Psychosocial and economic challenges faced by young fathers in assuming parental responsibilities in South African communities

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ABSTRACT

The father’s involvement in their children’s life is often defined by economical and psychological support, those without adequate financial muscle are often denied 1) parental contact and 2) responsibilities. The noted unjustified perceptions fail to contemplate historic socio-economic and psychosocial factors affecting fathers’ roles and related expectations. Therefore, the objective of this study was aimed at accentuating psychosocial and economic challenges faced by young fathers in assuming parental responsibilities, focusing on South African case studies. The applied methodology was based on ‘non-empirical research design: Systematic Review,’ documentary sources were qualitatively [Purposively] sampled from the search engines such as ‘Google scholar, South African Electronic Thesis or Dissertation (ETD) portal, Jstor, Sabinet, and EbroHost,’ using keywords/phrases related to the subject under research to filter relevant data, restricted to 2003-2022. The inductive Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) analyzed the collected data. The primary finding of this study revealed that [Some] young fathers are faced with parental exclusions owing to the financial instability of compensating and supporting them. Moreover, they also experience psychological distress and resort to criminal activities to find means of supporting their children. The underlined conclusion suggests that society should allow fatherly responsibilities to be catered on children without placing more pressure on them (Fathers’), their financial standards should be respected at all costs. Programs strictly advocating for children’s contact with their non-residential fathers to encourage their [Fathers] positive involvement and focus on children’s needs across South African communities should be urgently staged.

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Introduction

Fatherhood remains a serious matter in both South Africa and neighbouring countries. World Health Organisation [WHO] (2014) reported that over 16 million girls between the age of 15 and 19 become pregnant universally, and over 2.5 million of these girls are impregnated by young males. However, in attempting to find the solution to the problem of young parents, Madiba and Nsiki (2017) has bemoaned researchers for solely focusing on these young girls and excluding young boys. Moreover, the latter authors also noticed that even when coming to challenges of parenthood, young fathers are not included. This means that researchers focus on young mothers and how being a young mother affects them and neglects young fathers. A year later, Uengwongsapat, Kantaruksa, Kluinklin, and Sansiriphun (2018) also came out and experience their dissatisfaction with researchers focusing solely on young mothers and alienating young fathers. Moreover, Uengwongsapat et al. (2018) highlight that researcher should look at challenges young fathers endure and how those challenges affect their relationship with their children. It is worth noting that in this paper, young fathers or mothers refer to those aged between 18 to 25 years.

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More often than not, young fathers are denied access to their children due to their inability to pay damages. Ngema (2013) who enunciated that due to societal supports this line of thinking or cultural norms of paying damages; young fathers’ find themselves on the wrong side, as they are unable to pay for damages. The researchers agree with Ngema (2013) as we have seen in Bapedi culture, a male who impregnated a female is not allowed to visit his child before paying damages to the female’s family. Due to the inability to pay for damages, young fathers fail to maintain contact with the child and that leads to a diminished relationship between a child and its father. Although that is the case, Children’s Act (No. 38 of 2005) stipulates that both parents are responsible for looking after their child - not only financially but they should also provide emotional support to their children (South Africa, 2005). To maintain contact with the child, some young fathers engage in the wrong lifestyle, such as downsing their sorrow to substance abuse whilst others opt for criminal activities to raise funds to pay damages (Lobaka, 2017). The above are not all challenges that young fathers’ faces, for example, Almpay (2014) signposted that some young fathers drop out of school and experience physiological disorders which might affect their future or lives. Thus, this paper was aimed at accentuating psychosocial and social challenges faced by young fathers in assuming parental responsibilities.

The concept of fatherhood and fathering is different from one family to the other. Hence, it is without a doubt that an understanding of this concept requires an articulate consideration of what it means to be a father in a certain culture or family looking at the culture or the family’s rules, norms and expectations (Seward & Rush, 2015). According to Makhanya and Matthias (2018), there is a dearth of literature focusing on the challenges that fathers particularly the ‘unmarried’ face towards their presence in their children’s lives. These difficulties are often associated with the consideration of culture in parenthood, which prohibits many fathers from fathering their children as fathers should follow certain cultural norms from their child’s maternal side (Chrisholm, Büchner, Krüger & du Bois-Reymond, 2020). For instance, many fathers fail to access their children, as they are sometimes required to either perform a ritual or pay a certain fee. It is worth noting that this mentality weighs more on fathers who are unemployed or come from a poor background because the maternal family will weigh the father’s involvement in his child’s life based on what he brings to the table (Makhanya & Matthias, 2018). As such, these fathers get the pressure of proving which then invites law-breaking behaviours.

Research is categorised into empirical and non-empirical. This study adopted non-empirical research wherein we reviewed existing literature to accentuate social and economic challenges faced by fathers in assuming parental responsibilities. Furthermore, a narrative literature review was utilised as a research design due to its ability to identify and synthesize different books and journal articles about a chosen topic (Campbell Collaboration, 2018). Considering this, researchers gathered secondary data from various journals using a purposive sampling technique since there are prominent papers on parenthood. This secondary data was sourced from research engines such as the Google scholar, South African National ETD portal, Jstor, Sabinet and EbcoHost that focused on the topic in question. The selection criteria were also determined by restricted data from the year 2003 to 2022 with a 19 years’ projection (Not in sequence) to reach data saturation (Maluleke, 2020; and Mokwena & Maluleke, 2020). As Creswell (2014) confirmed that researchers may collect qualitative documents, for example; accredited journals, internet sources, public documents, newspapers, minutes of meetings or official documents, dissertations and thesis, amongst others.

Furthermore, it is provided also that one can ask questions of documents in same ways as with research participants. The collected data could be qualitative in nature, for example; to determine ‘what ideas expressed in document, what is underlying approach or ‘agenda’ of document?’ (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Moreover, the search was limited to work on fatherhood. The data was analysed thematically using the inductive TCA. This method can be used to identify, analyse and report patterns within data set, allowing for descriptive organisation of the data in a way that facilitates interpretation of various aspects of research topics and be usefully applied to documents (O’Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015).

Furthermore, the covered introduction section presented the general area of this study, by introducing the broad objective, which was confined to the ‘Psychosocial and economic challenges faced by young fathers in assuming parental responsibilities in South African communities.’ The problem statement guiding this study was also addressed by stating the main reasons relating to the importance and interesting facets of the identified study problem. A brief overview of relevant existing literature studies on this topic were also reviewed, closely looking at the following main sections, which guided this study: Psychosocial challenges faced by young fathers, Paternal involvement, and; Attachment and economic challenges faced by young fathers, coupled with the applied theoretical framework applications, The Ecosystem Theory. This was done to indicate specific gaps, inconsistencies and controversies in the reviewed literature. Overall, three themes were identified on this study, namely: Experience of growing without a father, Contribution of culture towards fatherlessness, and; Financial incapacity as a contributing factor to crime. Moreover, the adopted research design and approach [Methodology] to solve the problem guiding this study are outlined in the following section.

Literature review

Fathers encounter various challenges in fathering their children. This was supported by Okeke, Ugwuanyi and Mufutau (2020) who postulated that fathering proves to be a discreet journey for many fathers as they tend to emulate how they were fathered (Ito, & Izumi-Taylor, 2013). However, some young fathers find themselves not knowing how to father their children because they grew up without a father (Matlakala, Makhubele & Mashilo, 2018). This confusion in turn creates turmoil in relationships between the father and his child. On that score, this section will vividly discuss the challenges faced by fathers throughout the fatherhood journey focusing on psychosocial and economic challenges. Moreover, we will also look at the influence of culture on fatherhood as well as the relationship between culture, fatherhood, and criminality.
Psychosocial challenges faced by young fathers

There is no doubt that being a parent changes one's feelings and behaviour. All parents out there aim to teach norms, support, maintain contact and care for their children. Hence, Harris (2006) underscored that societal norms anticipates that parents should raise their children, despite their respective ages. However, this concept appears to be skewed to one parental figure being the 'young mothers' because young fathers are limited and prohibited from raising their kids especially if they are not married to the mother (Alampay, 2014). According to the Children’s Act (No. 38 of 2005), Section 21, a father’s involvement in their children’s lives is determined by their demonstration of accepting social and financial responsibility towards the child (Swartz, Bhana, Richter, & Versfeld, 2013). This means that the degree to which young fathers want to be involved in their children’s lives is seen through their meaningful actions such as financially maintaining the child. However, many young fathers with an interest in fathering are unable to meet the standard of providing due to unemployment. As a result, Alampay (2014) posited that these fathers succumb to harsh conditions of not being part of their children’s lives and developmental health issues such as stress, anxiety, and depression. Some of the other psychological challenges are unpacked as follows:

Paternal involvement and attachment

Ancient research on paternal roles has shown various experiences that moulded the meaning of fathering in different families as evident in recent studies (Kruk, 2010). This means that the meaning of a father is understood differently in various cultures such as the Bapedi and Zulu cultures. Schindler (2010) reports that there is a vast of positive psychological literature on the importance of fathers’ involvement in their children’s lives emphasising developmental values and the nature of affection between fathers and their children. In the same vein, Kruk (2010) and Alampay (2014) postulated that fathers consider parenting as a critical and valued social role that helps to shape how their children perceive life. Without any doubt, fathers’ engagement with their children proved to have a significant attachment that ascertains positive outcomes in the child’s life as an adult.

Kruk (2010) further stated that fathers’ involvement promotes sex-role and moral development as well as achievement, motivation, and intellectual development in a child’s life. In essence, when a father is present in a child’s life, there is a great potential for the child to be socially competent and responsible. Considering the above, Alampay (2014) affirmed that father-child attachment is negatively affected by the limited contact between these parties. This suggests there is a lack of affection between fathers and children particularly those who stay far and/or are prohibited from seeing their children. Adams (2016) avowed that many fathers are denied access to see their children for several reasons such as not being in a permanent relationship with the mother or not providing for the child financially. For this reason, children grow up hating their fathers because they were brainwashed to believe that their fathers are useless and do not desire to have a father-child relationship. Thus, we deduce that most young mothers are thrilled by the idea of raising a child with a man who has money. This is indirectly leading to the rejection of the biological father of their child provided he is financially poor and damages the father-child relationship. Furthermore, these mothers encourage their children to hate their fathers by telling them that their fathers fail to provide for them and calling them names such as ‘looser.’

Economic challenges faced by young fathers

Payne (2019) provided that many researchers devoted their time to understanding how South African history and the Apartheid regime has contributed to the economic challenges faced by citizens. Without a doubt, the anomalous environmental conditions have created a struggle for many families, as they had to navigate and find balance in an environment that does not cater for family stability and solidarity. Seepamore (2016) signposted that South Africa has shown 39.5% and 3.3% of children staying with only their mother and father respectively. In simple terms, these numbers indicate that more children in South Africa are residing with their mothers than their fathers. In light of the above, Meintjes, Hall and Sambu (2015) found that children prefer residing with their mothers than their fathers due to historical population control, poverty, migration, housing, and educational opportunities. In essence, the apartheid conditions were unfavourable to fathers because they are culturally known as financial providers, and they were expected to migrate to new places to secure employment and send money home (Seepamore, 2016).

For this reason, their households broke down and the number of absent fathers increased, damaging many father-child relationships, and leaving children with the mind-set that fathers are banks rather than support systems. For example, fathers were expected to reduce visiting their children to save more money and this disrupted them from providing emotional and physical support to their children in turn making mothers sole support networks. Furthermore, Lesch and Kelapile (2016) alluded that unemployment plays a critical role in fathers’ involvement in their children’s life as poor fathers are considered more incompetent fathers than richer fathers particularly when the father and mother broke up. Although that is the case, Payne (2019) highlighted that despite the economic challenges that hinder fathers’ involvement, many fathers still want to be present in their children’s lives and have a bond with them. However, due to cultural factors, they fail to assume their parental responsibilities as they fail to pay Lobola or damages. This is, unfortunately, leading to more children growing up without their fathers. Conversely, not all fathers succumb to pressure, some of the young fathers engage in criminal activities to assume parental responsibilities and keep their relationship intact.

The illustrated findings reaffirm the earlier submission made by Schwartz (2003) by revealing that societal issues such as violence imamate because of the dismissive roles disguised in cultural norms as people use cultural norms when it benefits them. Undoubtedly, the cultural laws that prohibit these males from partaking in their fatherly roles create social tribulations not only on children but to the fathers as well since Flood (2003) believed that fathers who have no attachment to their family particularly their children are
likely to be uncivilised citizens. This is because these fathers lack the responsibility and positivity that comes with marriage and fatherhood. Also, denying fathers access to their children suggests a high number of mother headed families leading to stress and frustration on children, broken social bonds and an opened crime tap, Coley and Medeiros (2007). Given this, the presence of fathers in their children’s lives has the potential of preventing criminality, especially in boys because fathers act as responsible role models and guardians to these children.

Theoretical framework applications

The Ecosystem Theory

This theory [Ecosystem Theory] was widely known as Ecological Perspective owing to the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1976). This theory embodies the combination of psychological, biological and social sciences focusing on understanding the development of a human being. It was initially looking at the science of living organisms (Ecology) but later moved to ecosystems theory that aims to understand the relationship between individuals and their environment (Weyers, 2011). According to Crawford (2020), Bronfenbrenner (1976) understood that many theories are based on understanding individuals in isolation and came up with one that will uncover how the immediate systems of an individual affect their development and how these individuals’ affects the systems. In other words, the ecosystems theory is embedded in comprehending how individuals relate to one another and how the environment comes about affecting their lives. In this study, the Ecosystems Theory is used to understand how the environment that young fathers grow in affects their perception of fatherhood and how their current surrounding undermines the relationship between these young fathers and their children.

Bronfenbrenner (1976) underscored that the development of a human being occurs through layers wherein one layer is enclosed in the other. Rosa and Tudge (2013) pursued these developmental layers as follows; firstly, the microsystem which describes the development of a person within their immediate surroundings unpacking the roles, activities and interpersonal relationships that an individual has over time. The microsystems can entail family members or people who maintain direct and consistent contact with the individual (Crawford, 2020). For example, for children it can be family and friends meanwhile for adults it can be colleagues or gym mates. Secondly, the mesosystems which explains the link between microsystems in a person’s life. In simple terms, the mesosystem looks at the reciprocal relationship between an environment and an individual. Thirdly, the Exosystem, which is similar to the mesosystem for it is made of different microsystems but one of the microsystems in the Exosystem does not include the person. For instance, a child cannot be directly influenced by parents’ workplace but can be influenced if parents are fired from their job, as they will not have financial security. Lastly, the Macrosystem entails the globally shared cultural laws and customs and the interaction within and between the microsystems, mesosystems and Exosystems. Crawford (2020) reiterates that the development of a human being can go wrong if an individual is not correctly integrated into a system, and this can affect how they respond to adult life situations. For example, the behaviour of children with unsupportive and unresponsive parents can be impaired. This theory will be used to understand how the absence of a father during childhood affects their response to having their kids.

Discussions of the identified study themes

In this section, the researchers present the findings that are synchronised or dissected with the aid of the study theory. From literature, the following themes emerged, experiences of growing without a father, contribution of culture towards fatherlessness and financial incapacity as a contributing factor to crime.

Experience of growing without a father

Fathers play a significant role in the healthy development of children. Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid and Bremberg (2008) and Schindler (2010) are of the agreement that fathers’ involvement in a child’s life is beneficial to the child’s cognitive, psychological, social and behavioural abilities. With that said, children who grow up having fathers are likely to perform well in school, be emotionally secure and confident, and can connect well with the outside world. In line with the study theory, the direct interactions that children have with their immediate surroundings (microsystems) influence how these children will turn out (Ahmed, Amer & Killawi, 2017). For instance, when parents in this context young fathers are supportive and nurturing, children will have a positive attitude to life meanwhile absent and detached fathers’ spoils how children perceive life and how they relate to other people. Equally, Shenk (2010) and Makofane (2015) reiterated that children who grow up without fathers are unable to make life-changing decisions, form relationships and lack confidence in conducting themselves as men. Additionally, Tau (2020) avered that children especially boys who grow up without fathers are not fostered and well equipped with manhood instructions as there are roles that require male figure teachings. Again, Ito and Izumi-Taylor (2013) avered that children who grew up without father’s struggle to father their children because they were not fathered themselves. For instance, if a child grows in an impassive environment such as lacking a father as a provider, they may not understand what it means to socialise their children when old.

Contribution of culture towards fatherlessness

The context in which a child is socialised appears to be an enormous issue. Hofmeyr (2012) revealed that each human being is born and socialised into a certain environment that has a culture that influences how they think, feel, behave as well as how to communicate and relate to other tenants of the ethnic group. Culture influences personal identity and the learning of dominant values. For example, the phrase of the Bapedi ethnic group that says "motho ke motho ka batho", meaning that an individual cannot exist in isolation but
co-exist with other individuals in a particular environment. In terms of ecosystems theory, the environment that young fathers find themselves in influences their development (Ahmed, Amer & Killawi, 2017). The study finding highlights those men are socially and culturally defined as financial providers and society does not recognise a man as a father unless he has paid damages to the maternal family of his child (Seemapare, 2016). It is for this reason that young fathers are often denied the opportunity to raise their children with love without being judged based on their financial background and this leads them into depression and anxiety.

**Financial incapacity as a contributing factor to crime**

Father-child separation contributes to the number of uncivilised people in many communities. Coley and Medeiros (2007) underscored that fathers perceive their children as their strong attachment bond and when they are separated from them, they feel like they have nothing to live for and inflict pain to other community members through committing crimes. In the same vein, during the Southern African Catholic Bishop’s Conference [SACBC] it was underscored that financial insecurity awakens frustration, anger and aggression in many fathers and this motivates them to commit a crime to support their children (SACBC, 2019). Also, the societal treatment received by fathers who are unable to provide for themselves fuels their aggressive actions. This is in line with ecosystems theory, the environment that individuals find themselves in affects their thinking, emotions, and behaviour. In this instance, Payne (2019) reveals that many South African cultures believe that a man can only be a father after paying lobola or damage fine for impregnating their child. In other words, a male who has not acknowledged impregnating a female through compensating the female’s family will be denied access to his child. Crawford (2020) confirmed that although many fathers are reluctant to pay damages and follow cultural practices of the maternal family, they end up agreeing for the sake of their children. Ecosystems theory hold the view that old community members hold an important position that everyone is expected to respect hence these fathers have no choice but to find means to provide for their children.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

The concept of parenthood is understood differently in various contexts and the understanding of this phrase is associated with societal views of what it means to be a parent. The perception of fathers and mothers is differentiated according to societal roles. This means that fathers are viewed as protectors and financial providers meanwhile mothers are seen as carers. For this reason, fathers suffer from challenges such as being excluded in their children’s lives by the maternal family because of their financial incapacity. Then, these fathers’ resort to criminal activities to obtain money to support their children. On that note, society should have children’s interests at heart and allow fathers to perform their fatherly roles because these children need love and care from both their parents. Thus, the following recommendations are presented by this study:

i. Future research should focus more on encouraging positive involvement of fathers in their children’s lives.
ii. Introduction of programs that advocate for children’s contact with their non-residential fathers.
iii. Policies should focus on the needs of children than the structure of their households.

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