times as they are having no one to help them, they are not able to meet all the family needs. The phenomenon of absent-fathers still remains a challenging issue in many communities. Children deserted by their fathers irrespective of the reasons advanced have a void in the lives regarding the father-figure with its concomitant benefits and responsibilities.

Keywords: Single mothers; Absent fathers; socio-emotional factors; social exclusion; children

INTRODUCTION

The issue of absent fathers is often related to family dysfunction and leads to other social problems. This is frequently visible in rural families of low-economic-class where the father figure is usually seen as the sole provider for the family. Kelly (2013) asserts that most men emphasize employment as being central to the understanding and practice of fatherhood. The absence of a father has negative influence on the child's life and the family in question at large. In corroboration, Ramphele (2002) avers that the mistrust between parent and child can further be exacerbated if the unknown parent's identity is revealed by an indirect source. While, Manyatshe (2012) indicates that the non-disclosure of the father can result in negative dynamics within the family.

Children often get curious in knowing who their fathers are, more especially when they reach the adolescent stage where everyone tends to start making sense of their identities. Manyatshe (2012) avows that absent and unknown biological fathers have reported that affected adolescents and youth were apprehensive about asking the mothers and caregivers about their

fathers. Kelly (2013) argues child's expressed interest in their biological parents can be interpreted by both the parents and child as an assault on the familial allegiance, thus children often suppress their desire to ask their caregivers about their true fathers. This shows a great concern from the children in knowing their biological fathers. The aim of this study was to explore the perspectives of single mothers on the socio-emotional and economic influence of 'absent fathers' in child's life at a rural community.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Eddy, Thomson-de Boor and Mphaka (2013) have discovered that the absence of the father in child's life is a challenge in South Africa and recommend studies to be carried out on the phenomenon – absent father, to develop policies, support programmes and awareness campaign. Fathers can be *absent* in the lives of children fully, partially, economically or emotionally (Datta 2007; Khunou 2008; Kruger 2012; Langa 2010; Madhavan, Townsend and Garey 2008; Manyatshe 2012; Townsend, Madhavan & Garey 2005). In answering the question, who are absent fathers, Jaffee and colleagues refer to paternal non-involvement and single mothers as situations that spell out absent fathers (Jaffee, Caspi, Moffitt, Taylor & Dickson 2001). The degree and nature of non-involvement are not spelt out. On the other hand, Mancini (2010) states that absent fathers usually do not reside with their children or are away for long periods of time. Accordingly, Clowes, Ratele and Shefer (2013) aver that fathers who are incarcerated might be absent for that time while they are in jail, but the child might still visit the father, and when they are released they might resume a presence in their child's life. Therefore, separation due to incarceration can be termed as a temporary absence.

Notions of fatherhood in African cultures are significantly linked to the philosophical foundation of *ubuntu* which encourages the collective social responsibility of the community (Mkhize 2006). African cultures thus see fathering as the responsibility of the community as a whole and not the sole responsibility of the biological father. Mkhize (2006) and Morrell (2006) both discovered that African fathers epitomise the portrayal of a strict patriarchal head of the family. The traditional patriarchal father figure in African cultures, according to Lesejane (2006), is not just the head of the household but also carries many responsibilities that exhibit good fathering. These responsibilities include enforcing moral authority and guidance for the family and children; becoming a leader and being responsible for the affairs of the family; being the primary provider of the family's material needs such as food and shelter; being a protector of one's family and children against any perceived threats; and becoming a good role model especially for their sons so they in turn can embody the values of good fatherhood. Freeks (2013) avers that father is an ideal role model for the young ones and his absence mean he or she will lack a person to teach him or her moral mores.

Death as a result of HIV/AIDS epidemic contributes to the absence of fathers (Posel & Devey 2006). Many South African households are headed by single mothers raising children whose fathers are deceased. In light of the current HIV/AIDS epidemic in South Africa where most infections are concentrated in the sexually active population the majority of people infected are parents (Desmond & Desmond 2006). The spread of HIV/AIDS contributes to fatherless households, however what is most prevalent in South Africa is the number of HIV positive women in the country (Wiener, Vasquez & Battles 2001).

Bogan and Krohn (2001) in their study discovered that those who grow up without a father end up being desperate for father figure. In support, Mancini (2010) discovered that daughters who grew up without a father are emotionally wounded and show promiscuous behaviour. Ellis, Bates, Dodge, Fergusson, John-Horwood, Pettit and Woodward (2003) discovered that female children who are less than five years are prone to teenage pregnancy before the age of 16 as compared to their counterparts who have their father's present. Mancini (2010) also affirms the view of Ellis et al (2003) who postulate that there is an association between teenage pregnancy or unintended pregnancy with father absence. On the other hand, Mandara, Murray and Joyner (2005) avers that boys who grow up without father figure involve themselves in criminal activities and show destructive behaviour. East, Jackson and O'Brien (2006:229) in this study found that "adolescents who experienced father absence had lower self-esteem, engaged in sexual activity at an earlier age and had lower general achievements compared to adolescents of intact dyadic families."

According to Shows and Gerstel (2009), most men emphasize employment as being central to the understanding and practice of fatherhood. South Africa's increasing rate of unemployment, especially among Black male South Africans, limits the ability for fathers to provide financially for their family and children (Mkhize 2006). There is a need for an alternative understanding of manhood and responsible fatherhood. Although unemployed fathers cannot financially provide for their families they can still assert and embrace their roles as fathers through other avenues (Rabe 2006). Munroe (2008) avers absent father is a root of socio-economic challenges in the world. Seemingly, Freeks (2011:91) found that "the increasing number of absent fathers on the horizon had become not only a dilemma but a serious debate in South Africa, especially on subjects such as socio-economic, morals, maturation of children, children development, relationships and replacement of fathers." Morman and Floyd (2006) reported that fathers are more likely to increase their involvement with their children if they have a greater proportion of male children in the family.

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

Feminist theory

The feminist movement is vast in orientation and there is no singular prescription of what the feminist theory constitutes. It is however, stated that within the feminism there is a high degree of consensus that the distinct underlying principle is the awareness of gender and the politics of gender within society (Brayton 1997). The essential aim of feminist theory as described by Flax (1987) is to analyse gender relations, how they are structured and experienced and more importantly how they are viewed. It highlights the constructed nature of gender (Sarantakos 2004), and that while culturally agreed on biological characteristics might assign males and females to the category of men or women, it is not synonymous with gender (Burr 1998). The notion of gender encompasses socially constructed roles, responsibilities, identities and expectations assigned differently to men and women (Johnson 1988) and gender is seen as a significant feature of social interactions. The notion of gender can be used as an analytic tool to scrutinize phenomena at the societal level. This value is shared by sociologist, Millen (1997), who advocates for all research to take into consideration an unequal society and disproportionate

gender relations in order to ensure that androcentric norms are not incorporated into their findings.

It can be said that the gendered role of fathering would affect how fathers relate to their children (Datta 2007), and to that effect, what and how fathers relate and communicate with their children. A gender analysis would thus seek to see gender hierarchies as entangled in social systems, and that other societal classification systems such as socioeconomic positioning, cultural practices and race are also embedded in societal structures (Lorber 2000). It is added that the intersectional nature of societal structural arrangements ranks individuals and groups into systems of power and powerlessness, privilege and disadvantage, normality and otherness. These structures are in turn sustained and constructed in everyday interactions and in cultural norms as well as being further legitimised in social institutions and legislation.

By bringing forth a gender structure framework a more realistic description of the lives of women, men and children can be provided by moving beyond stereotypical constructions of people's lives (Gerson 2004). According to Lay and Daley (2008), by viewing individuals in their social, political, economic, ethnic, and cultural contexts, these factors and how they overlap to produce the potential for disparities that are rooted in gendered relationships can be observed. A gendered framework would acknowledge the link between individuals' private choices and broader institutions and how at times women's choices are constrained by structural domains of which they have limited control over. Even though father absence is experienced in an intimate setting, gender inequalities are embedded in work and family institutions and shape both personal and social problems, thus a gender lens directs attention to the societal structural arrangement that organizes women and men's options differently and the unequal ways that perpetuate inequality (Gerson 2004).

The feminist theory was applied in this research in order to debunk this phenomenon 'absent fathers' without ignoring the fact that when these fathers are absent, there are some people who have to carry the burden, usually the single mothers in most cases or the maternal families if the father is deceased.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used qualitative approach because the researchers wanted to explore the perspectives of single mothers on the socio-emotional and economic influence of 'Absent Fathers' in Child's Life at rural community. Robert (2011) defines qualitative approach as an approach that provides a detailed narrative descriptions and explanations of phenomena investigated, with lesser emphasis given to numerical quantifications; methods used to collect qualitative data include ethnographic practices such as observing and interviewing. The researcher focused on feelings, behaviour, descriptions and words from the participants.

This study used a multiple case study design because of its ability analyse cases in their own setting in order to understand perspective of single mothers on the socio-emotional and economic influence of 'absent fathers' in child's life in a rural community (Cousin, 2005). Creswell (2013:97) avers that case study method "explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information." The multiple case study design was used to contrast the views of single mothers on the socio-emotional and economical influence of absent fathers (Yin, 2003). This study constituted of single mothers who are bona fide members

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of a rural community. The researcher considered to study this population irrespective of age or race. The reason being that the researcher believes that every person's insight in this regard can be of paramount importance despite different ages or even race.

A total number of seven (7) single mothers who are bona fide members of a rural community were sampled using purpose sampling technique. According to Bless, Smith and Sithole (2013) purposive/judgment sampling is based on the judgment of a researcher regarding the characteristics of a representative sample. A sample is chosen on the basis of what the researcher considers to be typical units that are judged to be the most common in the population under investigation. Purposive sampling enabled the researcher to choose the participants according to the goals of the research (Babbie 2010). The study included single mothers who were residing at rural area during the period that the study was conducted.

The study used semi-structured interviews to collect data. According to Moore (2006), interviews provide a rich stream of data that can be used to build up an understanding of why things happen in the way they do. Interviews allowed participants to share their own understanding and the researcher used audio recording and field notes in collecting data. They allowed the authors to be able to understand participant's emotions, views and beliefs. The researchers were guided by interview schedule when collecting data and used open-ended question. The researchers asked the same questions to different participants. This helped to accommodate every participant since some users are illiterate and could not read the researcher's interview schedule. Questions that were not well understood by respondents were clarified in participants' language.

This study used Thematic analysis because of its ability to provide flexible, rich and detailed data out of the complex account of data (Braun & Clarke 2006). Thematic analysis use coding strategy to look for recurrent themes, topics, or relationships, and marking passages with a code or label to categorise them for later retrieval and theory-building (Mills, Durepo & Wiebe 2010). There are steps to be followed when analysing data using themes. The following steps were followed as outlined by Manyatshe (2012):

- **Transcription of data**

The researcher transcribe data from tape onto paper thematically. The manuscripts were edited in order to eliminate typing errors and contradictions. Tape recorders were kept in a safe place and locked. Only the researcher and his supervisor had access to the tape recorders for verification of data.

- **Checking and editing**

The researcher scrutinised and edited transcripts. The researcher also related parts of the data in an attempt to prepare them for further analysis.

- **Analysing and interpretation**

This step entails data reduction and analysis. The researcher developed categories of the data. Codes and categories were used as tools of analysing data.

- **Generalisation**

The researcher identified the similarities and differences and developed the typologies of data.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

i)   Influence of Absent Fathers in Child's Life

Acknowledged biological fatherhood, at least as a manifestation of lineage, is a very important element of identity development. Children take their clan name from their father and, in times past, children, like the famed Zulu King Shaka (1787-1828) were humiliated for being fatherless. Today, being considered fatherless generates in children a sense of loss and a great deal of confusion (Ramphele 2002).

It can be noted that the issue of absent-fathers causes more harm than good. The participants have stated that there are a lot of negative influence that are being brought by fathers' absenteeism. Sense of longlines, felling of stress, insufficient funds and unemployment and poverty will be discussed consecutively below.

ii)   Sense of longlines

Most participants indicated that this issue of absent fathers is associated with sense of longlines and its often visible amongst the children on how they interact with the society. Fatherless children interact differently with their peers as compared to those with both parents.

One participant said:
> *"The influence of this issue where visible on my children because the other one once told me that if their fathers were with them he was going to be happy and ask him al that he would like to have. I can tell as a mother that my son was talking with a painful heart."*

Other echoed:
> *"I think this issue have affected my child a lot because every time he would ask about his fathers and I can tell that the face does not have a spark when he talks about the issue."*

iii)   Feeling of stress

Most of the participants mentioned that fatherless children experience emotional challenges such as stress. This may be because children often envy the benefits that the fathers give to their children and that cause emotional glitches to the children.

Some of the participants said:
> *"So in the absence of a father as single mothers we really get stressed and the children too notice that if there was a father in the family things were going to be much better."*

Others echoed:
> *"It is very hard and difficult to raise children without their father in the picture…"*

> *"Parenting should be a two people task so that it does not have to feel like a burden. It becomes hard at times that you think of their father who never took responsibility."*

iv)   *Insufficient funds and unemployment*

Most of the participants indicated that they are unemployed, and they do not have enough funds to fill the void left by the children's fathers. Single mothers struggle to put food on the table on their own and at times as they are having no one to help them, they are not able to meet all the family needs.

Some of the participants' comments were:

> *"When there is a father in the family, as a mother I can worry about other things except the monetary standing of the family. Fathers are known to feed their families and always have means of making money so that the children can grow."*

Other echoed:

> *"Whenever my children talk or ask about their father, you could tell that the issue really not sitting well with them. The other day my child even said that if his father was around he would not be having any worries knowing that his father is there to give him all that he can as from him, be it clothes, cell phones, etc..."*

v)   *Poverty*

Majority of the participants indicated that since there is no breadwinner in the family they are more likely to experience poverty. This was to be expected because in typical rural areas, fathers are still seen as sole providers in the family.
Some of the participants said:

> *"Honestly speaking, having no father in the family brings nothing but a struggle. Poverty play with us as single mithers because we are unemployed and yet we have children that are supposed to eat every day, bath, wear and live normal lives like others. But with no employment and no help from the children's father it's really a struggle and only God just keep us going."*

> *"Sometimes at home when we face some hardships, poverty in most cases, my children like to say that if their father was around they would not be struggling."*

Other echoed:

> *"a father is known to be the provider in his family, a woman's salary can just help but a man is the provider."*

DISCUSSION

In this study it was discovered that children who are growing without a father have sense of longlines. This affirms the finding of Freeks (2013) who avers that father is an ideal role model

for the young ones and his absence mean he or she will lack a person to teach him or her moral mores. In addition, Wray, Grant, Kofman, and Peel (2015) avows that fatherless children develop feelings of isolation and they lack sense of identity and belonging. This might prove to be a huge problem for children as they might not have stable relationship with their life time partners. Fatherless children also develop low self-esteem because there is no one to reinforce their positive contributions and acknowledge their accolades (East et al. 2006).

Other reported that children with absent fathers have feeling of stress. This shows that emotional agony is mostly felt by boy children as they should be seeing their fathers as their role models and wanting to be like them as any other children would wish to, but when the father is absent it then emotionally breaks the child. This was supported by the views of Perrin, Baker, Romelus, Jones, Heesacker (2009) and Goodsell and Meldrum (2010) who discovered that many children have a desire for emotional connection with their father and their absence leave them with emotional breakdown. Socially the issue of absent fathers affects the children negatively and some end up engaging in unacceptable behaviour as their way of dealing with their stress. This affirms the views of Baskerville (2002) who avers that almost any kind of social pathology has been linked to children with absent fathers including drug and alcohol abuse, criminal involvement, teen pregnancy and suicide.

Some children without fathers opt to drink alcohol and smoke knowing their single mothers have less power to discipline them. Like the participants have highlighted, it could be better if the father was present and they could hold hands together in raising the children and making sure that their lives are socially healthy. Flood (2003) have discovered that paternal absence causes a host of social, emotional and behavioural problems. The presence of a father in a male child helps him to take up his role of fatherhood as he matures (Goeke-Morey & Cummings 2007). On the hand, female children have balanced life when their fathers are present (Goeke-Morey & Cummings 2007) and having an absent father means the daughter will not have a balanced life.

Lack of funds from single mothers make it impossible for them to provide all the necessity that their children needs. Tyawa (2017) has discovered that in South Africa, fathers leave their children because their sense of identity is damaged because of unemployment. Due to lack of unemployed single mothers and absent fathers, children are more likely to engage in criminal activities in order to attain things that they cannot get from their fathers. This assumption is supported by Mandara et al. (2005) who discovered that boys who grow up without father figure involve themselves in criminal activities. Mancini (2010) who asserts that fatherless children faces the risk of poverty. In corroboration, Eddy et al. (2013) who assert that social exclusion is prevalent in households without a father. Single mothers find themselves in situations that stress them out because the children want things that the mother cannot afford. Raising a child is very expensive and without being employed it can even be more difficult. In most rural areas, having a father in the family means less poverty, so if there is no father that might mean a serious struggle. As a matter of a norm in the society, mothers are expected to remain at home and look after the children while fathers may even go far to look for employment to feed their families.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of absent-fathers still remains a challenging issue in many communities. Fathers do not have it easy as there are a lot of other issues having a very strong influence on the phenomenon. There are distinct ways of defining fatherhood and that determine whether the father will be involved or absent. The critical aspects that hinder this significant role ranges from culture, beliefs, marital status and the personal intentions of the children's parents, specifically the children's biological fathers in this most cases. Other issues that influence the issue of fatherhood are social influences, economic influences and even historical influences of how fatherhood have been conceptualised all along. The concept of fatherhood has to be redefined in order to try and change society's perspectives on fatherhood and the importance of fatherhood be given enough consideration. The government can strategize on ways to encourage fathers to develop more interest in becoming involved in the upbringing of their children and actually realise the negative impacts that come with their absence and also the benefits of being tangled in their children's lives.

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