

# Provider expectations and father involvement: learning from experiences of poor “absent fathers” in Gauteng, South Africa

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## Abstract

*The phenomenon of absent fathers is prevalent in South Africa and has been singled out as a huge social challenge both in the public and policy debate. However, there has been little scholarly research on how men construct their role as fathers and on factors that constrain paternal involvement. This paper discusses constructions of paternal roles in South Africa, specifically in poor and black communities. The paper also seeks to understand how conceptions of fatherhood shape the type and extent of father involvement. Drawing from focus group discussions held in Gauteng's poor and black communities with fathers that did not live with their children, this paper argues that fathers are predominantly seen as providers. This prevalent construction of fathers as mainly agents for financial and material support of children and families precludes the emergence of alternative fatherhood roles. Besides, unemployment and poverty affect fathers' ability to live up to provider expectations. Hence, many fathers retreat or are excluded from playing an active role in their children's lives. It is essential that social policy and community interventions promote multidimensional fatherhood so as to offer fathers with alternative roles which can be carried out even in situations of unemployment and poverty. Besides, unemployed and poor fathers need social assistance if the society is going to succeed to keep them involved in their children's lives.*

## Introduction

Paternal involvement is associated with positive outcomes for households and children, including children's improved access to resources in the community, increased protection, and higher level of households' expenditure (Redpath et al. 2008a; Morrel and Richter 2006). Referring mostly to international studies, Peacock et al. argue that “the engagement or presence of a father or father figure in the life of a child is said to positively affect the child's life prospects, academic achievement, physical and emotional health and linguistic, literary and cognitive development” (Redpath et al. 2008b: 33). Men's participation as parents can also be positive for the health and well-being of women as research in Central America shows that “women with children are more

vulnerable to poverty if fathers neglect their financial responsibilities” (Redpath et al. 2008b: 34). On the contrary, father absence can exacerbate household poverty and “can also have significant psychological implications for the cognitive, physiological, and socio-emotional development of the children, although such effects are not uniformly found and are certainly conditioned by a variety of characteristics of the child and family unit” (Mott 1990: 499).

South Africa has a large number of absent fathers and consequently children who do not have daily contacts with their living fathers (Morrel and Richter 2006; Holborn and Eddy 2011). This phenomenon has been identified as a huge social challenge both in the public and policy debate. Notwithstanding the extent of the problem and the rising awareness on the detrimental consequences it has on the country’s social development prospects, there has been little scholarly research on how men construct their role as fathers and on factors that constrain paternal involvement. This paper discusses constructions of paternal roles in South Africa, specifically in poor and black communities. The paper also seeks to understand how conceptions of fatherhood shape the type and extent of father involvement. Drawing from focus group discussions held in Gauteng’s poor and black communities with fathers that did not live with their children, this paper argues that fathers are predominantly seen as providers. This prevalent construction of fathers as mainly agents for financial and material support of children and families precludes the emergence of alternative fatherhood roles. Besides, unemployment and poverty affect fathers’ ability to live up to provider expectations. Hence, many fathers retreat or are excluded from playing an active role in their children’s lives. The paper first outlines the theoretical framework which informs this research with particular focus on various ways of conceptualising fatherhood and paternal involvement. It proceeds to present the extent of father absence in South Africa before spelling out the research methodology. Research findings are then presented with focus on the predominant construction of fatherhood, its relationship to alternative father roles and its impact on paternal involvement. After the findings, a short discussion confronts this research’s findings to insights from relevant existing literature. A conclusion sums up the main argument.

## **Theoretical framework**

There has been a great deal of interest in the study of masculinity and fatherhood and related social dynamics. Fatherhood is generally understood as “the social role that men undertake to care for their children” (Morrell and Richter 2006: 18). It refers to physical and emotional presence in the child’s life. The literature on fatherhood has argued that father involvement has positive socio-psychological outcomes for children. Besides, positive father involvement also benefits the mother and advances the cause of gender equality (Peacock et al. 2008b).

In conceptualising father involvement, Pleck distinguishes various modalities such as engagement, accessibility, responsibility and influence (Pleck 1997). Building on this early conceptualisation of father involvement, scholars have underscored the multiple and wide ranging parameters of the practice of fatherhood and show how it is related to the diverse fatherhood arrangements (Marsiglio et al. 2000). According to Marsiglio, the practice of fatherhood can be captured in three dimensions: paternal motivation, paternal involvement and paternal influence (Marsiglio et al. 2008). Paternal motivation refers to reasons why men would want to participate in their children's lives. These reasons range from love for one's child, pressures to act as masculine adult males, early family experiences to perceptions about the extent children need their involvement or financial resources. Paternal involvement comprises aspects such as engagement, accessibility, responsibility and cognitive representations of involvement. Engagements are direct interactions with children. Accessibility involves activities regarding supervision and the potential for interaction. Responsibility refers to the father taking final sense of duty over the child's well-being. Cognitive representations of involvement refer to mind states such as anxiety, worry and contingency planning related to a child's well-being (Ibid). The third dimension of the practice of fatherhood is the influence of fathers on children. The four general features of paternal influence are nurturance and provision of care, moral and ethical guidance, emotional, practical, and psychosocial support of one's partner and economic provision (Ibid). These features of paternal influence are important for children's well-being and development. It thus appears that exercise of fatherhood has to be conceptualised as multidimensional.

Like the social world, fatherhood is socially constructed. This means that predominant conceptions of paternal involvement change over time. Lamb describes the different dominant paternal roles in American social history (Lamb 2000). Dominant father roles have shifted from being the moral teacher and guide, to having responsibility for bread-winning, to being a role model for especially sons, and finally to being a nurturing and active father. These changes have been influenced by processes like industrialisation, economic disruption and dislocation, labour market change and demands for gender equality (Ibid).

Historically, the two most dominant father roles have been providing or/and care-giving. Traditionally, fathers have been regarded as mainly providers. However, as a result of women's increasing entry into the labour market, there has been emergence of a new fatherhood model which has emphasized the need for fathers to be involved in care-giving activities. Research has shown that society and social policies do not always do justice to both equally important father roles, often emphasizing one at the expense of the other (Roy 1999; Khunou 2006). Fathers themselves have negotiated variously these roles depending on the socio-cultural and economic contexts.

Scholars have highlighted the link between provider expectations and father involvement (Roy 2004). While noting that specific contexts may lead to different

expectations for economic provision, Roy has pointed out that “provider expectations can discourage as well as encourage men to become involved fathers” (Ibid). This article examines how fathers in poor and black South African communities construct their role as fathers and the effects of such fatherhood constructs on their involvement in their child’s life.

Since this research specifically targeted “absent fathers” in order to capture how they construct their role as fathers, it is opportune to outline how this concept is understood in this paper. Father absence has two meanings. The first meaning has to do with physical absence caused by factors such as “situations of divorce, domestic instability, work, and social dislocations, including wars” (Morrell and Richter, 2006). However, fatherhood goes beyond mere father physical presence because “a father might well be physically present, but emotionally absent, or physically absent but emotionally supportive” (Ibid). Besides, father presence can be characterized by abusive conduct towards his child or her wife. The second meaning of the concept “absent father” thus refers to a father’s emotional disengagement from one’s child life regardless of whether he is physically present or distant. Morrel notes two problems associated with the absent father argument. The first problem is that “it is difficult to show that physical absence of the biological father is as serious for the child as is often argued” (Ibid) as father presence can also be negative in some cases. The second problem stems from the fact that “men have used the argument that children need their (biological) father to pursue anti-feminist campaigns designed to return women to their dependence on men or to reduce their autonomy” (Ibid). Other students of family dynamics in South Africa have noted that the discourse on the phenomenon of absent fathers in South Africa has focussed on co-residence and has thus failed to recognise the extent of father-child connections and paternal support that transcend co-residence (Madhaven et al. 2008). While acknowledging the difficulty of coming up with an operational definition of the concept “absent father”, for the purposes of this research, the term refers to fathers that did not live with their child, did not maintain communication and did not pay maintenance.

Whist the extent of physically absent fathers in South Africa may be well publicised, little is known about the extent of emotionally absent fathers, which will even include many fathers that are physically present in households. Besides, little is known about how men, particularly African men relate to their role as fathers and how they make sense of the phenomenon of absent fatherhood. Aware of some of these knowledge gaps, previous research on fatherhood and masculinity has called for “more research on men’s roles in the family” as this is considered to have “the potential to ‘inform the development of new programmatic approaches that might feasibly engage men’s concerns and needs, and more effectively involve men as actors in community coping strategies” (Morrell and Richter 2006). It is opportune to provide a succinct discussion of the phenomenon of absent fathers in post-apartheid South Africa.

## The phenomenon of absent fathers in South Africa

The phenomenon of absent living fathers is prevalent in post apartheid South Africa. One father out of two is absent from his child's life in South Africa. This stems from Richter's estimation that around 54% of men aged 15-49 years are fathers, but that nearly 50% of these fathers did not have daily contact with their children (Ibid). Trends of absent fathers display a clear racial dimension with African children under 15 years having the lowest proportion of present fathers in 2009 at 30%, compared to 53% for coloured children, and 85% for Indians, and 83% for whites. A clear rural-urban dimension is also discernible in fatherhood trends with "55% of African rural children under the age of 15 having absent living fathers compared to 43% of African children in urban areas" (Holborn and Eddy 2011).

Father absence is again confirmed by a look at how orphans are cared for. Data from 1995 and 1996 show that only 41% of maternal orphans lived with their fathers, whereas nearly 80% of paternal orphans were living with their mother (Ibid). It means that few fathers actually look after their children once their mother dies. In comparison to other countries in Southern Africa and East Africa, South Africa had the lowest percentage of maternal orphans living with their biological fathers (Ibid).

Recent data suggest that there has been an increase of absent fathers from the end of apartheid to the present day. The proportion of African children under the age of 15 years with absent living fathers increased between 1996 and 2009 from 45% to 52%. There has also been an increase of absent fathers for coloured children (from 34% to 41%), and for white children (from 13% to 15%). The proportion of children with absent living fathers decreased only among Indians (from 17% to 12%) (Ibid).

Women disproportionately bear the brunt of the absence of fathers in homes. Desmond and Desmond estimated in 2006 that only 48% of fathers in South Africa are present in the homes of children under the age of 18 compared with 80 per cent of mothers. They added that, "in 96 per cent of households headed by men, a female spouse of the head was also present, compared to only 21 per cent of female-headed households that had a male partner of the head present" (Desmond and Desmond, 2006: 232). This partly justifies why efforts for increased involvement of fathers in their children's life constitutes a significant contribution to the liberation of women and advancement of gender equality.

This widespread father absence in South Africa begs for rigorous socio scientific explanation. To date, there have been little empirical explanatory studies in this direction. Hence, our knowledge of the key drivers of the phenomenon of father absence is still speculative. The widespread father absence originates from historical, economic and cultural processes that have shaped the South African society in the past hundred years. However, this paper does seek to analyse this set of explanatory factors. It focuses rather

on one of the factors which constrain father's involvement in their child's life namely provider expectations. The paper seeks to examine how fathers construct their role and the extent to which this perception limits their involvement in their child's life. How were data for this paper collected?

## Methodology

This paper draws from a research on absent fathers. Focus group discussions with absent fathers in four African and poor communities (Alexandra, Doornkop, Tembisa, and Soweto) were conducted in the period from August 2011 to October 2011. Participants were fathers that did not have regular contacts with their children, did not communicate frequently and did not pay maintenance.

In an effort to capture absent fathers' perspectives on fatherhood and reasons why they had been absent in their children's lives, the focus group discussions dealt with four themes namely men's conceptions of fatherhood, reasons for their absence from their children's lives, their perceptions of the consequences of father absence on the child and on the father and their recommendations in addressing the phenomenon of absent fathers. In each research sites, focus group discussions lasted for 3 to 4 hours. These conversations with absent fathers were recorded and later transcribed. Atlas.ti was used to analyse the rich primary data collected through the above described process.

Some 34 fathers took part in the focus group discussions in the four research sites. Age of fathers ranged from 22 to 54 with the majority of fathers (20 out of 32 or 68.7%) being under 35 years of age. Some 65.6% of the fathers were unemployed and only 34.3% reported being employed. However, given the type of jobs available in townships, it is likely that the few fathers that are employed receive a low salary. How did these fathers construct their role? How do these fatherhood constructs relate to the new fatherhood model? What effects do these conceptions of fatherhood have on paternal involvement in the South African socio-economic context?

## Findings

### Fathers saw their role primarily as providers

When enquiring on participants' conceptions of fatherhood, it emerged that fathers saw themselves primarily as providers. Though the term "provider" assumed broader significance, by far most fathers expressed a materialistic interpretation of the concept. For this group of men, the provider role referred to father's obligation to supply one's child or family with material goods or financial means. Masculinity and fatherhood were primarily understood in terms of one's ability to provide. In the course of the four focus group discussions, primacy on father's provider role was expressed recurrently. A Doornkop

father stated: "that is just that. As a father, you have to go and look for a job so that you can take care of your child". This was echoed by a similar statement uttered by a father in Tembisa: "We are the ones who must all the time come up with plans to ensure survival in the house." Another father referred to the social pressure generated by the primacy of the provider role: "whether you are unemployed or employed, you must provide".

These voices of fathers point not only to the prevalence of the provider role, but also to the dominance of the social representation of fathers as people who work. Previous research on fatherhood has demonstrated the long association of fatherhood with employment. This partly explains the traditional dichotomy between men's place in the public sphere and mothers' relegation in the care-giving activities in private place of the household. However, for the majority of fathers who were unemployed, the primacy of the provider role was experienced as a huge constraint on their capacity to exercise fatherhood as the paper will later show.

### **Care-giving presented as the preserve of women**

Emphasis on the provider role was expressed in a way that rejected care-giving activities as the preserve of the female partner. While few fathers embraced involvement in care-giving activities, many fathers still dissociated themselves from this type of involvement which they considered naturally suited to female partners. Here is how a father in Tembisa distanced himself from care giving activities while insisting on the male provider role: "The woman is somebody who is supposed to take care for the child. They are born to do that. She is responsible in any way for the child. When a child cries, he does not say "Papa". He says "Mama", from a young age. When he starts to talk he says "Mama". Women are responsible for the social well being of the children. And we are responsible for financial well-being of the child. If we can change and say that I'm guarding the child. I nappy him, I bath him and I say that the woman must go and look for a job, it won't work. It will look like we are crazy, it will seem like the nation is going crazy".

Fathers justified this separation of roles appealing to nature and God. They represented men as incapable of providing good care to children, particularly babies. In contrast, women were said to possess innate ability to look after children and natural bonds with their offspring which render baby rearing easy. As a father in Tembisa expressed it, "you see we are not caring, if we are to be honest. If you are left with the child for the day, you will find that the child is dirty, the child hasn't eaten for the whole day. Actually there is nothing that you do. You will go and spend time with the guys, drink beer or do whatever whereas the child will be suffering. But a woman, no matter whenever, whatever you can do, first thing when the child wakes up, she will ask where is my son. But for guys, it is difficult for us because with us this thing, we were not meant to possess

it, you see?" Belief in the natural difference between a mother's and father's ability to care for the child was again expressed with emphasis in contrasting terms: "you can't take care of the child the way a mother takes care of the child. As a father you can love your child. ...And be patient...But you can't have the same patience as the mother. A mother's love and a father's love are different. They will never be the same. Do you understand me, my brother? ...You can never love the child the way a mother loves a child, do you understand? You can love him but you can't love him the way his mother will love him, you get me my brother? ...A mother's love and a father's love are not the same. They can never be the same". By ascribing women's care ability to nature, fathers did not look at care-giving role as a set of skills that can be learned and perfected. Fatherhood and motherhood were thus understood as deterministic and static phenomena.

### **Fatherless fathers and the risk of a vicious cycle**

It was also notable that a number of fathers stated that they did not know how a father should behave vis-a-vis his children as they did not have a father figure in their life. The fact that some of these absent fathers did not themselves have an involved father points to the possibility of a vicious cycle. As expressed by a father: "we did not know our father and he never did anything for us. We do not have any father idea". Many fathers had similar explanation of their current deficient fatherhood practices. Another father spoke of the generational transmission of negative fatherhood models: "You are a grown man like this and I think your father has never given you a bath or put nappies on you and dressed you. It is highly rare. You see. If you grow up with that stereotype, it becomes difficult to change and accept that in your adulthood you are going to do these things". This underscores the crucial role of a present and involved father in serving as a role model for his offspring. Given the high number of children that now grow without regular contact with a father figure in post apartheid South Africa, it is highly likely that fatherless fathers end up themselves as uninvolved fathers, thus perpetuating a vicious cycle. The question on how to prevent this kind of vicious cycle for future generations by providing current children with positive fatherhood experience or training should therefore form part of the policy and advocacy debate.

### **Unemployment, poverty and fatherhood**

Fatherhood is associated with employment. An unemployed father who is unable to provide for his family sees himself as emasculated and unable to fully assume fatherhood. Unemployment is rife in South Africa. Young black and township dwellers are disproportionately affected by the lack of jobs in the economy. Research has shown that unemployment and poverty are closely associated in South Africa to the extent that



“employment is a key factor in avoiding poverty”. Hence, it is likely that unemployed fathers live in poverty in a social environment that is also marginalised from the mainstream economy.

### **Effects of provider expectations on paternal involvement**

Caught up in difficult economic circumstances, many fathers fail to live up to the provider expectations. It is therefore unsurprising that many men buckle under this pressure, or their relationship with the mother buckles under this pressure, and they end up becoming estranged with their children. Inability to provide material or financial support makes fathers feel like a failure. A participant to the Alexandra focus group discussion conveyed this experience in unambiguous terms: “Something that may sometimes lead me backwards is that I don’t have the capacity to provide. I mean to provide financially. That is why I lose the title to be a father. By that I also feel like I am failing myself because at the moment I want to be with my family. I want to enjoy the kind of life that I want to enjoy with the family that I know is mine. I have started myself but due to the reason that I am not working I am failing that and it is painful, to be honest.” As a result of difficulties in conforming to successful provider expectations, many fathers retreat from their child’s life. As a father put it: “it happens sometimes you have a boy of six years and you were working by the time that boy was born maybe 2 to 3 years. Now you loose your job. You start feeling the distance, you start making the distance. You think in yourself, all the time I go to visit my child, I don’t have anything. I must stop going there, how is my child going to look at me, what will my child say”. A Tembisa father spoke of self-isolation as common natural reaction from fathers who become unable to provide. He stated “I don’t know about other guys but I think it’s our nature. Once you don’t have anything, as a man you isolate yourself.”

Other fathers are excluded by the mother of the child or her family against their will when they are or have become unable to make any material or financial contribution to the child’s life. A father in Devland (Soweto) reported how his former partner would keep her away from his child: “Even now, I am unable to see her (the partner) because I don’t have money and because I don’t have money for the child... When I try to talk to her, she makes me to talk to her mother and I am not allowed to talk to her”. A participant to the focus group discussion in Alexandra reported his friend’s experience in these terms: “Just because by the time they had children he was not working, he is called a useless man. He cannot even access his children because he is not bringing anything in their life.”

Overemphasis on provider role by fathers themselves, by mothers and their families make it difficult for alternative father roles to develop and be promoted. Nevertheless few fathers demonstrated that they valued or were encouraged to assume alternative

father roles such as taking part in childcare, in children's recreational activities or just being there. A father stated: "the mother of my child ended up telling me, no, you must come and see your child with or without money. When you get there hey you find the bonding, the love, you forget that you don't have money, the child grabs you, you see? So that is something I have realised." Other participants underscored the importance of moving beyond the provider role and placing equal premium on emotional connection to one's child: "It is about spending time with the child and whereby you can develop a bond with your child and so that he can always know that my father taught me this". Another father concurred: "not that because I am unemployed I must abandon my children. No, you can be around your children even if you are unemployed, show them that love." Fatherhood should not be given instrumental value, but rather be approached as a value in itself. As a participant put it, "the mother should value more that the man can come, the presence of the person coming. Even if he brings something, if he brings money, but what they should value more is the human being coming." Without providing excuse to fathers who default on child maintenance, the call for moving beyond "economic fatherhood" is recognition that material contribution is neither the full extent of fatherhood nor its most important manifestation. Valuing father's emotional connection with the child may be, in some circumstances, the most effective way to promote their economic contribution.

## Discussion

Findings from this study resonate with similar research conducted with fathers in low income African American communities in the US. In his study on the construction of roles for paternal providers in low income and working class families, Roy also noted the prevalence of the provider role in how fathers constructed their paternal involvement (Roy 1999, 2004). Due to lack of stable employment, many non resident fathers failed to live up to the provider expectations. Roy's comparative analysis of low income and working class groups also lead to the conclusion that "the importance that families assign to men's providing may play out differently in diverse social contexts. For example, men's providing is particularly salient for non-middle class families who urgently need resources" (Roy 2004). This socio-economic contextualisation is indeed in line with the dynamics found in South African poor black communities where men are under huge pressure to fulfil their provider role as discussed above.

Unlike in South Africa where unsuccessful providers often retreat or are excluded from being involved in their children's lives, Roy's research shows that fathers which failed to provide financially provided a variety of in kind contributions and displayed alternative paternal roles (Roy 1999, 2004). This allowance for fathers to assume alternative roles ran contrary to family welfare policies which prioritized finances over

care. In this regard, the US child maintenance system shows similar characteristics as the South African one, particularly in their emphasis on fathers' financial contribution and non-recognition of alternative father roles.

Findings from this study are also consistent with Roy and Morrel conclusions on a similar subject. Roy argues that "provider role expectations can discourage as well as encourage men to become involved fathers" (Roy 2004). The South African case discussed above has shown that predominant constructions of fathers as ATMs (providers) curtail their paternal involvement. This study also illustrates with new empirical materials drawn specifically from a previously under-researched social group how in a South African context where fathers are primarily represented as providers, men that are unable to provide for their families are more likely to deny or flee the fatherhood roles.

The fact that fatherhood is socially constructed also means that current and predominant fatherhood ideas should be viewed as dynamic rather than static or deterministic. This study has shown that a significant number of fathers continue to hold traditional views about paternal roles. They tend to naturalise gender roles and perpetuate old fashioned clichés between male and female roles. The rigidity that comes with such often dualist and dichotomist view of gender roles constrains adaptation to changing circumstances and wide adoption of the new fatherhood model.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined fathers' conceptions of their roles vis-à-vis their children. The enquiry has focused on understanding how fathers relate to various possibilities of paternal role such as economic provision, care giving, and other forms of social fatherhood. The paper has also sought to analyse how predominant constructions of fatherhood impact on paternal involvement in the lives of the child. These questions have proved crucial in helping to understand why so many fathers are uninvolved in their children's lives.

Fathers saw themselves and were largely perceived as providers. This refers to material and economic provision to the child and to the family. Other paternal roles such as care giving, helping with education, involving in recreational activities with the child, or just being there were given less importance. The dichotomy between gender roles was particularly striking. Fathers predominantly saw care giving as the preserve of mothers who are thought to be naturally equipped for it whereas men were considered to lack such skills. The deterministic and naturalistic construction of these gender roles made it difficult for men to envisage that they could perfect their skills in baby rearing and care giving.

Dominant constructions of fathers as providers clash with the stark reality of endemic unemployment and poverty in poor and black communities. Many fathers are presented

with intractable dilemma: they find it difficult to live up to their own conceptions of fatherhood and their communities' expectations. However, fathers and communities do not easily accept in kind contributions to the child or alternative paternal roles. As a result, many fathers either retreat or are excluded from their child's life. In the context of poor and black communities in townships, provider expectations prevented the emergence of paternal roles associated with the new fatherhood model and constrained paternal involvement. It is essential that social policy and community interventions promote multidimensional fatherhood so as to offer fathers with alternative roles which can be carried out even in situations of unemployment and poverty. Besides, unemployed and poor fathers need social assistance if the society is going to succeed to keep them involved in their children's lives.

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