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“NOT ALL MEN ARE FATHERS”: EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN WOMEN FROM FAMILIES WITH ABSENT FATHERS

Prof Mankwane DM Makofane, Department of Social Work, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Abstract

A qualitative exploratory-descriptive inquiry was undertaken to gain insight into the experiences of young African women raised in families with absent fathers. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to procure a sample comprising 14 women aged 24 to 41 years. Data were collected through online guiding open-ended questions. The findings suggest that participants have emerged from their experiences as victorious, strong, assertive, empowered and self-reliant individuals whose lives were shaped by their maternal extended families. However, further insight into the manifestation of such attributes in their intimate heterosexual relationships is required to gain insight into their construction of relationships with men.



## **“NOT ALL MEN ARE FATHERS”: EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN WOMEN FROM FAMILIES WITH ABSENT FATHERS**

**Mankwane Makofane**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The word ‘father’ conjures up different images to a child, such as that of a strong man who will love, protect and provide for her needs. Traditionally, fathers are viewed as providers, protectors of their wives and children (Clare, 2000:184-185; Marsiglio & Pleck, 2005:256), role models for their children and contributors to their general wellbeing, especially during the girls’ development (Lopez & Corona, 2012:718). Research has demonstrated the connections between fathers and their children’s development (Pouget, Serbin, Stack & Schwartzman, 2011:173). However, Morrell (2006:18) cautions that the position of a father in the family cannot be determined in terms of his absence or presence, considering that father presence does not mean father involvement (Harris, 2002:125).

In South Africa many children are raised without fathers (Meintjies & Hall, 2010:80), while in the United States (USA), “[t]he large proportion of children who grow up in single-parent families is widely regarded as a major social problem” (Lang & Zagorsky, 2001:254). McLanahan and Schwartz (2002:37) posit that about one-fifth of all children born in the USA will never live with their fathers. Clearly, such magnitude of father absence could have serious repercussions on the development of a country in relation to education, health services and social services. However, this article should not be misconstrued as an attempt to promote the patriarchal nuclear family as a preferred structure to enhance children’s emotional, social, physical and economic outcomes (Perlesz, 2005:25).

It is against this backdrop that selective aspects on fatherhood are discussed. Nielsen (2001, 2007), an expert in father-daughter relationships in the USA, noted that less attention is paid to this phenomenon that is important especially during the early stages of childhood and adolescence (Doherty, Kouneski & Erickson, 2000:570). Fathers contribute towards their daughter’s development by maintaining order through the application of rules, provision of guidance, becoming role models, serving as a link between the family and other individuals, community organisations and the outside world (Lesejane, 2006:179; Lichtenberg, 2008:106; Marsiglio, Amato, Day & Lamb, 2000:1176). Thus a girl child who is brought up by her mother loses out on the father-daughter relationship, which “has the potential to shape interaction patterns that surface as women enter into adult college relationships” (Perkins, 2001). On the other hand, Harris (2002:114) noted that theorists assert that “[m]others raise their daughters and love their sons.”

Nevertheless, the interaction between father and daughter may be difficult because of the manner in which men are raised (Dunleavy, Wanzer, Krezmien & Ruppel, 2011:582). Research shows that men are either not expected to communicate emotionally (Nielsen, 2001; 2005) or are less involved emotionally or less communicative (Way & Gillman, 2000:310). It has also been noted that daughters are reluctant to talk to their fathers about emotions, assuming that they may not be interested (Dunleavy *et al.*, 2011:582) or to share intimate concerns with them (Way & Gillman, 2000:315,326).

The current study was inspired by the increasing number of girl children in South Africa who grow up in the absence of their fathers, and the disconnectedness between the two groups (Ratele, Shefer & Clowes, 2012:554). There is a lack of a South African body of knowledge on the effects of fathers' absence on young women. Most studies focus on the effects of absent father on boys and absent father as a result of migrant labour. The most recent study conducted by Makusha, Richter, Knight, Van Rooyen and Bhana (2013) focuses on adult women and men's experiences with their own fathers and father figures, and how their experiences had influenced women's expectations and men's experiences of fathering in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The concern raised by Nielsen (2005:1) that few social service workers are well prepared to work with girl children and that little attention is paid to father-daughter relationships also prompted the study.

Furthermore, the research was motivated by a general belief among Africans that a woman whose father was absent from home will not be able to have long-lasting relationships with men. As a result, it has been observed that some African parents dissuade their sons from marrying women from such families. Mokgoatšane (2014) confirms the observation, asserting that the fear of parents emanates from the likelihood that some of these women may not have had role models to observe the communication and interaction between husband and wife. In addition, the continuous robust internet discussions on the topic "Don't ever marry a woman who doesn't have a father" and posted messages saying women who were raised in families with absent fathers are "not ideal marriage material" attest to the negative attitudes harboured by some individuals worldwide. The current study, however, sought to explore and describe the experiences of women from such families and to highlight implications for social work practice.

### **Conceptualisation**

Different concepts are utilised to describe the position, roles, functions and responsibilities of a father in the family. Some of the common concepts used by practitioners and researchers in this field are father, fatherhood and fathering. According to Lamb (2000:36), being a father "denotes maturity and confers status in many societies and subcultures." The first part of the previous statement is misleading, as it suggests that fatherhood is tantamount to maturity, which is not always the case. Moreover, Mavungu (2013:68) purports that "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". Furthermore, the South African media do not often portray men in parental roles (Prinsloo, 2006:132).

There is no agreed upon definition of fatherhood and thus researchers understand the concept differently (Rabe, 2006:251). Fatherhood is related to manhood (Morrell, 2006:15) and it is commonly understood as the social role that men assume to care for their children, or as a human and cultural role (Morrell & Richter, 2006:8,18). In the 1990s researchers who focused on fatherhood were influenced by "father involvement", which includes the first domain of paternal involvement or engagement (i.e. direct contact, care giving and shared interactions between father and child) (Jacobs & Kelly, 2006:24), followed by the less direct form of involvement, namely accessibility (i.e. a father's presence and availability to his child) and responsibility (i.e. activities involving

the father's direct care and/or provision of resources for taking care of the child) (Marsiglio *et al.*, 2000:1175). Hence Dowd (2006:917-919) suggests that fatherhood should be defined as the manner of caring for children which relates to the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual care. Fathering as a social construct therefore creates an understanding of the different contexts in which fathers might operate or what is called "the shifting demography of fatherhood" (Marsiglio *et al.*, 2000:1181). Unfortunately, men have reported a limited understanding of the meaning of fathering (Olmstead, Futris & Pasley, 2009:250).

*Social fathering* is a term that has emerged to describe the many ways in which a child may be connected to an adult male (Richter, 2006:54). Grandfathers, uncles and in some instances male educators or priests are men who may fulfil the father role (Richter, 2006:54). On the other hand, definitions for the concept 'father absence' stem from the fact that some parents are never married or did not cohabit, while others are in parental separation or divorced. However, divorce and a father's absence are not similar (Pouget, Serbin, Stack, Ledingham & Schwartzman, 2012:541). For instance, prior to fathers' absence, children of divorced parents may have been exposed to discordant parental relationships (MacCallum & Golombok, 2004:1407). Hence, responses from women whose parents had divorced were not considered for this study.

Absent fathers refer to those who do not interact with their children regularly and thus do not play an important role in their development (Krohn & Bogan, 2001). In their research on *Disrupted relationships: adult daughters and father absence*, East, Jackson and O'Brian (2007a:15) adopted the definition of father absence as "a father being absent from the family home because of parental relationship breakdown". In this inquiry, the concept *absent father* refers to the physical and emotional absence of a biological father during the participants' childhood and/or adolescence due to parental relationship breakdown.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION AND GOAL**

A research question is a concise, interrogative statement developed to direct a study (Grove, Burns & Gray, 2013:708). Thus, the research question that provided a framework and boundaries for the inquiry was: "What are the experiences of young African women from families with absent fathers?" The primary purpose that indicated a road map for the study (Creswell, 2013:134) was to develop insight into the experiences of African women from families with absent fathers and to proffer suggestions for social work practice.

## **RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY**

Based on the limited information on the topic, a qualitative exploratory-descriptive inquiry was conducted. Such an investigation facilitated the understanding of women's experiences from their perspectives (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011:8), discovery of existing multiple realities (Streubert, Speziale & Carpenter, 2007:21) and generation of knowledge. An exploratory design was employed since the topic has not been well investigated (Polit, Beck & Hungler, 2001:19). The descriptive design, on the other hand, facilitated provision of an accurate account of the participants' real-life situations

for purposes of describing what exists (Grove *et al.*, 2013:632; Ritchie & Lewis, 2005:32-33).

The study looked at African women who grew up in families with absent fathers (Carey, 2009:41; Grinnell & Unrau, 2008:552). As only African women participated in the study, the experiences of the Coloured, Indian and White women remain unknown. To procure a sample, purposive sampling was used for its flexibility in the recruitment of participants (Hennink *et al.*, 2011:85) while snowball sampling was utilised for its advantage of reaching out to social networks (Grove *et al.*, 2013:336).

Prior to the distribution of the guiding open-ended questions, a pilot test was conducted with two women from families with absent fathers to determine if questions were well structured and effective for data collection (Hennink *et al.*, 2011:120; Thyer, 2012:7). The findings were analysed and one question was slightly modified for clarity (Kumar, 2013:305). The pilot data did not form part of the inquiry.

Using snowball sampling, the invitation letter and guiding open-ended questions in English were mailed electronically to a few potential participants identified and recruited by the researcher to take part in the study, and to disseminate the invitation to other women who met the criteria. Online communication was appropriate, since it afforded participants an opportunity to express themselves freely. Willis (2011:142) purports that “[t]he social interaction between online personas produces equally fruitful data for social researchers as off-line communication methods”. Thus, the participants’ written responses provided their subjective understanding and meanings based on their experiences (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002:717) of being raised in families with absent fathers. This method resonates with the value of qualitative research of giving participants a voice (Jack, 2010:4).

An invitation letter to prospective participants stipulated the criteria for inclusion as follows: that a woman should have been brought up in a family with an absent father; should be between 21 and 45 years, and be willing to share her experiences in writing. Confidentiality was guaranteed, since the names of the participants would not be mentioned in the reporting of the findings. The participants were encouraged to seek professional assistance in case recounting the past evoked unpleasant feelings.

Eleven participants answered the questions on their own and emailed their responses to the researcher. Four participants from Umtata in the Eastern Cape who did not have access to internet facilities solicited the assistance of a fourth-year student social worker to type and email their responses to the researcher. The student emailed the researcher, requesting permission to assist, which was granted. He was reminded to observe confidentiality, anonymity and management of information, as outlined by various authors (Gibson & Brown, 2009:62; Greener, 2011:146; Hennink *et al.*, 2011:76).

Thirty-two responses from African women were received between July and September 2013. Seventeen were disqualified for not meeting the inclusion criteria, since the participants’ separation with their fathers resulted from parental divorce or death. The researcher read through the participants’ responses as they came through and was able to determine saturation of the data obtained when no new information emerged.

The findings are based on direct storylines written by the participants without any influence from the researcher and this process gives credence to the outcome of the study. To increase credibility of the findings, an independent coder and the researcher independently conducted a thematic content analysis of the qualitative data (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011:153). Thereafter, a telephonic discussion between the two was held to reach consensus on the identified themes and sub-themes.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Table 1 depicts the biographical data of the participants. The themes and sub-themes that emerged from data analysis are presented after that.

**TABLE 1**  
**BIOGRAPHICAL DATA OF THE PARTICIPANTS**

Age and province <sup>1</sup> of participant	Marital status <sup>2</sup>	Gender <sup>3</sup> and age of children (years)	Highest qualification	Employment	Age of participant when father became absent	Relations with father
L - 41 – LP	S	M(4)	Degree in Social Work	Full-time	Never knew him	None
M - 39 – EP	S	M(18, 16, 7,5)	Diploma in Education	Full-time	7 years	Very poor
N - 38 – GP	S	M, F, M(20,5 & 10 months)	Degree in Social Work	Full-time	5 years	Very poor
O - 36 – LP	S	F(10)	Chemical Operator Certificate	Unemployed	4 years	Poor
P - 36 – EP	M	F(18)	D0egree: Social Work	Part-time	5 years	None
Q - 32 – LP	S	M(15,9)	Postgraduate degree: not specified	Unemployed	10 years	None
R - 28 – LP	S	F(8)	Degree in Social Work	Unemployed	12 years	Very poor
S - 27 – EC	S	F(5)	Degree in Social Work	Unemployed	4 years	None
T - 27 – GP	S	None	Degree in Social Work	Full-time	5 years	None
U - 27 – EC	S	M(6)	Degree in Social Work	Full-time	10/11 years	None
V - 26 – LP	S	M(9, 5)	Grade 12	Student: Social Work	13 years	Poor
W- 26 – LP	S	M(7, 4)	Grade 12	Unemployed	Not specified	None
X- 25 – MP	S	None	Grade 12	Student: BSc Chemistry	Not sure	Poor
Y- 24 – MP	S	None	Foundation Phase teacher	One year Learnership: UK company in RSA	Never met him	None

<sup>1</sup> EC – Eastern Cape Province; GP – Gauteng Province; LP – Limpopo Province; MP – MPumalanga Province.

<sup>2</sup> M – Married; S – Single.

<sup>3</sup> F – Female; M – Male.

The responses of 14 participants whose ages ranged between 24 and 41 years from four of the nine provinces in South Africa were considered. Their mean age was 31 years. Seven participants are qualified social workers and one is a student social worker. The participants' educational accomplishment is consistent with Azuka-Obieke's (2013:112) conclusion that many children in single-parent homes develop into successful mature adults.

Four themes and nine sub-themes that emerged from the data are presented below, supported by the storylines.

## **THEME 1: DESCRIPTION OF CONTEXT OF THE PARTICIPANTS' UPBRINGING**

Of the 14 participants, 12 were raised by their mothers with assistance and support from their families. One participant was raised by her mother without the support of relatives stating that "I grew up with my mother [meaning raised by her mother] and my mother filled both parts [referring to the role of mother and father]." The last participant was raised by her uncle.

The participants' mothers and maternal grandmothers formed strong teams in raising and caring for the participants, as they shared the same values as illustrated by the following storylines:

*"My mother and my grandmother were both responsible for my upbringing. She [maternal grandmother] made sure that we go to school daily and always communicated with my mother about what we needed at that time, who will then make sure that she provides where she could. She [maternal grandmother] shared the same values with my mother and they always agreed on a way of bringing us up."*

*"From birth to age 12, I was living with my grandmother ... and I knew that she [mother] would come around now and again. I started living with my mother when I was 12."*

The findings confirm Louw's (2013:637) assertion that, for a long time, child-rearing in South Africa has been characterised by multi-caregivers in the lives of children, such as grandparents and members of the extended family.

### **Sub-theme 1.1: Extended family members**

Reliance of mothers on their families for support in raising children is important and prevalent among Africans. The participants' grandparents, uncles and aunts played a major role in their upbringing, as demonstrated below.

*"...with the help of my two uncles, of course. My two sisters also helped my granny in my rearing as they were responsible for taking me to school."*

*"Both grandparents played a pivotal role in my upbringing. I had a close bond with the two of them as well as my uncles. I had a lovely one (childhood) being brought up by my grandparents. I was the first grandchild and enjoyed all the care, attention and love."*



*“I lived with my grandmother for a couple of years and my aunts and uncles were taking care of my needs while my mother completed her studies. I was very fortunate to have the family I have.”*

The findings are consistent with those of Silverstein and Auerbach (1999:397) that a father is not essential in the life of a child and that such a responsibility can be executed by a responsible adult who provides a stable environment for the child. This was the case in this inquiry, as 13 participants had a father figure. Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine the extent and value of support from extended families (Maudeni, 2001:40). This is because of the recent economic and demographic changes that have “exhausted the support mechanisms that were traditionally offered by the extended family” (Mokomane, 2012:248).

### **Sub-Theme 1.2: Description of nature of upbringing**

All the participants seemed to have been brought up in stable, nurturing and protective environments in which their mothers, grandparents and maternal relatives joined forces in influencing their development and catering for their basic needs, as demonstrated by the storylines.

*“My granny was very protective of us (me and my two sisters). I was taught to respect my elders and my granny imparted to us the values of knowing Christ and casting everything on Him.”*

*“My grandfather was a strict educator and I was also subjected to this too at home. At an early age I was expected to read newspapers & books and thereafter narrate to him according to my understanding. This had to be done in English. My love for Sunday Times newspaper was formed then. This has helped me greatly and I think it is the reason that today I am confident and eloquent, as people often remark. Sometimes I feel that I have failed my grandfather with my career stagnation.”*

*“Having a child out of wedlock is not something my family encourages and me being that one child who was a victim of that I feel they felt obliged to protect me and they did that and I was given all the love any girl child wants. I had my uncles who protected and still protect me as their own even now.”*

*“As a young girl my upbringing was good because I had people [referring to grandparents] who took care of me.”*

*“I grew up in a protective home which provided me with all my needs, and where discipline was installed.”*

Children raised by grandparents progressed better across health, academic and behaviour than those raised by a single parent (Solomon & Marx cited by Stern, 2008:13). This may be attributed to the loving, stable and structured environments provided by grandparents to their grandchildren.

## **THEME 2: DESCRIPTION OF THE PARTICIPANTS' AWARENESS OF FATHERS' ABSENCE**

The age of onset of fathers' absence varied among participants. It appeared as though a few fathers had been intermittently involved in the participants' lives during childhood. For instance, 9 participants realised complete father absence from home when they were between the age of 4 and 10 years, while 2 were 12 and 13 years old. One participant did not provide an answer, while another was not sure when she realised her father's absence (Table 1).

One of the two participants who never knew their fathers seemed to be grappling with unanswered questions about her identity and lamented that *"I really do not have an idea as this is a subject [referring to the identity of her father] for no discussion with my mom."* Furthermore, she indicated that:

*"I have never met him or his family. I don't know how ugly he looks, whether he is short, tall, educated or a drunkard. I am short and my maternal family is tall and I guess I took after him ... what was mom thinking dating a short guy whereas she is tall? I have an African nose that I can't match it with my maternal because they have nicely shaped noses. I Love it though. It would have been nice to match it with my dad's or aunt's."*

Such a sentiment was expressed by an adolescent girl in Way and Gillman's (2000:320) study who said "I think everybody should know their father, biological father. If he was there to make me, he should be there to take care of me."

On the other hand, another participant was told "lies" by her relatives probably in order to give her a sense of belonging as she grew up referring to her uncle as her father. She wrote:

*"My family brought me up telling me my father was my mother's eldest brother [uncle]. I grew up calling my cousin my sister and her brothers were my brothers too. Today the relationship, even though they [are] not live [staying] in my town [they] are still my brothers and sisters, nothing has changed."*

Two participants who met their fathers in their teens indicated that:

*"I actually met him when I was 13 years old. That was the first time I met a person called my 'father'."*

*"I met him for the first time at the end of my 7<sup>th</sup> grade (age 13). At that point I thought things would change because he seemed eager to be involved in our lives."*

A participant who accidentally learned about her father at age 13 wrote that:

*"I turned 13 years ... My grandfather was a father figure ... but nobody talked to me about my biological father. One day I heard my [maternal] aunt arguing with my mother and she was telling my mother to tell me who my father is. Eventually my aunt told me about him."*

Researchers regard fathers' involvement in the lives of their children throughout childhood and adolescence as beneficial for children (Doherty *et al.*, 1998:279). However, from their study MacCallum and Golombok (2004:1407) concluded that "being without a resident father from infancy does not seem to have negative consequences for children". There is also a notion that African-American fathers are also peripheral in their children's lives, since most of them do not live with their children (Thomas, Krampe & Newton, 2008:530).

The participants' responses to the effects of fathers' absence yielded three sub-themes that are discussed in the following section.

### **Sub-theme 2.1: No influence of fathers' absence on the participants**

Social fathering was a reality for 13 participants whose grandfathers and maternal uncles fulfilled the father role; thus they did not miss the physical and emotional presence of their fathers, as illustrated by the quotations below:

*"It was not a big deal, especially with my uncles and people around me didn't make me feel like I needed a father, they shared their fathers with me. It didn't hurt me and I think it's because I know that my fathers who are my uncles love and care for me more than the man who is my father and that's enough."*

*"I did not feel a difference whether he was present or absent, firstly because it was always a full house meaning an uncle, a grandmother, an aunt, cousins and nephews, so you did not really feel that there is something missing."*

The participants' experiences support Redpath, Morrell, Jewkes and Peacock's (2008:33) assertion that "the engagement or presence of a father or father figure in the life of a child" has a positive effect on the child's life, such as academic achievement, physical and emotional health as well as cognitive development. Conversely, in an attempt to dispel the fear of fathers' absence in families, Perlesz (2005:3) argues that there is no "essential need for fathers"; however, he proposes that an attempt should be made to socially and emotionally reconnect children with their fathers.

### **Sub-theme 2:2: Financial impact**

Few participants indicated having missed their fathers' financial support. They instead sympathised with their mothers and grandmothers as sole providers. One participant wrote that:

*"It was too difficult in my life without my father. I stayed together with my grandmother and my other two siblings. My grandmother worked so hard in order to be able to feed us."*

Another participant expressed a need for her father's financial support and not him as a person. She indicated that:

*"I never felt a need for a father. It is only now that I am financially constrained that I feel his absence so that he could help me financially as sometimes my mother is not coping."*

This statement is consistent with the view that children who grow up with a single parent are likely to experience social and economic disadvantages (Lang & Zagorsky, 2001:254).

However, the economic deprivation in single-parent families “is not due to the physical absence of one parent but to the absence of the economic resources generated by the absent parent” (Mandara & Murray, 2000:476), as evinced by this excerpt:

*“Financially my mother was the only person responsible for my upbringing. My mother did a great job so I wouldn’t feel like not having a father was a disadvantage and that I had everything I wanted and needed.”*

However, Madhavan, Townsend and Garey (2008:648) caution that the father’s presence in the home should not be regarded as a measure of his financial support to his children, but rather that the father’s residence and financial support for his children should be considered as two separate issues of a father’s connection to his children.

### **Sub-theme 2.3: Painful experiences**

Fathers’ absence left some participants emotionally wounded as they felt lost, unloved, hurt, rejected and betrayed by their unreliable fathers. Krohn and Bogan (2001) are of the view that girls with absent fathers grow up without receiving attention, care and loving interaction from a man on a daily basis. Thus they feel unloved and, as such, their emotional wellbeing may be adversely affected. One participant, who met her father when she was 13 years old, hates her father as she felt betrayed. She mentioned:

*“He and my mother went as far as agreeing to share the costs of my high school. This lasted 6 months, he disappeared without honouring his part of the agreement. He resurfaced about a year later with more promises and a great attitude to go with it. That too didn’t last long. And when this happened for the third time I decided not to entertain him and that also led to me hating him because I felt like he wanted to be a father when it was convenient for him and never wanted to do any of the hard work.”*

East *et al.* (2007b:254) also found that, because of the inconsistent contact between fathers and daughters during childhood and adolescence, adult daughters experienced disrupted relationships. For instance, one of the participants in the study by East *et al.* (2007a:15) stated that “He always let me down: a constant source of hurt”.

Another participant attributed her low self-esteem to the abandonment by her father and wrote:

*“...but when he came back and disappeared again, it troubled me. I felt rejected as a young girl and did not feel I was worth anything. That led me to look down on myself and low self-esteem emerged. I was doing well at school but did not see that counting for anything because I had been abandoned.”*

However, this finding is in contrast to that of Mandara and Murray (2000:480), which shows that parental marital status had no significant effect on the girls’ self-esteem. Conversely, the study by Way and Gillman (2000:328-329) revealed that a father’s

presence or absence shaped the way daughters thought about themselves, their relationships and the world as a whole.

Some of the participants who recounted the hurt they had endured growing up wrote that:

*“It hurts listening to people speaking fondly about their fathers and yet you don’t have a story about your own.”*

*“When I was young I would hear other children talking about their fathers and I would not have anything to say. That used to hurt a lot.”*

Most of the children in Richter and Smith’s (2006:161) study expressed the desire for their fathers to spend time with them. This sentiment was also expressed by the participants who felt deprived of fatherly love, attention, quality time and sharing of their dreams with their fathers, as evinced by the following excerpts:

*“What I missed from him was love because every child deserves to be loved by both parents but he was nowhere to be found.”*

*“I missed being with him, spending more time with him, sharing with him about my dreams maybe.”*

*“I was feeling very lonely, neglected, lack of love, ignored.”*

Way and Gillman (2000:321) found that adolescent girls would like to have conversations with their fathers about school and various aspects of life except intimate topics. In a 15-year study daughters raised the fact that they had not spent “private time” with their fathers (Nielsen, 2007). However, numerous studies reviewed by Marsiglio *et al.* (2000:1184) suggest that the interaction of non-resident fathers with their children is more important than the amount of time they spend together.

Another participant lamented her father not being available to protect her, which is a fundamental need and right for every child, by indicating that: *“I wished he was there for me, especially when I was around 16 years, because my stepfather was very abusive towards all of us at home.”* As a result of a lack of father-daughter relationship, the participant’s father failed to fulfil one of his basic responsibilities, namely to protect his child against threatening forces (Lesejane, 2006:176), such as abuse by a stepfather.

A participant who has never known her father seems to have unresolved issues, as pointed out by her response *“I guess knowing him as a person, being able to talk to him about life and just having someone to father you completes you as a child, a woman and a wife.”* The finding highlights the participant’s innermost feelings of deprivation of a father, which has resulted in the overwhelming experience of incompleteness as a human being.

#### **Sub-theme 2.4: Impact on sense of identity**

Even though most participants seem to be well-adjusted and successful individuals, personal identity and a lack of a sense of belonging remain challenges for some. For instance, a participant who has never known her father seems to be carrying a huge burden of resentment and emotional scars as a result of deep-seated unanswered

questions. She highlights the fact that one's knowledge of one's family history and health risks is critical, a matter that seems to be ignored by many, as reflected in the storyline:

*“There comes a time in one's life that you want to identify yourself with your family. This makes you feel that you belong somewhere even if you may not have close relationship with your paternal family. Knowing where you come from completes a puzzle in one's life especially in terms of character, personality and most importantly medically. The latter enables you to know what you are predisposed to in the likes of chronic illnesses and personality disorders.”*

This finding corroborates that of East et al. (2007a:16), whose participants expressed the lack of shared histories with their fathers. This could be a major challenge among Africans, who believe that a child, who has not been formally introduced to her father's family or ancestors, is likely to experience mishaps throughout her life. For instance, in Xhosa culture a ritual called *imbeleko* is held after the birth of a child. At this ceremony an elder in the family calls upon the ancestors to bless and protect the child (Ramphela & Richter, 2006:78).

Conversely, growing up without a father had become a source of strength and opportunity for one of the participants who wrote:

*“I was bitter that my biological father did not take care of me; on the other hand I thank him that I became a very strong young woman who believes in hard work and not let your background to determine the person you want to become. I will never deny my children to have a relationship with their fathers because I do believe both parents play a role in one's life.”*

Another participant indicated a positive response of being committed to promoting healthy relationships between children and their fathers. She is on a mission to raise awareness among young men about the significant role that fathers play in their children's lives, as encapsulated below:

*“I think this has shaped me to be open to my son about his dad. I wouldn't want him to miss out on this. My wish is that he could enjoy a solid relationship with him [father]. I have grown to be focused and to reach to young men and educate them about the importance of being in the lives of their kids.”*

This statement supports Ngobeni's (2006:149-153) assertion about the important role women play in raising and teaching their sons to become respectable and responsible men.

Essentially, aspects of fathering related to “moral and ethical socialisation and transitions to independence and autonomy” (Richter, 2006:58) were provided by maternal uncles who had played a significant role in the lives of the participants by instilling a sense of worth in them, as evinced by the response that

*“My uncles have helped me grow into a lovely woman and they always told me to never sell myself short of anything. This is important because girl children need at least one male figure to give them direction. The rest is up to them.”*

Clearly, the assertion by Krohn and Bogan (2001) that meaning and interaction with men cannot be learned from biological fathers alone holds true, as participants have learned from their social fathers.

Another participant provided an inconclusive explanation regarding the connection between her decision not to engage in a heterosexual relationship and father's absence by stating that

*"I wouldn't say it [father's absence] has affected me, but I have never had [intimate] relationships with male figures. I have stayed long before deciding on what it is that I want to do, but after 21 years I decided to date in the same gender I'm in because I feel comfortable there."*

This finding corroborates Mattox's (cited by Krohn & Bogan, 2001) view that "[m]any lesbian relationships result more from a daughter's outright rejection by her father rather than from her identification with his masculine role". Nonetheless, this finding requires further empirical investigation.

### **THEME 3: THE PARTICIPANTS' DESCRIPTIONS OF PRESENT RELATIONSHIPS WITH FATHERS**

Of major concern is that the father-daughter relationship was non-existent among the majority of the participants. Eight participants did not have a relationship with their fathers; three described their relationship as poor and four as very poor (Table 1). The finding is consistent with Richter and Morrell's (2006:2) statement that "[n]ot all fathers are proud to be fathers, and unfortunately not all fathers want to participate in the lives of their children. In fact, most South African men do not seem especially interested in their children."

Earlier on Doherty *et al.* (1998) reached a conclusion that "[o]verall, there appears to be a strong negative effect of non-marital fathering on the father-child bond." This assumption is supported by a participant's disheartening description of how her father's conduct inhibits their relationship. She stated:

*"I do see him when I go to the village where I was born ... he is not in a good condition. Whenever I see him he is always drunk. Sometimes I find myself passing him on the road."*

Unfortunately, such behaviour is likely to diminish the participant's respect towards her father.

Because of the lack of a bond between fathers and daughters, some of the participants blocked out their fathers' existence or considered them dead, as evinced by the following excerpts:

*"We don't have a close relationship. I even forget that he exists and we rarely communicate."*

*"No relationship at all. I don't know what he looks like, if he's dead or alive."*

*“I feel that he is such a coward and irresponsible father. So, he is dead and buried to me.”*

These expressions signify the emotional detachment, denial, deep-seated hurt and pain that, if unattended, are likely to interfere with one’s intimate relationships. Previous studies also show the diminished father-daughter relationship between absent fathers and daughters (East *et al.*, 2007b:255; Krohn & Bogan, 2001).

#### **THEME 4: THE INFLUENCE OF FATHERS’ ABSENCE ON THE PARTICIPANTS’ OWN RELATIONSHIPS WITH MEN**

The participants reported divergent opinions on how fathers’ absence had influenced their perceptions of men and/or their relationships with men. Only one participant was married at the time of the study (Table 1). Thus, the impact of fathers’ absence on the women’s decision to enter into matrimony (which was not part of the current inquiry) is unknown and requires investigation. Three sub-themes that emerged under this theme are discussed below.

##### **Sub-theme 4.1: Participants experienced no influence from fathers’ absence**

Contrary to the general belief that women from absent father families are likely to loath men, many participants demonstrated maturity and understanding by not generalising their experiences to all men, as captured in the following excerpts:

*“It has not negatively impacted my perception on men because we had uncles, who were morally supportive of us, our pastor at church also played a father role in our lives, so that has helped me not to think that all men are capable of what he did to us, but I am angry with him in particular.”*

*“I have never had a bad perception about men and I continue to look at men positively, except those who abuse women and children. Generally, I seem to have a great view of men and I am raising one and I endeavour to instil good values in him.”*

*“The absence of my father did not really influence my perspective of men, because I grew up with 2 older brothers and I have a lot of guy friends growing up. So I got to see that not all men are like my father or bad. I was able to see the good side of men.”*

The findings demonstrate that the relationship the participants had with their social fathers who were their role models helped them to have a positive view of men in general. Furthermore, evidence points to the fact that fathers determine how females view the opposite sex, the outside world and themselves (Krohn & Bogan, 2001). One participant who had good relationships with men stated that

*“I believe I have strong relationships with men but tend to be angry at those who neglect their kids. I had a few failed relationships but I can’t pin this to the absence of my father in my life. I do not harbour anger towards men.”*

Besides the positive influence of the social fathers on the participant, this finding shows the participant’s level of maturity.



### **Sub-theme 4.2: Participants' lack of trust in men**

Trust is important in all kinds of relationships because it is closely related to respect. The impact of fathers' absence resulted in some participants not trusting men, depriving themselves of loving or being loved because of fear of desertion and hurt. These fears will undoubtedly have a detrimental effect on their intimacy with men, as described in the following storylines.

*"I do not trust men and I have a fear that they will desert you if you depend on them. This has affected me in such a way that I prefer to be independent and I find it hard to appreciate even if a man do[es] things for me in good faith."*

*"I feel that I cannot put all my trust in men, i.e. guys I go out with. I make sure I never rely on anyone for survival, even when we are not dating anymore; I must still be able to continue with my life and never feel like a part of me is gone or stagnant."*

*"However, I am unable to be in a stable committed relationship with men. I don't allow myself to fall in love with them because I am scared that I will not be able to handle a heartbreak which in my mind is inevitable for people that fall in love, and also have a fear of them leaving me once I get comfortable."*

These expressions are consistent with those of participants in the study by East *et al.* (2007a:16), who experienced "difficulties around their relationships with men including having distrust in men; fear of abandonment; having negative feelings towards men". According to Dunleavy *et al.* (2011:582), evidence points to the fact that fathers have a greater effect on their daughters' ability to relate with other men. Hence, the age at which a daughter loses her father is significant, since it has a bearing on her perception of males (Krohn & Bogan, 2001). Furthermore, girls who had little contact with their fathers had difficulty forming lasting relationships with men (Krohn & Bogan, 2001).

The consequence of fathers' absence is underscored by a poignant response from one participant who said that

*"It made me realise that not all men are fathers. And some men don't care about their own blood children. But fathers are important – those absent fathers hurt their children in so many ways."*

The finding supports Richter and Morrell's (2006:2) view that not all men are proud to be fathers or to participate in the lives of their children or show interest in them.

### **Sub-theme 4.3: Mothers' negative influence on the participants' perception of men**

A strong maternal influence on a girl's perceptions of men is captured in the following response:

*"I did not have any perception about men in general until my mother filled my mind with [an idea] that men are dogs because they are irresponsible and its only then that I started to realize some men are not good."*

This finding confirms written feedback that Nielsen (2005) received from students who had enrolled for a course in family studies that revealed their increased awareness of the “negative impact their mothers have had on certain aspects of their father-daughter relationship”.

## **DISCUSSION**

The aim of the current study was to gain insight into the experiences of women brought up in families with absent fathers. Overall, the participants shared a balanced account of their experiences of being brought up in families with absent fathers.

The findings revealed that, firstly, thirteen were brought up by their maternal grandfathers and/or relatives who provided for their basic needs as well as overwhelming, unwavering support and unconditional love. Secondly, thirteen participants had social fathers during their childhood, namely their maternal grandfathers and uncles; thus they were influenced by a father figure throughout their development. Thirdly, none of the fourteen participants received any form of assistance and support from their paternal grandparents and relatives. Fourthly, even though some of the participants felt a void in their lives because they felt unloved, abandoned and rejected by their fathers, they emerged victorious, strong, empowered and self-reliant. Fifthly, the findings suggest that women who were brought up in families with absent fathers have varied perceptions about men. Sixthly, the ramification of the participants’ experiences is that some do not trust men and this may be detrimental to their intimate relationships with men.

Even though the participants benefitted from having a father figure during childhood, this should not in any way overshadow the lack of father-daughter connection, the lack of father involvement, as explained by Marsiglio *et al.* (2000:1175), in the development of a daughter, and the non-existing relationship between daughters and their paternal grandparents and relatives. Consequently, children end up not knowing their history in relation to their roots, identities, clan names, totems, values and norms. Furthermore, the burden carried by the maternal relatives in caring for children of absent fathers is a major concern. Therefore, mothers should encourage the father-daughter relationship.

Despite the fact that the participants have emerged from their experience as strong and independent women, their distrust of men remains a concern. Hence, a brief discussion on the implications for social work practice is presented.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE**

Intimate heterosexual relationships are beset with challenges that, if not properly managed, may lead to irreconcilable conflict. The lack of trust in men expressed by some participants places them at risk of inadvertently sabotaging or thwarting their relationships with male partners. It would, therefore, be futile to attempt to engage a young woman in, for instance, resolving the conflict between her and her partner without understanding her background regarding her upbringing, as this has implications for her understanding of relationships between men and women. Therefore, social workers should first acquire knowledge about father-daughter relationships (Nielsen, 2005:1). Institutions of higher learning should design and offer short courses with Continuing Professional Development (CPD) points in this

area to enhance the social workers' knowledge and skills. Such training will enable social workers to engage women in the exploration, assessment and negotiation of appropriate intervention strategies.

The assessment process starts at the beginning of the social worker's interaction with the client to facilitate an explanation and understanding of the client's problem (Kadushin & Kadushin, 2013:189). The main tasks during this process are presented in the Table 2 below.

**TABLE 2**  
**MAIN TASKS TO BE ACHIEVED THROUGH ASSESSMENT**

Trevithick (2012:176-177)	Zastrow (2014:70)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interpretation and analysis of information received</li> <li>• Clarification of the problem</li> <li>• Identification of the collaborative framework to be adopted</li> <li>• Identification and agreement on set goals and an action plan</li> <li>• Implementation strategy</li> <li>• Evaluation of effectiveness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collection, organisation and interpretation of client data</li> <li>• Assessment of client's strengths and limitations</li> <li>• Development of mutually agreed upon intervention goals and objectives</li> <li>• Selection of appropriate intervention strategies</li> </ul>

During the implementation of tasks, it is imperative to incorporate Zastrow's second task on assessment of the client's strengths and limitations, and the last one by Trevithick on the evaluation of the intervention. A possibility for a referral to another professional for further assessment should be explored when such a need arises.

Social workers should raise awareness among women regarding the importance of a father-daughter relationship by promoting the social and emotional reconnection of children with their fathers through "collaborative explorations with clients around the particular roles fathers might play in their children's lives and which of the roles could be supported and enhanced" (Perlesz, 2005:25). Furthermore, this should be negotiated on a case-by-case basis. This suggestion is supported by the finding in Makusha *et al.* (2013:154) in which women expressed a wish for the fathers of their children to be emotionally available for their children as opposed to being "distant breadwinners" by providing financial support only.

The enforcement of the Maintenance Act (Act No 99 of 1998) by the Department of Justice leaves much to be desired. Women from the lower socio-economic group find it difficult to access these services. Those who are financially independent appoint lawyers to represent them in court to force their children's fathers to maintain their children. In the USA men who abdicate their responsibilities of maintaining their children are called "deadbeat dads" (Doherty *et al.*, 1998:282).

Social workers should show a renewed interest in the father's role and promote the children's rights-based practice by collaborating with the Department of Justice officials to find ways of assisting many children to receive financial assistance from their fathers,

such as payment for their education that would make them financially independent in future. Grandparents and maternal relatives are no longer in a position to assist in rearing and providing for the needs of children with absent fathers as was the case with the participants in this study.

## CONCLUSION

The South African family requires attention, considering that the fathers of all 14 participants had not been involved in their lives. This phenomenon has impacted on their identities and has the potential to have a negative effect on their intimate heterosexual relationships. The ripple effect of the fathers' failure to maintain their children will increase the number of children depending on social assistance, which will place a strain on the country's resources.

Because of the limited nature of this study, it is recommended that studies should be conducted in the following areas: a comprehensive (including all race groups) exploration and description of the experiences of young women who have been brought up in families with absent fathers; how the father-daughter relationships and/or relationships with social fathers have prepared them for intimate heterosexual relationships; and the role of African fathers in raising the girl child.

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*Prof Mankwane DM Makofane, Department of Social Work, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa.*