Where is my Daddy? An Exploration of the Impact of Absentee Fathers on the Lives of Young People in Botswana

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Abstract

A substantial body of research has consistently concluded that children growing up with absentee fathers are at an increased risk of maladjustment. This paper argues that co-parenting can have both direct and indirect or mediated effects on children. Co-parenting has an added benefit of modelling dyadic skills that include proving mutual emotional support, influence, and amicable resolution of disputes. Through qualitative data obtained in 2009 from 45 final year students at the University of Botswana, the authors conclude that African personhood is a larger-than-self conception, which also includes more than the physical being and shows that young people raised in father-absent families view their personhood as inferior, less guarded, and incomplete, relative to that of their counterparts who were born and raised in married-couple families. Living a full quality life eludes youth who were raised by mothers only, affirming the importance of fathers in the personhood of any individual.

Key Words: Absentee fathers; youth personhood; co-parenting

Résumé

Elles sont nombreuses les études qui concluent systématiquement que les enfants grandissant en l'absence de leurs pères sont plus susceptibles d'être des inadaptés sociaux. Cet article a pour objet de démontrer que la coparentalité peut avoir des effets à la fois directs et indirects ou intermédiaires sur l'enfant. La coparentalité permet en plus de façonner les aptitudes relevant des deux conjoints dont le soutien émotionnel et l'influence réciproques ainsi que le règlement des

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disputes à l'amiable. Sur la base des données qualitatives obtenues en 2009
auprès de 45 étudiants en dernière année à l'Université du Botswana, les auteurs
ont pu conclure que la notion d'Africanité transcende le concept de la personne
et embrasse plus que l'être physique. L'étude démontre que les jeunes qui ont
grandi dans des familles monoparentales où le père est absent se considèrent
comme inférieurs, moins choyés et non-épanouis, comparés à ceux qui sont nés
et élevés dans des familles avec des parents mariés. Les jeunes élevés dans une
famille monoparentale, formée uniquement de la mère, sont loin de mener une
vie qualitative. Ainsi, la présence du père est indispensable et structurante de la
personnalité de tout individu.

Introduction

Historically, men's role in the upbringing of their children was limited
primarily to their economic contribution (Burgess and Russell 2004), leading
fathers often to be invisible or overlooked in parenting programmes and
activities that extended beyond their role as a bread-winner. This has been a
trend in both developed and developing countries (Daly, Ashbourne and
Brown 2009). The changing trend in men's participation in care is influenced
by the dynamics of the world today, such as men's employment status
(O'Brien and Richter 2011) that place fathers in positions to be involved in
a wide range of parenting roles. The benefits of father involvement have
been suggested across cultures, family structures and the types of parental
relationships with some, including Pruett et al., (2009) suggesting that children
who are supported by their fathers show lower levels of child neglect. The
contribution made by fathers in the upbringing of their children differs from
country to country. The increasing understanding of the importance of the
role fathers play in children's development is coupled with enhanced
awareness that fathers' parenting roles have changed in recent years (Pruett
et al., 2009). Anderson et al., (1999) posit that males provide substantial
amounts of care and resources to children and their absence can have a
range of detrimental effects on the psycho-social development of the child.

This is especially noteworthy within the African context where rates of
father absenteeism appear to be on the increase. O'Brien and Ritcher's
(2011) study underlines this observation by presenting findings that show
that up to 39 percent of children within South Africa grow up without their
fathers. The issue of father involvement has been sparsely studied in Botswana
(Maundeni 2000; Beardshaw 2006; and Dyer et al., 2011). Even so, the few
published works, including Maundeni (2000), confirm a noteworthy decline
on the quality of life for children who have no contact with their fathers,
especially children from divorced families and the never married. Beadshaw
(2006) offers a contradictory view and argues that absenteeism related to
fathers' working can in fact have a positive influence on their children. The
South African picture is contradicted by other countries, for example, in

Jamaica, fathers are responsible for raising their children regardless of the custodial union and in that regard marriage status does not become a determinant on father involvement in parenting (Wanda 2009). Notably, the changing roles of women and men within the workplace appear to be giving an impetus to a new set of dynamics in the roles played by men within parenting. In the Canadian context, for example, men have greater flexibility within the workplace and as a result, they have increased opportunities for taking an active role in parenting (Daly, Ashbourne and Brown 2009). In the US, women who work with health care disciplines spend comparatively more time than men in work and as a result, men have increased participation in parental and domestic activities (Hoffman 1998). O'Brien (2011) and Richter and Dorrit (2004) reveal similar patterns in Norway, especially in the increase in men's participation in domestic activities. A closer analysis of this study area seems to illuminate a trend that points to many parts of Africa as having quite contradictory patterns to other parts of the world in terms of the roles played by fathers in raising their children. O'Brien (2011) and Richter and Dorrit (2004) offer some insights into the South African experience but clearly need to be augmented by comparable studies within the continent. Informed by this trend in scholarship on fathers' role in their children's socialisation, the current study explores the emotional and social impact of growing up in father-absent families within a university student population in Botswana.

Methods

A qualitative study was designed to explore the emotional and social impact of the absence of fathers on young adults raised in father-absent families. The study used five focus group discussions conducted over 30 days to elicit information from participants on the emotional and social impact of being raised by their mothers without a father figure. Flyers were placed around the University of Botswana inviting would-be participants. The flyers clearly stipulated that those eligible to participate must be age 21 years and above and have been raised in single parent households where there was no father figure. A telephone number and email of the principal investigator was also posted for further clarity on the study.

The Ministry of Health Review Boards approved the study before data collection and a detailed leaflet explaining the study was given to all prospective participants. The leaflet explained the purpose, activities, duration and the expectations of the study. A consent form was also drawn up which participants had to sign if they agreed to participate after reading the leaflet. A statement on confidentiality was included that no names or identifying data would be included at any stage of the study and for any publication that might emerge from the study. The statement on voluntarism and withdrawal

from the study at any time during the process of the study was included and it clearly delineated that such students would not be treated unfairly or prejudiced in any way. Each participant was required to fill out a self-developed demographic form indicating gender, age, knowledge of their father and father's involvement in their lives.

Data Collection

Data were collected by means of focus groups. There were five focus groups held which lasted for two hours each and were conducted over 30 working days. The focus group discussions were audio-taped with the consent of the participants. A focus group guide developed by the principal investigator was used to guide the discussions. The principal investigator led all the discussions and the second co-author took notes and noted any observations. Focus group discussions were grouped into categories as suggested by Krueger (1998b) under the following headings: Opening, Introduction, transition and closing.

The opening began with the Principal investigator introducing herself and allowing the co-authors to introduce themselves. This was followed by the PI asking participants why they volunteered to participate in this study. This was to relax participants and allow for openness in the discussion. The grand tour question for the discussion was, 'Tell me your experiences about growing up without a father'. The tour question was supplemented by other questions such as: 'Let us discuss how your emotions have been affected by the absence of your fathers in your lives; 'Are there any social benefits derived from having a father?'; Are there any cultural expectations from children growing with and those without fathers?; Let us talk about how having a stay-in-father would have helped you; Let us discuss some of the positive and negative effects of having a father or not having a father; Are there any positives or negatives that you have experienced by not having a father?

All these questions were followed by many probes such as 'expand on what you mean when you said your mother wants you all to herself', and others such as 'Has any other person experienced the same thing?'

Data Analysis

Content analysis adopted from Krueger (1998b) was used to analyse data from focus group discussions. Audio tape recordings were transcribed verbatim by a consultant knowledgeable on transcription. Field notes taken during the focus group discussions were also examined. Data analysis was done by the PI, co-author and the consultant. Transcripts were read by the PI, co-author and consultant independently and then comparing notes through a three step process of content analysis, identification of emerging patterns

and developing sub-themes. Where there was no consensus the theme was dropped or the PI and team members went back to the transcripts until consensus was reached.

Results

Demographic Characteristics
A total of 45 fourth year university students participated in the study. The participants were aged 21 to 25 years with a mean age of 23. A total of five focus groups were conducted. The groups were arranged in the same gender cohorts with the first and second groups consisting of a male group of nine participants each aged between 21 and 23 and third group consisting of males aged between 24 and 25. The fourth group was all females aged between 21 and 23 and there were 12 participants in this group. The last group consisted of six female participants aged between 24 and 25.

Themes
A number of themes emerged from these focus groups that in turn led to even more sub-themes as shown in Table 1 below:

Emotional Impact
All the five groups expressed stress and depression as noted emotional effects that they experienced for not knowing who their fathers were. However, all the female groups verbalized anger and hate towards their mothers for the absence of their fathers in their lives. This was best exemplified in the quote below by a 23 year old female student who said: 'I at times hate my mother for denying me the opportunity to know my dad'.

Social Impact
A clear distinction emerged between female and male participants in their perceptions of the social impact that the absence of their father brought to their lives. Male participants were mostly concerned about the cultural practices that involve fathers, such as getting married and filling out official forms. Female participants were mostly worried about the possibilities of dating one's own brother and just not feel a sense of belonging. Some selected quotes that validate the social effects experienced by participants are provided here:

> Filling forms that requires you to mention your father is very uncomfortable or directly being asked about your father, you have to say, 'I do not know', or 'is dead' or something, you feel excluded' (23 year old male participant).

Table 1: Themes and Sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes	Relevant Quotes From Participants
1. Emotional impact	a. Protective nature of single mothers b. Assumption of ownership by mothers c. Topic avoidance	My mother is too possessive; I am not even allowed to ask about my father. I am always reminded that she has raised me single-handedlyMy mum calls me his baby, I know she means well but it's like she owns me. Talking about my father (if I have one is taboo in our family, my grandmother does not even want me to ask her about my paternity).
2. Social Impact	a. Social exclusion b. Inferiority complex c. Inability to freely socialise	In our society not having a father makes you less than your other peers I am very poor at dating, because. I am never surethe boy am going out is my brother or my kin that I do not know. You are never too sure of anything.
3. Cultural identity	a. No name ownership	I use my mother's name and always wonder who am I? I do not know what I will tell my children if I do marry. What will I tell my wife and in-laws who I am, I do not belong
4. Father's Responsibility	Economic responsibility	He paid for my school fees until I was 18 years old

I am thinking of getting married in the near future, but who will negotiate my marriage? Who would I tell my wife is my father, how would I answer if she wonders about my ability to be a proper father because I have never known one? (25 year old male participant).

> You need to have a sense of belonging. One day I was writing my mom's name on my desk calendar and my friend said, 'Is your dad so bad that you do not write him on your desk calendar?' I got so angry (22 year old female participant).

> I do not know who to blame – I dated a girl and went all the way only to hear rumours that she was my sister. I no longer date. I feel like a social misfit (24 year old male participant).

Cultural Identity

Participants verbalized the fact that in an African culture like Botswana, a person is culturally identified by his father's name and generally belongs with his father's people. Participants felt that using their mothers' name is not proper hence they do not feel a sense of belonging and tended to see themselves as having no identity. This was best exemplified by the quote from a 24 year old male who said:

> I use my mother's name and always wonder who am I? I do not know what I will tell my children if I do marry.

Fathers' Responsibility

The father's responsibility also emerged as a theme. Generally, the participants' fathers had no role in their lives. There were those participants who knew their fathers but the fathers were not involved in their upbringing as exemplified in the following quotes from some of the participants:

> My mother once said she will shoot me if I ever look for my father (21 year old male participant).

> Mum calls me his baby. I know she means well but she is so possessive of me (23 year old male participant).

> I was told that my father paid for my school fees through the district commissioner until I was 18 years old. That was the only way he was involved in my care (24 year old female participant).

Discussion

Although it is apparent that the involvement of fathers in their children's lives is changing, there is need for more rigorous steps to be taken that encourage men to be more involved with their children right from birth. In the current study participants did not know their fathers and voiced the desire to meet them in order to have an identity that they could pass on to

their children. This desire is compatible with the African Personhood theory that contends that an African being represents a system; an orientation inextricably connected to community or an ethnic group, or a cultural practice. The embodiment of an African person is the essence of the organization of being inherent in the organization's ontology, directing the understanding of how a person conceives of him/herself (Fairfax 2008).

There is an assumption that a father need not do certain chores for his/her children, including grooming, feeding and other menial duties that encourage bonding between parents and their children. This notion is more pronounced in Botswana (Thupayagale-Tshweneagae, Seloilwe and Dithole 2005). However, Fairfax (2008) contradicts this notion in his African Personhood theory that an African-centred idea of a human person, stipulates that a man is a man if he does not let go of his responsibility and that a person not exhibiting moral and ethical behaviours deemed to be morally correct by their culture is an aberration of personhood. Fairfax's notion of personhood is in this study stretched to show that what most of the participants sought was the social presence of their fathers so as to give them a concrete social identity. Following these findings we can therefore imply that fatherhood as a symbolic entity (where the father is present in the child's life irrespective of the material chores he performs) contributes to the child's sense of self and personhood.

The involvement of a father extends overtime and is often regarded as interaction availability and responsibility (Lamb, Pleck, Charnov and Levine 1987:125). In the current study, participants decried the fact that not knowing their fathers socially excludes them from fully participating in cultural practices. Steinmetz and Day (2000) assert that the benefits of father involvement hold across cultures and family structures. The findings of this study further confirm what is already known in research that male children are likely to communicate with mothers and female children are more comfortable with their fathers (Guerrero and Afifi 1995). Females in the study were angry at not knowing their father for personal reasons, whereas male participants acknowledged the dual roles of their mothers and only wanted fathers for identity and extension of their lineage. Doucet (2006) is of the view that men should be more involved in their children's lives and be emotionally involved in their children's lives. As our study has shown, in cases where fathers do not have any role in their children's lives the children exhibit or report low-self esteem or feelings of an inferiority complex. This finding is congruent with findings from a study by Finley and Schwartz (2007) that found that young adults from families with both parents had high self esteem, were positive about the future and were generally satisfied with life.

Participants also stated that using their mother's name was inappropriate and made them feel 'nameless'. This finding is supported by Kiernan (2006) who asserts that unmarried fathers that are named in their children's birth certificate are likely to continue personal and emotional involvement with their children even when separated from their mothers. Depression, anger and hate were emotions occasionally experienced by participants over their absentee fathers and occasionally over the mothers who they blame for their not knowing who their fathers are. In some incidences, the topic about one's father was avoided. This may also have contributed to the participants' experience of depression and anger. There is ample literature on the benefits of participants knowing who their fathers are both from a social and a mental health perspective (see, for instance, O'Brien 2004; Lamb 2010).

Peer-victimization through name calling by those who are involved with their fathers was also mentioned by the participants. There are numerous studies that associate peer victimization with depression, anxiety, poor self esteem and a poor self concept (Hawker and Boulton 2000; Flouri and Buchanan 2002). All these negative feelings were experienced by the participants in this current study. Overall, the study results show that the psychological well-being of young adults is positively related to the involvement of fathers in their lives. It was also clear from the findings that there is a need for fathers to get more emotionally, socially and financially involved with their children. Amato (2004) also alluded to the fact that adults who were close to their fathers are more likely to do well at school, at work and have higher levels of psychological well-being and be content with who they are compared to their counterparts without a father in their lives.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is evident from the stories of young people in Botswana that there is a need for father involvement in their lives or the children's lives in general. For any meaningful involvement of fathers in the children's lives there must be policies put in place that will encourage men's involvement in the children's lives. Doing so will give the children an identity and issues such as marrying your brother or sister and feeling of insecurity will be minimized. The authors therefore recommend that such policies should include a policy that recognizes a child's paternity by including the name of the father in the birth certificate even if unmarried. The current practice in Botswana for the most part is for a child of a single mother to use her mother's maiden name. Studies (Kiernan 2006; Carlson and McLanahan 2010) show that fathers whose names appear in their children certificates are likely to continue contact with their children.

Paternity leave is another policy that the researchers recommend for Botswana. Currently there are sporadic organizations that are considering paternity leave. Giving paternity leave will encourage fathers to take responsibility of their offspring from the beginning and it would in some way encourage responsibility for fathers and reduce the mother's possessiveness over the children as found in the study. O'Brien (2009) argues that paternity leave may encourage fathers to become attached to their children and subsequently reduce the possibility of leaving them. It would also help fathers to become more supportive to the mothers.

Historically, the men's role in raising of their children was limited to economic contributions by policy makers (Burgess and Russell 2004) leading to situations where fathers are often invisible or overlooked in parenting programmes and activities. This has been a trend in both developed and developing countries (Daly, Ashbourne and Brown 2009). The trend in men's participation in care is changing following changing dynamics of the world today, such as men's employment status so that fathers are expected to be involved in the parenting role (O'Brien and Richter 2011). The benefits of father involvement in the socialisation of children hold across cultures, family structures and types of parental relationships (Pruett 2000). It is therefore apparent that a policy that encourages non-resident fathers to be involved in their children's lives is long overdue.

The presence of a policy, such as a family strengthening policy that would encourage involvement of fathers in their children's lives should also entail a reorientation of the prevailing cultural norms for mothers and fathers. The dominant Tswana culture assumes that a woman's social status is built through her ability to manage her household and raise her children (Suggs 1996). Mothers in Botswana, therefore, still adhere to the rigid traditional model, where a mother is the primary caretaker. With changing cultural structures brought about by a modern economy and social roles, both mothers and fathers need to rethink their social roles and start by having an equal share in the raising, care giving, and nurturing of a child.

In some Eastern European countries such as the Czech Republic and Poland, parental leave exists for both mothers and fathers. Similarly, in Slovenia the Parenthood Protection and Family Benefits Act of 2006 provides 105 days of maternity leave, 260 days of childcare leave and 90 days of paternity leave, with each parent entitled to half of the childcare leave (Robila 2008: 5). In the United Kingdom and the United States of America where there are family policies that encourage father involvement, fathers have been seen to take keen interest in the welfare of their children (Cowan 2008). As one of the most stable and modernizing countries in Africa, Botswana should be a place where both mothers and fathers take up full responsibility of socialising their children.

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