Talking South African fathers: a critical examination of men's constructions and experiences of fatherhood and fatherlessness

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The absence of biological fathers in South Africa has been constructed as a problem for children of both sexes but more so for boy-children. Arguably the dominant discourse in this respect has demonized non-nuclear, female-headed households. Fathers are constructed as either absent or 'bad'. Thus it has become important to explore more closely how male care-givers have been experienced by groups of men in South Africa. This article examines discourses of fatherhood and fatherlessness by drawing on qualitative interviews with a group of 29 men who speak about their reported experiences and understandings of being fathered or growing up without biological fathers. Two major and intertwined subjugated discourses about adult men's experiences of being fathered that counterbalance the prevailing discourses about meaning of fatherhood and fatherlessness became evident, namely, 'being always there' and 'talking fatherhood'. The importance of the experience of fatherhood as 'being there', which relates to a quality of time and relationship between child and father rather than physical time together, is illustrated. It is not only biological fathers who can 'be there' for their sons but also social fathers, other significant male role models and father figures who step in at different times in participants' lives when biological fathers are unavailable for whatever reason. Second, many positive experiences of fathers or father figures that resist a traditional role of authority and control and subscribe to more nurturant and non-violent forms of care, represented as 'talking' fathers, are underlined. If we are to better understand the impact of colonial and apartheid history and its legacy on family life in contemporary society, there is a need for more historically and contextually informed studies on the meaning of fatherhood and fatherlessness.

Keywords: family, father; gender, masculinity; men, South Africa, 'talking fathers'

There is a strong policy-based perception that family life is under pressure and the dominant view is that fathers are not playing their role. This understanding has received different forms of support from a variety of scholarly and governmental sources. Envisioning "well-functioning, resourced, viable and prosperous families which play pivotal roles in South Africa's human, social and economic development", the *Green Paper on Families Promoting Family Life and Strengthening Families in South Africa* of the Department of Social Development (DoSD, 2011, p. 16) for instance conceives of the problematic of family as the inability of the family "to play its critical roles of socialisation, nurturing, care and protection effectively, due to failures in the political economy and the legacy of colonialism and apartheid". The DoSD argues that among the forces that have weakened family life are absent fathers, alongside HIV&AIDS, high levels of poverty and inequality, gender inequalities, unwanted pregnancies, and high numbers of orphaned children. Reportedly, almost two decades of democracy have seen the number of children living without their fathers increase (Statistics South Africa [StatsSA], 2010), and statistics showing the increasing number of children living without their biological parents, in particular their biological fathers, advanced as evidence of weakened families.

Approximately 4 million children are estimated to be either maternal, paternal or double orphans (Meintjes & Hall, 2010). Of these approximately 859,000 are double orphans, 624,000 maternal orphans and 2,468,000 paternal orphans. Additionally, only about 1 in every 3 children lives with both biological parents and a quarter live with neither of their biological parents (DoSD, 2011; Holborn & Eddy, 2011; Meintjes, 2010; StatsSA, 2010). StatsSA (2010) indicates that "the disruption

of the conventional family structure is most evident amongst African children, as only 27% live with both their biological parents" (p. 3).The picture that emerges from these numbers is that the average child is increasingly likely to be raised by a single mother. To be sure, this societal trend is common to other parts of the world such as the US, where observers have remarked that African American families with single mothers are increasing (Choi & Jackson, 2011).

The absence of fathers mirrored in the rising numbers of single mothers is understood to have a number of causes. Among these is the fact that greater numbers of men confront premature deaths relative to women. Even when they remain alive though, unemployment, poverty, income inequality, gender power, consequences of intimate partner violence, masculinity ideologies, and migration and abandonment mean that biological fathers frequently reportedly play a relatively limited role in raising their children (Holborn & Eddy, 2011; StatsSA, 2010). On the other hand, the dominant discourse that families are under more pressure post-apartheid and that fathers are more absent has also been challenged since there is much historical evidence to illustrate the impact of apartheid, forced removals and migrant labour on African families (Bozalek, 2010). Moreover, these responses are also informed by the normative western nuclear family which has not been the model for many African communities historically and in contemporary times. Nonetheless, the statistics gathered on the increase of female-headed households and lack of biological fathers living with their children, has served to reproduce an image of men, in particular poor black men, as either not fulfilling their expected roles as fathers, and/or performing these 'badly'.

The fatherhood deficit discourse is further bolstered by psychological studies that are framed in a range of assumptions about what families should look like and the gendered assumption that fathers play a significant and different role to mothers in the parenting dyad. Studies indicate the importance of fathers' involvement for positive childhood and adulthood social, psychological, psychiatric and behavioural outcomes in comparison with children in single-parent families with absent fathers (e.g. Boyce et al., 2006; Bronte-Tinkew, Moore, Capps & Zaff, 2006). Outcomes reported in such studies serve to powerfully idealize the impact of the present father, and include lower psychological distress for sons, reduced likelihood of engagement in risk practices in ado-lescence, positive outcomes for daughters who are close to their fathers, better performance at school, better psychological adjustment and well-being children, less antisocial behaviour and more successful intimate relationships, positive intellectual development, higher levels of social com-petence, internal locus of control, and the ability to empathise. Conversely, studies suggests that when the father is absent in the home, children generally tend to exhibit lower mental, emotional and behavioural well-being, and increased likelihood of negative outcomes (e.g. Choi & Jackson, 2011; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003). These studies are used by policy makers and the public to perpetuate notions of an idealized heteronormative, nuclear family thus demonizing and devaluing non-nor-mative ways of 'doing' family while reproducing a binaristic gendered notion that both a male and female parent is essential in this unit and therefore casting a punitive lens on those families and those men and women that do not 'fit' this normative framework. Uncritical deficit and patronizing dis-courses such as notions of 'fractured' families, and the need for 'healing' are common currency in this respect (see, e.g. Holborn & Eddy, 2011).

While these appear to be commonsensical 'truths' we argue that the seemingly ideologically disinterested, scientifically neutral and ahistorical approach of many of these investigations is pro-blematic. Some of the problems which have been pointed out include the fact that much of the research on the consequences of father non-involvement suggests itself as universal, yet its context-impoverishment makes it relevant to mostly western countries; most of the data have been collected from stable nuclear families; there has been little attempt to explore the positive experiences of alternative families, such as lesbian-headed households; and many studies neglect to consider the wide range of meanings of parenting, care-giving and fatherhood/male care-givers (Richter, 2006).There is thus a need to adopt a more historicised and context-enriched critical perspective in attempts to understand contemporary practices of care-giving and parenting (see, e.g. Clowes, 2006; Mkhize, 2006).For instance, how significant is the biological father in families that are non-nuclear

in structure; in communities where the nuclear family has never been the norm; in lesbian-headed households; where multiple families may live within the walls of one house; or where homes are more than the semi-detached structures common in the west and western-influenced cultures (see Crehan, 1997; Bozalek, 2007)? It has been well-illustrated that the nuclear family pattern was never the dominant pattern of family life, and certainly existed in tandem with other family forms (Crehan, 1997; Bozalek, 2007). Arguably, in contemporary societies, practices of family and notions of family are shifting and westernized norms of a rigid heteronormative unit are no longer salient for many communities of people globally.

A negative construction of fathers, informed by such studies and normative assumptions of the nuclear family, has been noted with concern in South Africa (Swartz & Bhana, 2009). Research has further documented how poverty, increasing unemployment and HIV have undermined men's ability to meet accepted social roles of manhood and fatherhood (Hunter, 2005; Mfecane, 2008; Wilson, 2006).Thus men's historical and contemporary positions as care-givers have to be understood in the context of South Africa's history of violent gender and racial oppression and domination, particularly against African families, women and men. Local studies are beginning to challenge the unidimensional and 'blaming' discourse on fathers, especially black[1] fathers in South Africa, documenting multiple ways in which fathers and father-figures do care and play a role in young people's lives (see, e.g. Langa, 2010; Swartz & Bhana, 2009).

Evidence from the South African historical record also challenges the current negative construction of fathers, foregrounding how African men engaged in a variety of nurturing acts, behaviours that underline the existence of alternative forms of social fathering by men importantly including those who are not biological fathers. Growing up with his rural grandparents in the 1920s Ezekiel Mphahlele makes much of the communal fireplace where 'men and boys of the village met… to talk important things and trifles' (Mphahlele 1959, p. 15). 'White people', noted an informant of the Mayers in East London in the 1950s,"only look after their own families. It is not like a Native kraal where you will find many children of different ages; some are the man's own children, some are his late brother's boys, and some the illegitimate children of his sister. This is an excellent Native way" (Mayer & Mayer 1974, p. 63).

The historical record also provides evidence that questions the stereotype of the traditional black father as the authoritarian, distant and frequently violent patriarch. Desmond Tutu's daughter Thandeka Tutu-Gxashe recalls how responsive to his children her father was. "Looking back, my dad was not the typical man. He would give me baths and he took on a lot of responsibility for taking care of us" (*Cape Times*, 7 October 2011, p. 4). Likewise Phyllis Ntantala underlines that her father "played … the role of father and mother towards us … He raised me, nurtured me, moulded me and instilled in me values that I will treasure to the end of my days … I was with him everywhere – in the cattle fold, at the stables, in the ploughing fields, on the veranda, talking, talking and asking questions (Ntantala, 1992, pp. 14, 27, 41).

While not assuming a normative gendered approach that it is essential for children to have both a male and female adult in their lives in order to thrive, we also argue that adult men invested in positive masculinity *matter* in children's lives as well the view that, given a range of personal, social, political and economic circumstance of individual men, "no single fathering model will work for all men" (White, 2006, p.44). While precisely what fatherhood means changes according to time and place, and whether we should even be differentiating between mothers and fathers as different forms of parents, we suggest that if there are male parents present such a care-giver if engaged in positive parenting may shift dominant versions of masculinity while contributing to a more nurturant home experience.

The study is further informed by the growing field of critical men's studies which, applying a gendered lens, "places men and masculinities under the exploratory gaze" (Shefer, Stevens & Clowes, 2010, p. 511). Work on fathering and fatherhood features strongly in the literature on boys and men, internationally and in the African context (Richter & Morrell, 2006; Swartz & Bhana, 2009). The performances of men as breadwinners and head of the family and home has been shown

to be a key marker of masculinity in many empirical studies on boys and men (Hendricks, Swartz & Bhana, 2010; Silberschmidt, 2004; Mfecane, 2008; Morrell, 2007).This body of work foregrounds the normative and idealized assumption of the importance of fathers in families across multiple contexts, and especially in many African contexts which as argued above have in many ways disqualified the majority men from 'success' as fathers and therefore as men. These understandings of the discursive construction of fatherhood together with the material context of fatherhood and families in contemporary South Africa need to be kept in mind in analyzing and understanding the reported experiences and constructions of fatherhood.

Analysing how men remember and recount their experiences of being fathered by social as well as biological fathers, the present study looks closely at how fatherhood is understood by men. The study sought to understand men's ideas and reported experiences of being fathered in the context of South Africa's history of violent gender and racial oppression and domination, particularly against African families, women and men. In cultures where the nuclear family pattern was never the dominant pattern of family life, and certainly existed in tandem with other family forms (Crehan, 1997; Bozalek, 2007), the subordination of the social (such as social and extended family care-giving) to the biological (as in biological fathers) is odd and deserving thorough study. The study therefore closely examined the discourse of the lack of a biological father and fatherlessness with purpose of unpacking men's stories about how they were fathered in the context of the history of dominant discourses around fatherhood; of father-absence and deficiency, and, continued familialist discourses that assume the normative model of the nuclear family. The paper is equally concerned to foreground the stories that men tell about positive experiences of being fathered and fathering practices, by way of challenging the dominant narrative that tends to demonize fathers. Thus while studies have raised some aspects of dominant forms of masculinity as they are articulated in constructions of fatherhood and fathering that are problematic for women and children as well as men themselves, such as the association of fatherhood with control, power, possession, discipline, and resistance to interdependence and egalitarianism, we question the unitary and deterministic picture of men as absent or 'bad' fathers that is currently promulgated in popular and academic circles. We argue rather for a considered recognition of the ways in which adult men – against all odds in some cases, given economic constraints and cultural pressures to conform to hegemonic masculinity – have played positive and constructive roles in relation to children in their families and communities.

THE STUDY

The data analysed here are drawn from a qualitative study conducted with a group of men reflecting on their experiences of being fathered and fathering. The study was conducted as part of a three-way collaborative empirical research project and research-skills teaching engagement between the University of the Western Cape's Women's and Gender Studies Department (W&GS), the Safety and Peace Promotion Research Unit of the Medical Research Council (MRC) and the University of South Africa. Senior undergraduate students registered for a research module in W&GS were engaged as researchers to collect data towards their own assignments and that contributed to the larger corpus of data for this study. Students were rigorously trained in ethics of research and interviewing skills before conducting the interviews and engaged actively with the research methodology including the interview schedule. Role plays were conducted in class to develop interviewing skills as well as pilot the semi-structured interview schedule. Students selected participants using a 'snow-ball' methodology in which they interviewed men who were fathers in their communities that were familiar to the students and/or who were referred to them by their participants. Interviews were usually conducted in the participants' or interviewers' homes and lasted between half-an-hour to an hour-and-half. Interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule which asked questions about their family history, their experiences of being fathers, how they understand the role of fathers, and their own experience of fathering. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim and translated where necessary. Interviews were conducted in the home language or language of choice of the participant. Although the interviewers were not trained in a particular transcription method, they were

advised to make sure that they transcribed verbatim and to include any non-verbal aspects that appeared of value.

Each student interviewed two men aged 35 or older about their memories of their experiences of being fathered. 264 interviews were conducted for the study on fatherhood, out of which we selected a sample of 29 transcripts. These transcripts were chosen on the basis of the depth and rigour in which the interviews were conducted as many of the transcripts either reflected weak interviewing skills or poor transcription. All the participants lived in Cape Town at the time of the interviews, all, bar one, had children, and ages ranged from 35 to 68. Two of the men would have been classified as white under apartheid, nine were coloured and 18 African. Twelve of the participants reported that they grew up in nuclear households, although one of these indicated that his father was a migrant worker and thus away from home much of the year.

A qualitative thematic analysis informed by discourse analysis (drawing on the work of Potter and Wetherell (1987), Parker (1992), and Van Dijk (1993)) was conducted on the transcripts. After extracting dominant emerging themes, we also applied a discourse analytic reading that is located in a social constructionist framework. This analytic approach places particular emphasis on how meaning is constructed through the language used and how this offers insight into larger ideological constructions of gender. We were particularly concerned with unpacking the way in which participants' narratives reveal and/or resist dominant aspects of public discourse on fatherhood and the 'absent', 'bad' father.

Pseudonyms are used here for ethical reasons. All standard ethical procedures were adhered to including signed consent forms, assurances of confidentiality, anonymity and the right to withdraw at any point and permission to audio-record the interviews. In addition students signed a consent form giving permission for their transcripts to be included in the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

We underline two key discourses that serve to complicate a binaristic reading of the role of fathers in the experience of participants. First we illustrate the importance of the experience of fatherhood as 'being there' which relates to a quality of time and relationship between child and father rather than physical time together. A key part of this discourse however was the evidence that it is not only biological fathers who can 'be there' for their sons but also social fathers, other significant male role models and father figures who step in at different times in participants' lives when biological fathers are unavailable for whatever reason. Second, we explore narratives that speak to the way in which fathers or father figures resist a traditional role of authority and control and subscribe to more nurturant and non-violent forms of care. Here we hear stories of fathers who resisted the normative or assumed practices of authoritarian, disciplinary and even violent fathering practices, and engaged in dialogue and negotiation and showed care in some cases that is stereotypically associated with femininity.

'Being there'

The most common phrase men used to describe good fathering was the notion that he is "there for me" or a variation thereof. The salience of a sense of a caring presence from a father appeared to be more important for participants than the actual physical presence of a biological father. Quality of the relationship rather than quantity was foregrounded in many of the narratives:

My father meant a lot to me in the sense he was always *there for me*. (Siyabonga)

My father, I could say he was always *there for me*, always stood up for me, taught me a lot of things, spent quality time with me … and you name it, I mean just taught me a lot of things which I still treasure today and which I'm trying to pass on to my son. (John)

First of all, because of us being such a, a big family, being 7 brothers and 5 sisters, out of all those brothers and sisters, I was the first one and only one that he took to bioscope, even though it was just once it was the most wonderful thing to do, for a father to do, because he didn't do it for the others. I was the only one who he taught to swim and who he took to the

baths and for me being able to swim, even if it was at 2ft, the small pool at the baths, for me it was the greatest thing to express myself in front of my dad (.) uhm, at the soccer field, he used to take me to the soccer field and uhm, (*clears throat*) taught me how to kick, even though I was very young, less than 16, and then there was (*coughs*) the fact that he so much wanted me to become a doctor. So he had high standards for me and also high ideals. And that is why I see him as my father figure. (Clint)

A key component of the narrative on the father who 'is there for me' hinged around a sense that fathering did not have to take place by the biological father alone and the notion of the social father was central in participants' reflections on fatherhood. Because men (as can been read off the recent reports (e.g. StatsSA, 2010) more often than women, abandon their children, in very important ways fatherhood is much more than the evidence of men's sexual virility and instead about significant men's desire to be *present* for the children around them. While there was definite loss articulated with respect to not growing up with a biological father, many men spoke about the importance of extended family and other social male father-figures in their growing up. This is clear in the following extract from the interview with Xolile.

… the nicest thing about being fathered as a boy is that you are free in that everybody takes care of you … When I grew up I did not have a father, I was raised by my grandparents, my mother's parents. My uncle was my role model, because he went to work in Gauteng at the mine there and so he provided for me and the rest of the family. He took care of me in a way that my father never did even though he was also working. (Xolile)

Xolile makes the important observation that providing financially or failing to provide is not the only criterion of fatherhood. In that observation he gestures to the fact that fatherhood should be seen as a set of practices enabled or constrained by structural forces more than simply a reproductive role (Richter & Morrell 2006), a set of socially constructed ideas about manhood. Other men in the study supported this – that fatherhood is a set of behaviours far beyond biological reproduction and thus can be fulfilled by other adult men in a boy's life. It was frequently other male relatives that were described by participants as taking on the role of father figure or male role model when the biological father was absent for whatever reason:

It was my father and my grandfather because … I grew up under their presence. When I was a boy always with my grandfather but when I was a teenager I was with father. My grandfather usually wakes me up in the morning and goes to the garden to make some planting. This is where I have learned to work hard as a man. It is important to me because I'm able to work for my wife and my children. (Sipho)

Due to the fact that my father migrated to Cape Town when I was still very young in search for employment, he never played a huge role in my upbringing. My uncle (my father's brother) and the father from the neighborhood were always there for me. (Bulumko)

… all in all it was mostly my grandfather and my uncle who assisted me in my formation to become an adult. (Dave)

Yet father figures could also be unrelated biologically as in the experience of Jacob who grew up in an orphanage:

… .he was like a father to me, very humble man but also strict but very humble and the … he tried his best to see to all of us because there were nearly 200 boys in the orphanage, about 200 (*sighs*) he was a father figure to all of us. But I found him a very humble man humble person, very Godly man. You know, never use to give us hiding us, his wife used to do that (*student laughs*), when we were naughty, quite often as a child. But other times , I mean ah … he was somebody you could look up to because he never actually tell you anything wrong, in that will always try guide you in a right way and that tried do your best always ... Always encourage you. (Jacob)

The interchangeability of the biological father and other father figures was also evident in the narratives. Thus at different stages of their lives, due to differing circumstances, participants elaborated on how different men in their lives were more or less significant, highlighting the fluidity of father-

hood and foregrounding the strengths of a social or extended familial father figure rather than the dependence on one biological father:

> when I reach adolescent stage so many things has changed in my life as a result my mother's brother (uncle) has become my father figure as adolescent because I could see that my uncle was the only person who sees that I will one day be a priest or reverend … he was the one who could see through me and realize my dreams than my father as a teenager I went to school in different areas and stayed with my uncles … all in all it was mostly my grandfather and my uncle who assisted me in my formation to become an adult. (Dave)

> Tatomkhulu (*literally older father, meaning uncle*) and my father was my role model because when my father was at work … my uncle would play a role of my father and they taught me how to be a man. (Thabo)

Notwithstanding the many narratives that speak of the social father, participants who did not grow up with a biological father also tended to articulate a sense of incompleteness, lack, or emptiness that men speak of when they do not know their biological fathers or when he is absent.

> I mean growing up without a father is not an easy thing more especially we as men because there are things that sometimes you would like to share with your father but you can't because he is not always around. (Dave)

As reflectedin other studies (see Langa, 2010),despite clearly valuing the presence of other male role models as evident from the narratives on social fathers above, participants also at the same time foreground the absence of their biological fathers as a problem:

> … my father migrated to Cape Town when I was still very young in search for employment, he never played a huge role in my upbringing. My uncle (my father's brother) and the father from the neighbourhood were always there for me. However, my father was always supporting me financially and the whole family, but financial support was not enough for me as I needed to bond with him and his love the most. These two father figures played a very vital role in my childhood and when I was an adolescent. You should know that it is very difficult to grow up without your father, especially as a boy … The fact that I was brought up with other father figures, not my biological father was a negative aspect for me because it is very difficult to relate to someone who is not your biological father. (Bulumko)

Despite acknowledging the two father figures who 'were always there' for him, Bulumko for example, clearly felt a loss related to not having his biological father living with him. One wonders however to what extent Bulumko's sense of loss is based on the fantasy of what the biological father signifies as a key component of normative nuclear family discourse. Biological fatherhood is rooted in dominant social constructions of family and a reproductive essentialism that privileges biological connection over social relation. Given the unequivocal presence of a range of nurturant men who serve as role models in the boyhoods of our participants, we suggest that it maybe the social imperative of the (mythologised and idealised) biological father produced through popular discourse and rubberstamped by professional discourse which creates the narrative of deficit.

'Talking' fathers

Recent South African studies confirm that dominant discourses of fatherhood, overlapping those of masculinity, are characterised by masculine control, gender power, and in some instances violence, that relate to the pressure on men to fulfill the expectations of providing for their families, standing on their own feet and (re)claiming what it is to be a man given the legacies of colonisation and apartheid (e.g. Clowes, Ratele & Shefer, in press; Morrell, 2007; Swartz & Bhana, 2009). However, also evident in studies are instances when alternative discourses with respect to the role of the father, here particularly in relation to discipline and limit-setting, are surfaced. These discourses centreon fatherhood as a dialogical, psychosocial or 'talking' relationship, and serve to challenge unfair, unequal, punitive, and violent versions of fatherhood. These discourses are evident in the following extracts from the present study where men point out examples of talking, nurturing, peaceful, and 'mother-like' fathers:

> my father was more than a father he was also a mother … if it was not for these things that are happening today you would say my father was a gay but he was not because he was playing all the roles just like my mother. (BhutiMzwa)

Participants spoke about fathers who resisted the dominant version of fathers as authoritarian, disciplinarian and violent and who were role models for peaceful conflict-resolution as in the following examples:

> … as I said what my father has taught me it does show. I don't beat I just talk. So, the mother will be doing the beating if any. It is very rare. (Lihle)

> I do think, he handled it quite nicely, even when he and my mother would have an argument, he would call her afterwards. When everything is done, he would call her to, to um, um at the, the, their room and we, I can remember that they usually closed it. Afterwards when they are finish talking, I can know my mother is ok. So, he was a talker. He was a talker and he will speak about conflict, how he feel and he really accommodated us as children also about how to, you feel and I think that's the reason why me and my brothers and sisters are very open with each other. If I don't feel nice about something they do, I just tell them. That's the thing that he have installed in us. (Abel)

> my uncle was always a humble man, when there is a conflict he would try to resolve it by talking to the parties that are involved ... He always included me in taking part in the decisions that concerned our family. i.e. if there was a ritual that needed to be performed he would consult with me, even though he would do it even if I disapprove of it, but what made me happy was the fact that he informed about everything. (Xolile)

In a similar vein, the construction of the father as the head of the household, and who is to be feared was clearly destabilised by some fathers:

> My father was a very easy man to understand, so I never feel that anyone of us felt scared of him in my life … That was a thing that he taught amongst us telling us that if you fear one another, that means that it will difficult to ask for help from one another. That was the thing of fearing. (Lihle)

While making ready sense given the common understanding of identity as fluid, it was instructive to hear how some fathers changed when their children grew up. In the following extracts Abel, David and Thabo are talking about their fathers hitting or using verbal or physical force to discipline them; but take note of what each is saying:

> Yes, when I got older, I think 14 years, he didn't hit no more, but he still (*pause*) Actually my brothers also when they became 13 and 14years, he didn't hit us anymore. He just called us to his room to speak to us about what we have done. (Abel)

> He was proactive and did not take nonsense but he was never rude or violent … After we were in our teens, he stopped using corporal punishment and used to just talk to us openly and honestly so that we actually felt bad about what we had done. (David)

> My father never physically and verbally violent to me but if I didn't do what I was told to do he will raise up his voice … when I was young he disciplined me by beating me not violently but when I was getting older and bigger he sit down with me. (Thabo)

Particularly interesting in these cases is how the fathers change from the use of corporal punishment to talking to their children, indicating another form of the possible changeability of gender and men's practices. Other men referred to alternative forms of punishment or negative reinforcement that also were located outside of normative expectations of fathers:

> Um, his limits wasn't so what I would call harsh and he, his like er he gives you rope and when he sees you go too far pulls the rope back, so that you now know that you have gone too far and er he never use to use harsh words with us, he only er, like er the punishment like what he gave us was like er you you won't be able you won't go to bioscope (cinema) with him that was the way he or you won't get a ice-cream or whatever, that is how he punished us. (Abdul)

CONCLUSION

The legacy of apartheid, unemployment, poverty and inequality in post-apartheid South Africa,

gender inequality, and the burden of HIV/AIDS and violence-related mortality may have negatively affected family and parental practices with a significant number of children growing up without biological fathers, either through premature death or abandonment. In the context of the dominant discourses around absent fathers, this qualitative study was aimed at unpicking South African adult men's accounts of being fathered, fatherhood and the absence of biological father in their lives. At the same time, the study was also keen to highlight the importance of acknowledging positive models of fathering but also the role of popular discourse in undermining the value of a range of male care-givers and/or other forms of parenting and care-taking of children. The study illustrates that non-biological father figure and male relatives are immensely important in the fathering of South African boys and men; and that the role of non-biological fathers in the lives of boys and young men has perhaps been underestimated within the dominant assumption of the centrality of the biological father. Yet it is also evident from this study that the absence (physical or emotional) of biological fathers is sometimes experienced as a loss even while participants acknowledge the importance of social fathers. We suggest that this experience may be less a result of an essentialised developmental need for a biological father figure but may link rather to the westernized normative discourse on nuclear families which assumes a male father figure. It may also be shaped by dominant notions of masculinity in many communities in South Africa that place great emphasis on fathers as head of households and breadwinners and that may assume the lack of such a male figure as a deficit. The study further foregrounds how nurturing fatherhood is (and has been) relatively common since there were many narratives on fathering that are illustrative of positive fathering and that contest the normative assumption of the absent or 'bad' father. The findings therefore serve to destabilize the knee-jerk stereotype of the dominant authoritarian father and further,that this sample of men strongly valued these more nurturant norms of fatherhood.

While the meaning of fatherhood, and as such good family life, changes and is temporally and spatially contingent, the quality of how adult men in children's lives engage with them appears to be important as nurturant and supportive men engaged in their care, arevalued. We argue that an under-appreciated element is fatherly presence; not necessarily and only physical presence per se but also importantly presence as a dialogical, psychosocial relationship – referred to 'talking' fatherhood (Swartz & Bhana, 2009). The study suggests that children are negatively impacted less by growing up in a single-parent family and more in families where there are not enough care-givers who are psychosocially 'present' to offer care and support to the child. Thus while loss of the biological father may be felt, whether due to a 'real' need for such a person or dominant discourses framing fatherhood, more important to human flourishing in family practices is the presence of a nurturant, engaged person, whether a mother, extended family member, older sibling or any other male or female adult that plays a caring role in their lives.

Although inadequately investigated by the present study, one of the critical questions overlooked by many psychological and psychiatric studies is how in a context such as South Africa; independent of the absence of fathers in the home; historical white, racist, patriarchal, capitalist domination, poverty and inequality, high levels of interpersonal and intimate partner violence might influence the emotional, educational, behavioural and other outcomes for black boy and girl-children. In South Africa, where colonialism and apartheid were bent on negating black manhood and undermining black family and community life, some of the challenges young people face may be associated with the enduring legacy of structural violence rather than simply the absence of fathers. It is now accepted that colonial and apartheid ideology, laws and policies around for example marriages, sexual life, residential patterns, job reservation, education opportunities, business, and political franchise under-mined and negatively impacted on particularly Africans (DoSD, 2011; StatsSA, 2010). However, there appears to be a need for more and larger studies of the effects of colonialism and apartheid on all of black family life, specifically black fatherhood, in current psychological studies in South Africa. We therefore call for more historically and contextually informed studies to help understand the impact and legacyof South Africa's past on the meaning of fatherhood and fatherlessness in contemporary society.

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NOTE

1   With regard to the uses of apartheid race categories in South Africa, while noting the problems and complexity that come particularly with terms like black, African, and coloured, in using these distinctions we acknowledge them as socio-political and ideologically-laden constructs that continue to have a profound impact on material lives and experiences and the meanings attributed to them by South African citizens.

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