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Paternal deprivation, father-hunger, and implications for social work: narratives of four schoolchildren from impoverished households in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the findings of a qualitative study that probed factors affecting the everyday lives of children living in poverty. The research participants were purposively selected teenage children from the rural King Cetshwayo District of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. A combination of story accounts and semi-structured interviews from the selected participants were thematically analysed. The findings prove that children living in low-income families carry numerous emotional and psychological burdens, most of which are invisible to outsiders. Among the selected participants, the most profound burden was the absence of biological fathers. The study particularly revealed how experiences of grief and trauma associated with paternal loss adversely affect children's thoughts and self-perceptions. It draws attention to how children navigate these burdens in isolation. The research found that children burdened by losing a biological father may be better emotionally and psychologically supported cohesively within their immediate households, schools, and communities. To support such children, the findings highlight a dire need for an Ubuntu approach towards social work interventions in poverty-stricken communities. Hence, this paper agitates for government-appointed officials, community leaders, and community-based non-governmental and non-profit organisations, to work collaboratively in impoverished communities, and address the emotional poverty silently endured among children.

KEY TERMS: children, father, grief, paternal loss, poverty, South Africa, vulnerabilities

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INTRODUCTION

The reported study sought to explore the multidimensional factors impacting the everyday lives of children who continued to live in impoverished contexts despite the national efforts of South African reforms to eradicate poverty. Considering the dire socio-economic circumstances of the children's households, the exploration aimed to determine how poverty alleviation policies and practices might have failed these four children. Of the identified multidimensional factors, the study found that the absence of a biological parent (a father in particular) was the most profound contributor to economic deprivation. This paper elaborates on this finding and highlights its implications for social work.

BACKGROUND

Since transitioning to democracy in 1994, South Africa has made significant strides in reducing the extent of poverty and its effects on children. For example, between 2006 and 2015, close to 2.3 million South Africans received access to some form of income; as a result, the poverty rate fell from 51 to 40 percent (Plagerson & Mthembu, 2019; World Bank Group, 2018). The existing research also shows that South Africa has made considerable progress since 1994 in reducing the effects of poverty and social exclusion on children (Plagerson & Mthembu, 2019; World Bank Group, 2018).

However, by 2020, despite national poverty figures being on a decline, the research further showed that widespread poverty and social inequalities still profoundly existed in South Africa (Statistics South Africa, 2020). More particularly, by 2020, at the time of research for the reported study, existing research showed that South African children living in poverty remained among the vulnerable groups of society and most susceptible to the damaging effects of poverty (Amnesty International, 2020). To this end, in July 2020, Statistics South Africa released a report on Child Poverty in South Africa, claiming that, by then, approximately 51% of the children in South Africa lived in financial poverty. This meant they lived in households where the everyday expenditure was restricted to remain below R647 per person per month (Statistics South Africa, 2020).

It was further found that (of this 51% quota of children living in poverty), more than two-thirds were identified as being multidimensionally poor. Multidimensional poverty, according to Fransman & Yu (2019), refers to children who suffer from multiple socio-economic deficits. The report further revealed that multidimensional poverty rates among children increased in South African households with no employed adults, female-headed households, and where household heads had no or low education levels (Statistics South Africa, 2020).

By 2021, multidimensional poverty experienced among South Africa's impoverished children was rapidly exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the rising parental mortality rates. In-depth research relating to the phenomenon claims that between 1 March 2020 and 30 April 2021 alone, approximately 94625 children in South Africa experienced the death of at least one primary or secondary caregiver (Hillis et al., 2021). Parental death, therefore, plunged children from impoverished South African households further into the poverty trap. In 2016, it was already found that approximately 2.13 million in South Africa children were fatherless due to paternal death, while an estimated 9 million were growing up without fathers due to paternal abandonment (Freeks, 2017). Hence, by 2020, at the time of research for the reported study, compounded by Covid-19-related paternal loss, South Africa had become one of the countries with the highest figures of father absence in the world (Freeks, 2017; Freeks, 2019).

The phenomenon of absent fathers and the repercussions on the economic poverty of South African households has been confirmed in the study's findings reported in this paper. However, beyond this confirmation, the reported study further found that the absence of fathers contributed not just to economic deprivation – but also emotional deprivation, which manifested in several forms among the study's participants. Related research on emotional deprivation highlighted that living in impoverished households where the biological father is absent – and thus rendering such children particularly emotionally vulnerable (Hall & Sambu, 2019) - is a reality for many Black African children raised in South Africa. Therefore, the findings of the reported study augment existing findings on the impact of paternal absence on children's mental and emotional health. Accordingly, this paper aims to highlight the need to alleviate poverty not simply through physical and nutritional interventions, as existing poverty alleviation policies and practices presently do. Rather, the goal is to raise awareness of the need for existing policies and practices to be augmented to address emotional poverty experienced among silently grieving children from poor households.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative study reported in this paper was conducted in the rural King Cetshwayo District Municipality, found in the north-eastern province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Whereas King Cetshwayo District

Municipality has the third highest population in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, it also has a high unemployment rate; at the time of research, it recorded an 80% poverty rate (King Cetshwayo Municipality, 2020).

The study's sample, chosen from this region, consisted of ten children ranging in age from 13 to 17 years. All participants resided in the most socio-economically deprived households of King Cetshwayo, characterised by failing housing structures and reliance on social grants from the government for daily expenses (Jili & Nzumakwe, 2022). The ten selected children were purposively chosen from children who attended a no-fee school in King Cetshwayo District. In South Africa, no-fee schools are those that do not charge school fees, and children who attend such schools are fed within the school via a feeding scheme (Mnguni & Morton McKay, 2022). School records showed that the selected children were among the poorest of the poor in the no-fee school population of King Cetshwayo District and were academically underperforming. However, of the ten selected children, the narratives of four (pertaining to the daily socio-economic challenges they experienced at home and school) centred emphatically around the absence of their fathers – which was not the case for all participants. Hence, for the purpose of this paper, of the ten purposively selected research participants, only the narratives of four children – three boys and one girl – are presented in the current paper.

Informed consent was obtained from the relevant Education Department, school managers, (traditional and religious) community leaders, participants' legal guardians, and participants themselves to access the research participants. Participants were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity were also assured to them. Ethical Clearance was obtained through the University's Research Ethics office. Pseudonyms are used in this paper to report on the findings and preserve the anonymity of the participants.

The study used a combination of narratives and semi-structured interviews to gather and interpret research data from the selected sample. Participants' narratives took the form of oral story accounts. During narrations, the participants were guided to give details of their experiences, feelings, and beliefs about numerous factors that significantly affected their everyday lives. Semi-structured interviews were also employed to understand how financial poverty shapes and influences children's life experiences. The questions asked ranged from general to specific questions. Probes to direct the responses to the research aims were used as the interviewer's task was to guide the interview to the topic. Probing questions enabled participants to extend their views about the topic without veering off it. Narrative and interview data were collected in venues and times convenient for the participants. Therefore, while some interviews occurred at participants' schools during school weekdays, others were at the participants' homes. Each interview session took about fifteen to twenty-five minutes. All interview sessions were audio-recorded through a voice recorder, with consent from participants and their legal guardians. Thematic analysis was employed as the applicable mode of analysis to sort the data.

African theories were exclusively considered in selecting an appropriate theoretical lens to collect and interpret the data. Guided by teachings on the philosophy of Ubuntu (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020), we particularly drew on the writings of Gebru & Wako (2022), who conducted an in-depth analysis of the extent to which African social work theories are favoured among African researchers, compared to Western ones, in theoretically framing African social work research. Of the emergent theories outlined by Gebru & Wako (2022), the individual-in-family (IIF) theory was most suited for theorising the data informing the present study. IIF theory holds that "Family circumstances contribute to a person's well-being as well as strategies to maintain, promote and revive that well-being" (ASWNet, Ubuntu Theories section, 2021). The focus is on the family, not the individual. Hence, in the present study, while the researchers examined four children's experiences of living in poverty, their narratives were explored against the fact that they lived within a family unit. Hence, the analysis critically considered the support participants received (or lack thereof) within that unit and the repercussions of that support on their lives.

Whereas the study's findings revealed that children living in financial poverty faced many psychosocial vulnerabilities in their everyday lives, the most impactful (and yet invisible) of these were induced by the absence of their biological fathers. Revealed also were how socio-economic factors compounded by losses of biological fathers led to silently borne emotional and mental trauma among the study's participants. The next section details these findings.

FINDINGS

An analysis of data for the reported study revealed that the loss of a father was experienced in two ways. In the first instance, loss referred to a father who was alive but did not live with their children, communicate with them, or contribute to the daily maintenance of their needs. In the second instance, loss denoted a deceased father. Within these two, the recurrent themes emerging from the analysis showed that the loss of a father by either identified means induced shared feelings of disaffection, yearning, disenfranchised grief, and silent bereavement among the participants. Guided by these themes, this section presents and discusses the reported study's findings further and, in so doing, contributes to the existing research on the emotional and mental impact of paternal loss on children.

Disaffection

In the reported study, data analysis revealed that the absence of a father was an emotionally painful issue that silently plagued the participants' lives. Regarding this, Sizwe (a 14-year-old boy) and Zinhle (a 13-year-old girl) shared similar experiences of fathers who, though still alive, allegedly alienated themselves from their children. Sizwe explained:

My father is still alive and stays in his house in Durban, and my relationship with him ended a long time ago. What hurts me the most is that he is not financially supporting me at all, and he does not care about all his children, which is affecting me so much.

The above extract reveals that Sizwe's wounded feelings are not simply induced by his father no longer sharing a residence or relationship with him. Rather, residing within the overall context of emotional and geographical estrangement, what appears to disturb Sizwe most in his everyday circumstances of poverty is his father's financial abandonment of him. Thus, his father does not assume his legal obligation to contribute financially towards Sizwe's living expenses. Similarly, Zinhle had this to say:

My father is working; it's only that he is not concerned about me; my father denies me, he denied me and sometimes, it hurts me; when my mother told me, it hurt me and my mother told me that it would pass, and it has passed, now I don't care because now I know, and I am used it.

In both above accounts, these two participants express mutual feelings of hurt due to similar experiences of deliberate physical alienation by their fathers. This finding resonates with the findings of studies on the status of children in South Africa, where the experience of an absent father is recognised as a daily source of suffering. Jensen (2013), for example, in the year 2013, revealed that approximately a quarter of children in South Africa have fathers who live elsewhere and never see them. Approximately seven years after that revelation, two participants' narratives in the present study reverberate feelings of emotional turbulence induced by losing a father through disaffection.

However, in the above extracts, whereas Sizwe's hurt stems from the added blow of not being financially supported, Zinhle's hurt from her working (yet financially unsupportive) father stems from being denied by him. Also evident is how Zinhle is supported by her mother regarding Zinhle's father's disaffection towards Zinhle. As reported, Zinhle's mother assists Zinhle emotionally by desensitising Zinhle's feelings toward her father's abandonment. Thus, her mother's attention and intervention in addressing Zinhle's emotional trauma caused by her father are highlighted.

Further discussion revealed the burden and struggles of Sizwe's primary parent (his mother) to fulfil Sizwe's daily living needs. Regarding this, Sizwe explained:

Everything that I ask for she buys for me. Though she does not buy it at the time I ask, she ends up buying those things I have asked for.

Sizwe and Zinhle's above accounts likewise present the struggles of mothers committed to providing for their children's needs, even though financially deprived. In both accounts, the mothers' assumed (financial and emotional) roles starkly contrast with the reports on the fathers who neglect their paternal responsibilities entirely.

However, also significant in this account of Sizwe's mother is the finding that, in dire poverty, Sizwe views money as the measure of parental love. His conversation about both parents – one who cares for him and the other who does not – pivots around his parents' financial concerns for him. Implicit in this is that while Sizwe has become emotionally detached from his father, he seemingly has developed a distorted construction that parental interest in his life is verified financially. His emotional void is thus filled by material desires, which, in a poor household, his mother eventually manages to provide. While Sizwe's prospects cannot be predicted, existing research (Langa, 2020) widely reports on the risk trajectory of teenage boys from impoverished contexts who fill emotional voids caused by their fathers' absence with material desires. In dire poverty, a desire to fulfil material desires predisposes children in Sizwe's circumstances to engage in criminal activities (Langa, 2020).

Father-hunger

Whereas the void felt in Sizwe's life for his disengaged father, as revealed above, appears to be more of a financial void than an emotional one, an analysis of the research data found that the absence of a father in the life of another participant created a deep emotional void. This void, it seems, is deepened by the fact that this participant's estranged biological father is likely to be still alive. In contrast, his biological mother (unlike Sizwe's and Zinhle's) is confirmed to be deceased. Concerning this, Mandla (a 17-year-old boy) reported:

My father has neglected us, and we don't communicate. It hurts me because I used to stay with him before, but he was not supporting me; I am not even sure whether he is still alive or not. I am hurt because he is not doing anything for me; it is like I haven't had a parent since my mother passed. I have a grandmother only, and I wish my grandmother to be with me forever.

The above extract again highlights a feeling of emotional pain because of not having any connection with a father this participant (Mandla) reports he had previously lived with. Moreover, even though Mandla declared that his father had never supported him, the extract suggests that his mother's death intensified his yearning for acknowledgement and support from his father. Mandla's yearning exemplifies what Groth (2019) describes as father-hunger, which denotes a deep, persistent desire for emotional connection with one's absent father. Mandla's father-hunger can be further understood considering Jensen's (2013) claim that if a father is absent, this could create instability and uncertainty because children are missing a role model. Confirming this, Freeks (2017) adds that the father-hunger children (like Mandla, in this case) often experience uncertainty and confusion because they need a father's attachment, presence, and lifestyle, characterised by good values received from their fathers (Freeks, 2017).

While Mandla does not specify the forms of support he requires from his father, his *hunger* for his father's acknowledgement and support is evident in his account. In Mandla's case, as revealed in the above account, Mandla's prospect of being orphaned induces a condition best described as Saudade. Pronounced *saw-dadi*, Saudade is a word borrowed from Portuguese by several Western languages. It is widely used to describe a psychosocial condition whereby an individual experiences silent grief induced by a melancholic longing for something that never existed (Neto & Mullet, 2020). In Mandla's case, his loss of his mother and fears about losing his grandmother seemingly cause him to yearn for his father's presence, albeit not knowing whether the alleged unsupportive father he hungers for is still alive.

Disenfranchised grief & silent bereavement

A parent's death is regarded as a life-changing shock for children because it is a traumatic experience that children must go through. The data presented below documents the experiences Sandile (a 17-year-old male participant) had after his parents' deaths. Elaborating further on his parents' deaths, Sandile explained:

My father and mom are deceased, and my grandparents raised me. It saddened me because I don't know my mother; she passed on when I was still a baby. Sometimes I think about how she was; my father died when I was ten. Another thing was when my father was still alive, he used to teach me every day when I came back from school, but it ended as a result of his death; presently, no one is assisting me anymore with my schoolwork. Also, if I feel sad that I am not doing well at school, I don't have anyone to tell.

This account shows how feelings of isolation from the death of one's parents have a negative ripple effect on academic performance. Sandile's claim of not having someone to talk to highlights the need for counselling for children like Sandile (and Mandla, as mentioned previously) so they can articulate the pain of facing life without their parents' support and mitigate the causal effect that this mental suffering may have on their academic lives.

Furthermore, the extract reveals how one loss induces a double loss in this boy's life: in this case, (again) the loss of academic capability. Speaking further on this, Sandile reported that:

Here at school, it is not better. This thing that has happened at home comes to my mind, and I will sit alone and think about what has happened at home. Yes, I am here at school and thinking about what has happened at home.

The above extract reinforces how the burden of losing a parent is mentally carried around in this participant's mind throughout his day. Sandile appears to suffer what Eastin (2003) terms as paternal deprivation syndrome, which, according to Eastin (2003), is a condition induced when the father is physically absent, psychologically non-involved, and disinterested in the child's life, yet present in a child's mind. As Sandile describes, thoughts about his home life plague his mind, even at school. Implicit in this is the possibility of his academic achievement being affected by his mental health, considering that he struggles to concentrate.

In a separate discussion, showing a picture of a car engine, Sandile speaks more about his double loss and how the physical loss of his father through death induced further losses of emotional connections to his father. Speaking of this, Sandile explained:

When my father was about to die, he left this car for me and asked me to look after it. My father said he would leave the car to me, but eventually, the car was cut, and its parts were sold. My father's car was

cut because they wanted to sell its parts to buy me the things I needed, even though my father had said he would leave the car to me to look after it.

As specified in the above account, Sandile had to deal with two forms of grief: normal grief he felt through losing his father and disenfranchised grief compounded by his caregivers. As documented in Sandile's narrative, his grief over the physical loss of the car his father wanted him to inherit is disenfranchised by those who sold it to support Sandile's financial needs. While in dire poverty, the sale of the car seems logical; Sandile, on the other hand, becomes pained each time he is engulfed by nostalgic memories of his father, the sold vehicle, and what it emotionally meant to both of their lives.

A similar pain to Sandile's is revealed in Mandla's further description of the pain felt after losing his mother. Unlike Sandile, Mandla knew his mother. An analysis of Mandla's narrative revealed that his view of her as someone who could fix everything in his life compounded Mandla's devastation by her death. Concerning this, Mandla explained:

It is painful; a mother is important because she is everything in life. If my mother could have been alive, she could have done what I wanted; for instance, as I'm not doing well in class, my mother could have taught me until I do well and be like all other people in the world. Sometimes, these things (the loss of his mother) come to my mind when I am on my way to school or if I am here at school.

Echoing Sandile's feelings about his father's loss, Mandla experiences double loss since Mandla sees his mother's physical loss as inducing losses in his academic prospects. Implicit in his description that his mother would help him with his schoolwork is that his mother addressed the educational gaps in his learning. Hence, the connection that Mandla makes between his mother's death and the impact on his academic ability seems to be a profound realisation that preoccupies his mind. As Mandla's account suggests, like Sandile, he too is preoccupied with the memory of his mother not just at home but enroute to, and even within, school. Mandla's account of his mother's death's impact on his thoughts again raises a need for mental health support for children such as these in the study to deal with emotional trauma and disenfranchised grief.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The research revealed how various emotional and psychological factors affect the everyday lives of four adolescents living in poverty-stricken households. To socially support children such as these, the study's findings suggest implications for a multi-pronged approach to social work interventions within poverty-stricken communities.

For one, at a community level, the findings of this study present implications directly for community-based social work. The findings highlight the need to strengthen households, organisations, and the community's accessibility to psychosocial support. This could be achieved by training parents and families and mobilising communities in ways that aid children from emotionally struggling families to be supported within the home. Thus, community-based social workers need to strive towards minimising vulnerabilities to which children may be exposed and increase their resilience rather than disenfranchising their grief or allowing them to become altogether desensitised to their emotional pain.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that, since schools are physical environments where children spend most of their daytime, social work interventions are needed in schools to reduce the impact of psychosocial factors affecting poor children's academic achievement. The dire infrastructural state and the consequential challenges teachers and learners face in South African schools, such as the one in which the research site for the present study is located, have been expansively detailed in du Plessis and Mestry's (2019) study. However, in du Plessis and Mestry's (2019) research, as is the case in many similar studies, the psychosocial needs of children and the onus on inadequately skilled South African teachers to provide for these needs appear undermined by the South African government (Setlhare, Wood, & Meyer; 2016). To this end, the findings of the reported study raise the alarm for the South African Ministry of Education to work cohesively with the social work sector by formally institutionalising mainstream psychosocial support mechanisms and processes within the schools. To successfully achieve this, teachers must be adequately skilled in identifying and supporting children with emotional, psychological, and educational difficulties that negatively affect their learning (Setlhare, Wood, & Meyer; 2016). Further suggested in the findings of the reported study is that teachers need to be (re)skilled with the necessary skill sets to identify learners suffering from father hunger and paternal deprivation. To support teachers, the Education Ministry must ensure that schools are well-resourced with health professionals to supply psychosocial support to children with psychological and emotional challenges.

Most profoundly, echoing Van den Berg & Makusha's (2018) earlier findings on the state of fathers in South Africa, the findings of the reported study revealed that absent fathers remain a powerful factor affecting impoverished children's emotional and psychological well-being. Hence, to deal with the issue of paternal

disengagement and to address its root cause, the findings of the reported study point to a dire need for a collaboration between the South African government, Non-Governmental Organisations, Non-Profit Organisations, and religious organisations, among other skilled professionals, to initiate, mobilise and conduct, responsible parenting programmes with men and boys. To this end, the reported study recognises the broad and widely accessible (online) evidence in existing research of Non-Governmental Organisations working in South Africa to address the issue of responsible parenting among men. These programs strive to instil a sense of responsibility among men and boys and break the cycle of paternal disengagement for future generations, presently plaguing the lives of the children in the reported study. However, the present study recognises as well that in reports about practically spearheading such initiatives in and among communities – and more particularly in rural-area communities such as the one in the reported study - the role of the South African government appears to be silent. There is thus a need for the South African government to play a more robust and visible role in driving initiatives relating to teaching men and boys about responsible fatherhood and ensuring that they reach deep rural communities, such as the one in which the present study is located.

CONCLUSION

As recognised in the introduction of this paper, the South African government has done well to implement programmes aimed at reducing the financial burdens of education and food security for impoverished households. The hope of these interventions is premised on conjoined beliefs that, for one, formal education will lead to a career that will someday release children from impoverished households from the poverty trap and a belief that children cannot learn on an empty stomach. While this notion may be somewhat valid, the reported study has indicated that redemption from poverty cannot solely be achieved on a satisfied stomach. Instead, in disrupting the cycle of poverty in disadvantaged communities, there needs to be a turn towards nurturing in children a healthy mind, free of trauma, anxiety, anger, and distraction created by parental loss. If not, children like those in the reported study may someday not just remain trapped in an ever-revolving cycle of poverty. Worse still, they may despairingly seek ways to numb their pain and, desensitised to their trauma, may someday, as parents themselves, inflict these on their children's lives. Thus, without psychosocial intervention for children like in the reported study, the cycle of emotional deprivation may whirl towards moral degradation and accompanying social ills, further plunging an already critically poor community into the poverty trap.

DECLARATION

We, the authors, declare that the submitted paper is our original work. It has not been *submitted elsewhere for publication*. As mentioned, the relevant University's Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval for the study. There are no conflicts of interest or funding sources to report. We further confirm that both *authors of this manuscript took part in the research process* and that our inclusion in the publication has been deservedly gained. While we understand that we, as authors, shall retain copyrights, we also acknowledge that the African Journal of Social Work has the sole and exclusive right to publish the work for the full length of the copyright period.

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