



## Lived experiences of adolescent boys who have absent fathers: A phenomenological approach

Kgethego Terrance Phasha<sup>(a)\*</sup> Makhubele Jabulani Calvin<sup>(b)</sup> Jocomina Malebo Mokone<sup>(c)</sup>

<sup>(a,c)</sup> Department of Social Work, University of Limpopo, Private Bag x 1106, Sovenga, South Africa

<sup>(b)</sup> Professor, School of Social Sciences, University of Limpopo, Limpopo, South Africa



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### ABSTRACT

*The phenomenon of absent fathers continues to be one of the major social problems affecting families globally. This study examined the lived experiences of adolescent boys who grow up in absent father families. The objectives of this study were to elucidate the experiences of adolescent boys with absent fathers, to describe the challenges faced by adolescent boys who grow up without a father and to determine their understanding of the role and value of having a father. A qualitative approach was followed for this study. Data was collected from 18 adolescent boys through face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions. The data collected was analysed thematically. The findings showed that adolescent boys regarded fathers as important figures in their lives and their families. The absence of fathers in their total upbringing has some negative ramifications, amongst others, financial challenges, poor academic progress, alcohol abuse and lack of immediate gender role model.*

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## Introduction

Globally, the structure and composition of families have changed. The advent of globalisation, industrialisation, and socio-economic changes brought a shift from the traditional nuclear family towards various forms of family compositions, amongst which are single-mother families. In South Africa, the majority of children live in households where their fathers are not part of the family structure (Holborn & Eddy, 2011; Magqamfana & Bazana, 2020). Due to the increasing number of children growing up in absent father households, this phenomenon has captured the attention of researchers worldwide (Cartwright & Henriksen Jr., 2012; Eddy, Thomson De Boor & Mphaka, 2013; Freeks, 2017; Khewu & Adu, 2015; Pitsoane & Gasa, 2018). Although the physical presence or availability of a father in the household does not automatically convert to positive outputs, a father's absence in the family is understood to have negative consequences for children in the family, especially boys (Eddy *et al.*, 2013; Van der Berg & Makusha, 2018). The absence of fathers in the family and in the children's lives in particular has been associated with adversities such as poverty, low self-esteem, poor academic performance, abuse of drugs and alcohol as well as lack of security in relationship with the opposite sex, just to name a few (East, Hutchinson, Power & Jackson, 2017; Hill, Proffitt-Leyva & DelPriore., 2016; Magqamfana & Bazana, 2020; Pitsoane & Gasa, 2018). In African context, fathers are predominantly economic providers and moral guides; hence, their absence in the family is a disadvantage to the family (East *et al.*, 2017; Magqamfana & Bazana, 2020). Great concern, which is also the focus of this study, is the effect of fathers' absence on young South African boys in rural setting since boys are generally attached towards fathers as compared to mothers. Majority of studies on absent fathers in South Africa focus on single-mothers and young male adults in urban and township settings (Langa, 2014; Mabusela, 2014; Sekgale, 2017; Spjeldnaes, Moland, Harris & Sam, 2011; Spjeldnaes, Moland, Harris & Sam, 2014). In these contexts, the phenomenon of absent fathers viewed through these lenses would appear to be biased and insufficiently capture in-depth understanding of the experiences of rural adolescent boys. The aim of this study was to elucidate the experiences of adolescent boys with absent fathers in single-mother families in Bakenberg village, Limpopo Province. The paper has been organised as follows: following the introduction is the research methodology and a and the

\* Corresponding author. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-9244-2468

paper has been organised as follows: following the introduction is the research methodology and analysis which offers a paper trail on how the study was conducted. After that the authors present and discuss the major findings of the study which are followed by drawing conclusions on key points and making recommendation for future research on the subject matter.

## Methodology

This study used two methods of data collection, namely semi-structured open-ended interviews and focus group discussions. These methods of data collection were understood to be advantageous in establishing rapport with participants and enabled the researcher to obtain rich descriptive data and to view the world through the eyes of the participants (Nieuwenhuis, 2016; Wagner, Kawulich & Gardener, 2012). Eight face-to-face interviews were conducted as well as one focus group discussions with 10 adolescent boys. The participants who formed part of the focus group discussions were not the same participants who were interviewed face-to-face. The aim for applying dual methods was to enable the researcher to triangulate the data, that is, use a number of strategies to ensure that the research findings presented are credible and authentic (Wagner *et al.*, 2012). The interviews and focus group discussion sessions were audio-recorded and done in Sepedi language and later translated into English. Adolescent boys with absent fathers from a rural village constituted the population for this study. These adolescents live in single-mother families where the father is not part of the family setup or unit. A purposive sampling technique was used to provide the richest data possible from people who possessed the requisite knowledge and experiences of the phenomenon being investigated (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2017; Creswell, 2012). According to the nature of qualitative research and the purpose of the study, the sample for the study consisted of 18 adolescent boys from the population group who possessed the specified characteristics required. The participants who met the inclusion criteria were selected to provide valuable information on the study phenomenon. Therefore, the sample of this study included the following criteria:

- i. Adolescent boys between the ages of 14 and 18.
- ii. Adolescent boys who grew up without fathers and receiving no contribution from their fathers.
- iii. Attending secondary schools within Bakenberg village.
- iv. Living in Bakenberg village.

The study did not include adolescent boys who were living in households where there is a male figure who plays a fatherly or manly role, for the reason that the researcher aimed to describe the experiences of adolescent boys who grow up without fathers. Considering the sensitivity of the study it had potential to evoke pent-up feelings, ethical considerations were heeded and an approval was sought from University of Limpopo Research and ethics committee. In addition, permissions were obtained from relevant key stakeholders such as adolescent boys themselves, and their parents.

## A thematic analysis

For the purposes of this study, a thematic analysis was an appropriate method of data analysis. The steps outlined by Clarke and Braun (2013) when analysing data using the thematic method were followed, namely, familiarisation, organisation, coding, and identification of themes, reviewing themes and producing a report (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017; Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013). All of the data collected from the interviews and the focus group discussions were transcribed into meaningful texts. This allowed the researcher to familiarise himself with the data as he listened to the audio recordings repeatedly and read through the manuscripts. Through reading the transcriptions and listening to the recordings, the researcher was able to identify emerging patterns in the data that were then able to be organised together. In order to accurately categorise and interpret the data, the researcher used coding to identify emerging patterns or themes within the data. Maguire and Delahunt (2017:3355) explain that data coding enabled the researcher to reduce data into small chunks of meaning and labelling it to form descriptions and broader themes in the data. In this regard, the researcher studied each sentence line by line to arrive at the most appropriate meaning of the data. Different codes were then categorised together to formulate broader themes and sub-themes. The identified and generated themes and sub-themes were reviewed to ascertain that they made sense and related to the study aim and objectives. A descriptive phenomenology research design was chosen for this study as it sought to provide descriptive experiences from adolescent boys with absent fathers. Researchers pointed out that phenomenology aims at concrete description of experienced events from the perspective of everyday life by participants (Bradshaw, Atkinson & Doody, 2017; Lambert & Lambert, 2012; Qutoshi, 2018; Wagner *et al.*, 2012). For this reason, a descriptive phenomenology design allowed for in-depth descriptive account of adolescent boys' experiences of growing up without a father and how it affected them. Furthermore, this research design also shed light on how the phenomenon of absent fathers affected the adolescent boys' upbringing and behavioural conduct.

## Discussions

From the analysis of the data collected from the participants, four themes emerged, namely: Compelled to play man's role, material deprivation in the family, comparison with boys whose fathers are present and role of other men. These themes will be highlighted in the next discussion with evidence.

### **Theme 1: Compelled to play man's role in the family**

The primary roles of a father are generally regarded as caring, protecting and providing for the family in conjunction with mothers. His absence implies that these roles shift to other members of the family and generally to male figures within the family. According to Eddy *et al.* (2013), when the father is absent, adolescent boys are pressured to act as adult males in the household. This study found that the majority of the participants were often forced or felt compelled to perform adult roles. For these boys, the absence of a male figure deprived them of the opportunity to be children as they grow up either being expected to or thinking they should play adult male roles. The majority of the participants in this study are confronted with the responsibility to play adult roles especially those that would have been executed by their fathers or adult men in the family. The traditional gender roles and societal expectations also play a major role in exacerbating the situation that most boys find themselves in as they are expected to assume tasks that are generally performed by adult men within the family. In corroboration, participants mentioned that:

*"As boys at home, it is often required of us to play the role of protecting the family as we live in a place where there is too much crime and also perform tasks which women in the family cannot perform".*

Another participant echoed similar views, that:

*"I often look after the cattle at home and fix the yard fence as a boy child because there is no one except me who can do that job at home"*

### **Theme 2: Material deprivation**

Notwithstanding the role single-mothers play in their families, the absence of a father to provide for the family exacerbates the hardship felt in the family. This is in line with a study by Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado (2018), who found that single-mothers and their children experience high levels of poverty due to the absence of a father. Another study conducted by East *et al.* (2017) also found that when a father is absent at home, the responsibility for provision of financial support and care is left entirely on the shoulders of the mother. These studies concur with the findings of this current study that most of these boys are unable to comprehensively meet their needs and this is attributed to their fathers' absence to provide for them. Generally, for most adolescents, physical appearance is very important which could lead to the demand for certain types of clothing such as expensive brands. In most instances, their mothers are unable to provide and meet their demands for the desired expensive clothes and accessories. The majority of participants attributed their dissatisfaction with the kind of clothing they wear and other things they are unable to have due to inadequate family finances as the result of the fathers' absence. For instance, they mentioned that:

*"When the father is absent at home, as a boy child, I cannot get certain types of clothes like expensive labels as my mother struggles to meet all our needs alone."*

In similar vein in corroboration with the above, another participant said:

*"As a boy, I wish my father were present at home to assist my mother in looking after us financially because with the little money she gets, she provides us with food and I do not get some of the things I desire."*

Several participants perceived their family situation as having a negative effect on their confidence and self-esteem. They mentioned that they repeat the same clothes more often and this makes them appear uncool in front of their friends. They regarded the absence of their fathers as an aggravating factor for not having all the things they wanted as they can only rely on their mothers.

### **Theme 3: Comparison with boys whose fathers are present**

The presence of a father is associated with positive outcomes for boys when compared to those who have absent fathers (East *et al.*, 2017; Hill *et al.*, 2016; Pitsoane & Gasa, 2018). Boys in this study expressed being envious of how their peers relate with their fathers and the benefits they receive from having fathers present in their lives. For instance, they mentioned that their fathers would have been able to buy them the expensive clothes they wanted and guide them as boys about becoming men. Almost all the participants pointed out differences between themselves and other boys who have fathers present. In responding to this question, the participants mentioned that:

*"Most of the boys who have fathers do not have to struggle for anything because they receive everything they desire, unlike us who barely get of the things we need."*

*"I see a big difference between me and boys who have fathers because they wear nice expensive clothes and also tend to brag about visiting places like Mall of the North in Polokwane where I am not able go willingly"*

According to Langton and Berger (2011), boys who have fathers present have greater access to economic resources as compared to boys from single-mother homes. This study revealed that boys who grow up having fathers present at home benefit more from their fathers' presence in terms of access to money and paternal guidance that is readily available. However, these boys also mentioned that some of the boys who have fathers present are often spoiled and show disrespect at school, wandering about at night, smoke and drink alcohol more than boys from absent father families. These differences indicate that not all boys from families where fathers are present behave well and subsequently not all boys from absent-father families display anti-social behaviour. These findings

corroborate the study conducted by Langa (2014; 2017), who found that not all boys who grow up without fathers necessarily engage in risky anti-social behaviours. These findings challenge the predominant view that associates children from absent father households with psychological and behavioural misconducts.

#### **Theme 4: The role of other men**

An African proverb alludes that it takes a village to raise a child and no exception is given to boys who grow up without fathers. The social fabric that builds communities and ties families together comes into play when the need for other male role models arises to bridge the gap of absent fathers to navigate adolescent boys to some degree of acceptable ways of life. In their study on constructions of fatherhood by men with absent fathers, East, Hutchinson, Power and Jackson (2020) found that men who grew up with absent fathers drew examples of fatherhood from male relatives such as grandfathers and uncles as well as from observing their friends interacting with their fathers. The role played by uncles, older men, male pastors and brothers within the immediate environment where these boys live is key in ensuring that boys learn acceptable male roles and are able to satisfy the need to belong. As pointed out by Langa (2014), individuals such as uncles, brothers, grandfathers and male teachers play a significant role as father figures to boys who grow up without biological fathers.

In corroborating these views, the participants mentioned that:

*“To some extent uncles and elderly men from the community play the fatherly role and provide guidance and support which help us to feel like we belonging.”*

In addition, another participant said:

*“I often learn from the guidance provided by fathers of my friends because I mostly spend time with them and get to observe and learn important lessons that they teach their sons.”*

The role played by uncles, older men, brother and pastors as role models is significant in modelling the behaviour of these adolescent boys. This study found that these support systems bridge the void left by the absence of a father in the lives of adolescent boys. These structures also instil important social values that guide these boys into taking responsibility for the choices and decisions they make into adulthood. Such supportive systems supplement the parental role provided by single-mothers to meet the social and emotional needs of the adolescent boys in the family.

## **Conclusion**

It is strongly believed that for psychological and behavioural reasons, a positive paternal involvement in families is very important for driving the agenda of identity formation and as moral guides as articulated by Magqamfana and Bazana (2020). In the absence of fathers' involvement and guidance, the study has brought to light the role played by other significant males who bridge the gap in providing moral values and discipline for boys in absent father households. The predominant perception on the phenomenon of absent fathers conceives families and children from absent father households as bearing negative life outcome and prone to indulge in risky anti-social behaviour such as alcohol and drugs, truancy and poor academic outcomes. The findings of this study has challenged this predominant view as it highlights that other boys who reside at households where fathers are present portrays similar anti-social behaviour and conduct which is said to be associated with boys who come from absent father households. This notion brings about a debate on the determination of the degree and quality of fathers' involvement and influence in the upbringing of their children, especially boys. The major limitation of this study pertains to the scope of the study, which involved limited sample; however, the findings of the study shed some light on the experiences of adolescent boys who have absent fathers from similar settings.

Furthermore, for future research on this phenomenon, there is a necessity to venture into the interrogation of absent fathers on the impact of their absence in their children's lives by specifically engaging absent fathers as participants in order to promote interaction and involvement of fathers in boys' lives.

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