

Self-As-Father: Perspectives and experiences of young men on becoming fathers.

Background

Fatherhood is a key component of identity for the majority of African men (Mkhize, 2006), however, as a result of certain political and socio-economic processes, a number of studies have documented lack of men's involvement in families, fathering and child care (Richter and Morrell, 2006; Richter et al., 2010; Makusha, 2013; Mavungu et al., 2013; Chili and Maharaj, 2015). The racialized labour markets divided families during the apartheid era, labour migrants maintained contact with their families left behind in what was formally known as 'homelands' through short visits and remittances. In many countries fatherhood is linked to masculinity in the sense that men are seen as providers. Therefore, as a result of the migrant labour system, in part, the role of a father increasingly became linked to provider status. Failure to assume the provider status led to men abandoning and neglecting their children. Socio-economic conditions are still prevalent in the contemporary South African society as there are high rates of unemployment and poverty. Youth aged 15–24 years are the most vulnerable in the South African labour market as the unemployment rate among this age group was 55,2% as per Statistics South Africa Quarterly Labour Force Survey. It is in this very challenging environment that South African men became fathers and in which, they try, and sometimes fail, to fulfil their fatherly roles. Scholars of family dynamics in South Africa have noted that the discourse on the phenomenon of absent fathers has focussed on co-residence, and thus failed to recognise the extent of father-child relationships that transcend co-residence. Literature indicates that there is not much that is known about how men, particularly young men perceive their role as fathers, this study aims to shed insight into the reflections of young men on fatherhood, and their experiences on becoming fathers.

Methods

This study was conducted in Umbumbulu, a rural area located in the eThekweni municipality, situated 40 kilometres away from Durban. Umbumbulu is one of the many rural areas that form part of the eThekweni Metro jurisdiction district in the province of KwaZulu-Natal (Ethekeeni Municipality, 2011). It is a low-income rural area with a dependency ratio of about 68.1% and has a higher than average unemployment rate. It has a female-headed household rate of 53.5%, which provides some evidence that adolescent boys and young men in the area often live without a father in the household. A qualitative, interpretative methodology was chosen for the study. The qualitative interpretive approach thus allowed for the collection of more in-depth information of perceptions and experiences. The final sample included fifteen young fathers between the ages of 18 to 24 years, most of whom fathered a child before the age 21 and most of whom became fathers during adolescence. The participants were recruited using non-probability sampling methods. The first two participants were recruited through purposive methods and to reach the desired sample size the rest of the participants were recruited through word of mouth or the snowball method. The small size of sample is a testament of the difficulty of locating and recruiting young fathers, which has been documented in other studies (Chili and Maharaj, 2013; Mavungu et al., 2013). However, this is not necessarily a challenge as the primary focus of the study was not to generalise but to explore undocumented perspectives and experiences of young fathers. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted in IsiZulu by the first author and then translated to English. The interviews were conducted at a community hall for some

participants, and those who indicated they wanted to be in familiar space, the interviews were conducted at a venue that ensured maximum privacy, usually their place of residence. The interviews lasted on average about 45 minutes to one hour.

Findings

The findings indicate that young fathers are often not ready emotionally and financially to assume the care responsibilities for their children. Young fathers cited unemployment and poverty as the major contributing factor for father's disengagement. Young, unemployed fathers felt emasculated as they were not able to assume the role of a provider. The study found that young fathers did not want to repeat the same mistakes as their fathers. They want to be present in their children's lives and at the same, they want to take responsibility for their children. All participants in the study indicated that they wish to be more supportive financially and emotionally to their children. The results reveal that young fathers had negative experiences of fatherhood whilst growing up as many of them had absent fathers. Despite this, the findings underscores that young fathers want to be more involved, and better than their biological fathers. Young fathers often feel a strong sense of responsibility towards their children. This finding is in accordance with the a number of studies on fatherhood, where young fathers have been observed to be more involved with their children (Richter et al., 2012; Richter et al., 2010; Mkhwanazi and Bhana, 2017; Van den Berg and Makusha, 2018) In the interviews men were able to tell their own stories allowing them to give their own definition or rather an understanding of 'being a father', which becomes the focal point of masculine identity for these young men. Most fathers in the study had similar perspectives that masculinity and fatherhood were linked in the sense that that a real 'man' is one who is able to provide for his family needs.

The study concludes that fatherhood extends beyond biological criterion. Promoting paternal involvement should also focus on biological fathers as well as social fathers as they play an important role in the upbringing of children. The study concludes that father involvement is dependent on the fulfilment of certain cultural practices such the damage payment for impregnating a women out of wedlock and the bride wealth locally known as *ilobolo*. As this study acknowledges the importance of cultural norms in maintaining family and society values, it also suggest that given the current socio-economic conditions, these beliefs should be accommodative of young, unmarried, non-resident and unemployed fathers. This study highlights the importance of reorientation of gender norms so as to deconstruct the idea that fathers are just financial providers. Therefore, the study recommends that the focus should be on alternative fatherhood roles that includes care giving activities. This work should target not only men, but also women and should aim to transform the gender norms ascribed to men and women in terms of parenting.

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