

Barriers to fathering and mental health outcomes of unmarried fathers in Bojanala, South Africa

Rebaone Petlele^{1*}, Sibusiso Mkwanzani^{1,2} and Clifford Odimegwu¹

¹Demography and Population Studies Programme, Schools of Public Health and Social Sciences, University of the Witwatersrand, 1 Jan Smuts Avenue, Johannesburg, South Africa

² Commissioner, South African National Planning Commission, Union Building, Pretoria, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Background

There are social, cultural, familial and economic factors identified which influence fathers involvement in the lives of their children with resident, and non-resident fathers constantly negotiating their parenting roles in the child's life. Multiple studies have found non-resident and unmarried fathers report a desire to participate in the lives of their children despite the challenges experienced. Paternal depression is observed in men in South Africa where the high rates of suicides among men are concerning.

Aim

This paper aimed to (i.) establish the involvement of unmarried and non-resident fathers in childcare, (ii.) to identify the barriers and challenges experienced by unmarried and non-resident fathers, and (iii.) to explore how the experience of parenting barriers impact the mental health of unmarried and non-resident fathers in the Bojanala district of South Africa. There are social, cultural, familial and economic factors identified which influence fathers involvement in the lives of their children with resident and non-resident fathers constantly negotiating their parenting roles in the child's life

Methods

The larger study used a mixed-methods research design to explore the role of men in teenage pregnancy in the Bojanala district, which is in the North West province in South Africa. The current study used male in-depth interviews and male community-based focus group discussions conducted in the district.

Results and Conclusions

The study shows multiple factors prohibit men from participating in childcare activities. Finance, the nature of the romantic relationship and family have a direct impact on father's access to and level of involvement in the child's life. The study shows how important relationships are when it comes to access to the child and fathers participation in fathering activities. Unmarried fathers who want to be present and involved fathers face a myriad of challenges in exercising their parental role and this results in emotion turmoil, anguish and deep pain. Fathers in Bojanala expressed varying degrees of distress and emotional struggles as a result of their parenting challenges. Our study highlights the salient struggles faced by fathers in Bojanala, and how these prolonged struggles have the potential to manifest into more

advanced illnesses. Unmarried non-resident fathers need support from the family network and professionals who can facilitate meaningful co-parenting agreements. Fathers should also be screened for depression and anxiety symptoms as a high at risk group.

INTRODUCTION

Mental health is a global public health challenge. Conditions of mental health are prevalent across multiple countries. Although common, mental health conditions are often undiagnosed and neglected by public health systems and sufferers remain underserved (WHO, 2022). Although mental health conditions differ by age and sex, depression is one of the leading conditions regardless of these demographic factors (WHO, 2022). Depressive symptoms include a “deep sense of dissatisfaction, as though there’s a gap in someone’s life...leading to a feeling of despair, a sense of hopelessness, worthlessness or emotional numbing” (Green & Van Graan, 2019, pg17). Men are associated with poor help-seeking and health-seeking behaviour, hegemonic masculinity norms perpetuate attitudes which encourage men to exhibit strength and conceal any form of suffering making them a high risk population for progressive mental health challenges (Canetto & Cleary, 2012; Gough & Novikova, 2020; King et al., 2020; Ogrodniczuk et al., 2023). Inappropriate coping strategies emerge such as drug and alcohol abuse, gambling, and violent behaviour further aggravating the disorder (Westmore, 2020).

Suicides are one of the highest contributors to mortality worldwide, suicide comes fourth in the rank of the leading causes of death globally (WHO, 2021) (Suicide worldwide). In 2019, men accounted for 79% (10 861) of suicides in South Africa (WHO, 2021). This disproportionate burden of deaths as a result of suicide demonstrate the challenges faced by men. Young men who conform to ideas and ideals of masculinity exhibited a higher preponderance of suicide ideation (King et al., 2020). Paternal depression is associated with employment status (Nishimura & Ohashi, 2010) and poverty (Moore et al., 2018), unplanned pregnancy (Nishimura & Ohashi, 2010), conflict in love relationships (Kopystynska et al., 2023; Price-Robertson et al., 2017), family dissolution (Mnyango & Alpaslan, 2018), and maternal gatekeeping (Han et al., 2023). In a recent study conducted in South African, men who experienced a change in the family structure experienced a higher rate of depressive symptoms (Muchemwa & Odimegwu, 2021). In cases of divorce, fathers suffer more loss for their children than their former partners demonstrating the emotional turmoil and psychological distress (Mnyango & Alpaslan, 2018).

In recent decades, research has illustrated the positive role men’s involvement has on pregnancy outcomes, birth and child development (Bateson et al., 2017; Makusha & Richter, 2018). The involvement of fathers during pregnancy and postnatal periods encourage good practices and outcomes such as mothers access to early and consistent prenatal care services, good eating habits, prevention of preterm births, breastfeeding for longer periods and reduced postnatal depression (Bateson et al., 2017; Makusha & Richter, 2018; Raine et al., 2010; Richter et al., 2012). The promotion of mother and child wellbeing is demonstrated in Lewin and others (2015) study which found that paternal presence reduced the risk of infant distress

among children living in low income communities, engaged fathers are a positive buffer facilitating good child outcomes (Lewin et al., 2015).

Residential separation has been observed in South African families over decades due to the labour migration system and growing “economic insecurity has also contributed to a long-term decline in marriage and increasing non-marital fertility rates” (Hosegood & Madhavan, 2012, p.258). Children born to unmarried couples are likely to live in the maternal household but children often frequent and belong to the maternal and paternal households where they have been acknowledged (Hosegood & Madhavan, 2012). There are social, cultural, familial and economic factors identified which influence fathers involvement in the lives of their children with resident, and non-resident fathers constantly negotiating their parenting roles in the child’s life (Coakley et al., 2014; Cosson & Graham, 2014). Multiple studies have found non-resident and unmarried fathers report a desire to participate in the lives of their children despite the challenges experienced (Roberts et al., 2014).

Only 36% of children in South Africa live with their biological father in South Africa (van den Berg & Makusha, 2018) where “men become fathers biologically but never have an opportunity to be involved in their children’s lives” (Makusha & Richter, 2018, pg.50). Paternal separation is rife in South Africa, but not much research has focused on unmarried non-resident fathers and how father-child separation affects them, including their mental health. Using the information obtained from fathers included in our mixed methods study Bojanala district, paper aimed to (i.) establish the involvement of unmarried and non-resident fathers in childcare, (ii.) to identify the barriers and challenges experienced by unmarried and non-resident fathers, and (iii.) to explore how the experience of parenting barriers impact the mental health of unmarried and non-resident fathers in the Bojanala district of South Africa. Our study does not make the assumption that all fathers want to be involved in the lives of their children and that all fathers should be permitted to be involved if they exhibit negative behaviour which is harmful to the child and mother.

RESEARCH METHODS AND STUDY

Study Design, Setting and Methods

Our study is nestled in a broader body of research conducted for the purpose of a doctoral degree. The larger study used a mixed-methods research design to explore the role of men in teenage pregnancy in the Bojanala district, which is in the North West province in South Africa. A sequential approach was used for the larger study; primary data was collected in the Bojanala district, thereafter, the data gap identified during fieldwork was used to inform the selection of a relevant secondary data source for analysis to support the primary data. The study used South Africa’s Recorded Live Births dataset for secondary analysis. For our current study, we used male in-depth interviews and male community-based focus group discussions.

Fieldwork

Ethics clearance was provided by the University of the Witwatersrand Human Research Ethics Committee on the 26th of August 2022. The protocol number for the study is H22/04/27.

Fieldwork in Bojanala commenced in September 2022 and concluded in May 2023. Fieldwork activities included the distribution of a male and female questionnaire (n=77), community-based focus group discussions with men (n=7) and in-depth interviews with young mothers who were pregnant as teenage girls (n=14) and fathers (n=8) who self-reported that they had a child born to a teenage mother in the district.

Data analysis

The qualitative data was collected, transcribed verbatim and analysed using MAXQDA software. Coded segments were used to build the themes which addressed the research objectives. This current study used the information obtained from in-depth interviews conducted with 8 fathers who had children with teenage girls in the district and information shared by 56 men who participated in the 7 male community-based focus group discussions.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our study shows there are multiple barriers prohibiting unmarried non-resident fathers in the Bojanala district from fathering. The relationship between the parents, extended family, financial status and cultural obligations are significant limitation for men's involvement in the lives of the father-child dyad. This finding is observed by other researchers, fathers in (Roberts et al., 2014) found the support of family and the relationship with the child's mother was important in moderating the dynamics of the father and child relationship. Gavin et al. (2002) also emphasised the status of the romantic relationship between mother and the child's father was a strong determinant for fathers access and level of involvement in the child's life. Furthermore, Bunting and McAuley (2004) also described a breakdown in the relationship with the mother or the maternal family results in fathers not having access to their children.

Unemployment was cited by numerous participants in the group discussions and in-depth interviews with fathers as the leading cause of paternity denial in the district, men who are unable to provide financially believe they have nothing else to offer. These findings are supported by previous authors such as (Makhanya, 2018) who reported the privileges of fathering were not experienced by men who were unable to provide material support – unemployment and fathers financial status had an impact on the extent to which the fathers included in the study were able to participate in the life of the mother and child. Fathers in Selebano and Khunou (2014) study demonstrated how fathers perceive themselves exclusively in the role of a provider and do not participate in childcare activities. The findings provide evidence that illustrates why there are so many non-involved fathers in the country - fathers associate their value with the ability to provide. With high unemployment, low levels of education and disproportionate poverty experienced by black African and Coloured men in South Africa, it is evident why children in the two race categories experience the highest rates of absent fathers (Ratele and Nduna, 2018).

All the fathers included in the in-depth interviews were unmarried, with the majority non-resident fathers. Fathers in Bojanala reported that traditional practices such as inhlawulo were

still observed and a requirement for paternity involvement. Our findings illustrate the level of importance inhlawulo plays as fathers such as Given where inhlawulo was never offered and therefore still suffering the consequences. The findings from Ratele and Nduna (2018) and Malinga and Ratele (2022) also found that fathers could be prevented from seeing their children in the case where this tradition is not observed, as demonstrated in Given's case. The family network can act as an enabler for a healthy co-parenting relationship or a gatekeeper to father involvement. With the changes in marital patterns observed in South Africa, there is a decline in marriages and increase in out-of-wedlock fertility in the country, therefore the relevance and importance of paternity acknowledgement ceremonies such as inhlawulo (Hosegood & Madhavan, 2012). Inhlawulo is important because without it, the maternal family cannot hold the father accountable for.

Our study also aimed to investigate the impact of father-child separation on the mental health among unmarried fathers in Bojanala. As observed in previous investigations such as those conducted by (Nishimura & Ohashi, 2010), cases of unplanned and mistimed pregnancies were associated with fathers who experienced paternal depression and other mental health challenges. The deterioration of the quality of the relationship as found in our study has resulted in restricted paternal access, multiple fathers reported this experience. Fathers reported feelings of despair, uncertainty, disappointment, hurt and concern. One of the fathers even reported mental suffering when he looks at his other children in the absence of the child whom he has no access to. This is a daily struggle for him which has mental health consequences. (Mnyango & Alpaslan, 2018) explains that fathers who experience a separation such as divorce mourn more for the children, than the romantic relationship, fathers describe their levels of grief and deep pain. More than half of the fathers in our study were able to acknowledge their mental health struggles, they do agree that they need help but only one of the fathers reported seeking counsel from another man. (Mnyango & Alpaslan, 2018) also reported that men shy away from reaching out as this makes them feel weak, these were also comments made by (Green & Van Graan, 2019) who reiterated the social pressure for men not to express their emotions as they are conditioned to adhere to masculinity norms. The progression of depression and anxiety disorders coupled with low levels of help seeking behaviour make men a vulnerable group to destructive behaviour impacting themselves and those around them (Green & Van Graan, 2019; Jeong et al., 2024; Kopystynska et al., 2023).

Our study found fathers in Bojanala reported varying rates of mental health challenges. Men seldom seek help and would likely suffer quietly to avoid being regarded as weak or not handling their feelings like a man, this masculinity complex exacerbates their risk of destructive behaviour to themselves and others. Unmarried fathers who want to be present and involved fathers face a myriad of challenges in exercising their parental responsibilities. Our study highlights the salient struggles faced by fathers in Bojanala, and prolonged struggles which have the potential to manifest into more advanced illnesses. Men require support from their social network and professionals in cases where paternal involvement requires mediation to strengthen the family environment conducive for health caregiving. More care should be provided to screen fathers for depression including the involvement of mental health

practitioners at workplaces. The needs of unmarried non-residential fathers require further research attention including fathers who want to re-establish entry into the child's life.

REFERENCES

- Bateson, K., Darwin, Z., Galdas, P. M., & Rosan, C. (2017). Engaging fathers: Acknowledging the barriers. *Journal of Health Visiting, 5*(3), 122–128. <https://doi.org/10.12968/johv.2017.5.3.126>
- Bunting, L., & McAuley, C. (2004). Teenage pregnancy and parenthood: The role of fathers. *Child & Family Social Work, 9*, 295–303. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313155795>
- Canetto, S. S., & Cleary, A. (2012). Men, masculinities and suicidal behaviour. *Social Science & Medicine, 74*(4), 461–465. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2011.11.001>
- Coakley, T. M., Shears, J. K., & Randolph, S. D. (2014). Understanding Key Barriers to Fathers' Involvement in Their Children's Lives. *Child & Youth Services, 35*(4), 343–364. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0145935X.2014.972550>
- Cosson, B., & Graham, E. (2014). 'I felt like a third wheel': Fathers' stories of exclusion from the 'parenting team'. *Journal of Family Studies, 18*(2), 121–129. <https://doi.org/10.5172/jfs.2012.18.2-3.121>
- Gavin, L. E., Black, M. M., Minor, S., Abel, Y., Papas, M. A., & Bentley, M. E. (2002). Young, Disadvantaged Fathers' Involvement With Their Infants: An Ecological Perspective. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 31*(3), 266–276. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s1054-139x\(02\)00366-x](https://doi.org/10.1016/s1054-139x(02)00366-x)
- Gough, B., & Novikova, I. (2020). *Health Evidence Network Synthesis Report (70)*. WHO Regional Office for Europe.
- Green, S., & Van Graan, M. (2019). DEPRESSION IN MEN. *MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS, 3*, 16–17.
- Han, Y., Liu, K., & Xie, Y. (2023). Factors Affecting Father Involvement in Parenting and Solutions. *Journal of Education, 8*. [10.54097/ehss.v8i.4624](https://doi.org/10.54097/ehss.v8i.4624)
- Hosegood, V., & Madhavan, S. (2012). Understanding fatherhood and father involvement in South Africa: Insights from surveys and population cohorts. *Fathering, 10*(3), 257–273. <https://doi.org/10.3149/fth.1003.257>
- Jeong, J., McCann, J. K., Joachim, D., Ahun, M. N., Kabati, M., & Kaaya, S. (2024). Fathers' mental health and coping strategies: A qualitative study in Mwanza, Tanzania. *BMJ Open, 14*, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2023-080933>
- King, T. L., Shields, M., Sojo, V., Daraganova, G., Currier, D., O'Neil, A., King, K., & Milner, A. (2020). Expressions of masculinity and associations with suicidal ideation among young males. *BMC Psychiatry, 20*(228), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-020-2475-y>
- Kopystynska, O., Barnett, M. A., Bradford, K., Crapo, J. S., & Higginbotham, B. (2023). Psychological Distress, Destructive Conflict, and Parenting among Residential and Nonresidential Fathers. *Marriage & Family Review, 59*(3), 229–252. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01494929.2022.2131027>

- Lewin, A., Mitchell, S. J., Waters, D., Hodgkinson, S., Southammakosane, C., & Gilmore, J. (2015). The Protective Effects of Father Involvement for Infants of Teen Mothers with Depressive Symptoms. *Maternal and Child Health Journal, 19*, 1016–1023. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10995-014-1600-2>
- Madiba, S., & Nsiki, C. (2017). Teen fathers' perceptions and experiences of fatherhood: A qualitative exploration with in-school teen fathers in a rural district in South Africa. *Current Pediatric Research, 21*(3), 501–506. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322526680>
- Makhanya, T. B. (2018). Exploring Young Unmarried Fathers Experiences and Perceptions of Pregnancy. *Gender & Behaviour, 16*(3), 12211–12223. <https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC-13675b998b>
- Makusha, T., & Richter, L. (2018). *Father involvement in the first 1,000 days*. In W, Van den Berg & T, Makusha (Eds.), *State of South Africa's Father's 2018*. MenCare Global Fatherhood Campaign. www.sowf.men-care.org
- Malinga, M., & Ratele, K. (2022). Fatherhood Among Marginalised Work-Seeking Men in South Africa. In *Engaged Fatherhood for Men, Families and Gender Equality. Healthcare, Social Policy, and Work Perspectives*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-75645-1>
- Mnyango, R. P., & Alpaslan, N. (2018). LET'S TALK ABOUT DIVORCE - MEN'S EXPERIENCES, CHALLENGES, COPING RESOURCES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK SUPPORT. *Social Work, 54*(1), 69–90. <https://doi.org/10.15270/54-1-615>
- Moore, D. D., Jefferson, B., & Armstrong, J. (2018). Barriers to Successful Fatherhood Among African American Men. *The Griot: The Journal of African American Studies, 37*(1), 54–82. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/372891110>
- Muchemwa, M., & Odimegwu, C. (2021). HETEROGENEOUS TRAJECTORIES OF DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS AMONG MEN IN SOUTH AFRICA: EVIDENCE FROM LATENT GROWTH MIXTURE MODELING. *Eurasian Journal of Social Sciences, 9*(4), 231–241. <https://doi.org/10.15604/ejss.2021.09.04.004>
- Nishimura, A., & Ohashi, K. (2010). *Risk factors of paternal depression in the early postnatal period in Japan*. *12*(2), 170–176. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1442-2018.2010.00513.x>
- Ogrodniczuk, J. S., Oliffe, J. L., & Kealy, D. (2023). *Silence and its manifestations in men's mental illness*. *1*, 446–448. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44220-023-00093-1>
- Price-Robertson, R., Baxter, J. A., & Mathews, S. (2017). Longitudinal associations between fathers' mental health and the quality of their coparenting relationships. *Clinical Psychologist, 21*(3), 215–226. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cp.12072>
- Raine, T. R., Gard, J. C., Boyer, C. B., Haider, S., Brown, B. A., Hernandez, F. A. R., & Harper, C. C. (2010). Contraceptive Decision-Making in Sexual Relationships: Young Men's Experiences, Attitudes, and Values. *Culture, Health & Sexuality, 12*(4), 373–386. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691050903524769>
- Ratele, K., & Nduna, M. (2018). *An overview of fatherhood in South Africa*. In W, Van den Berg & T, Makusha (Eds.), *State of South Africa's Father's 2018*.

- Richter, L., Desmond, C., Hosegood, V., Madhavan, S., Makiwane, M., Makusha, T., Morrell, R., & Swartz, S. (2012). *Fathers and other men in the lives of children and families*. Conference: Strategies to Overcome Poverty and Inequality: Towards Carnegie III, Cape Town.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/299448642_Fathers_and_other_men_in_the_lives_of_children_and_families
- Roberts, D., Coakley, T. M., Washington, T. J., & Kelley, A. (2014). Fathers' Perspectives on Supports and Barriers That Affect Their Fatherhood Role. *SAGE Open*, 1–10.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244014521818>
- Selebano, N., & Khunou, G. (2014). Early-Fatherhood in White City, Jabavu, Soweto: A Time-Bound, Contextual Construct. *The Open Family Studies Journal*, 6(Suppl 1:M3), 24–30.
- van den Berg, W., & Makusha, T. (2018). *Introduction*. In W, Van den Berg & T, Makusha (Eds.), *State of South Africa's Father's 2018*. Sonke Gender Justice & Human Sciences Research Council.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326624310_State_of_South_Africa%27s_Fathers
- Westmore, I. (2020). ANXIETY - RATTLING THE 'MASCULINITY' CAGE AMONGST MEN. *MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS*, 2.
- WHO. (2021). *Suicide worldwide in 2019: Global health estimates*. World Health Organization. <http://apps.who.int/iris>
- WHO. (2022). *World mental health report: Transforming mental health for all*. World Health Organization. <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/356119/9789240049338-eng.pdf?sequence=1>