



EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS WHO GREW UP IN FATHER ABSENT HOMES

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of female university students at a selected university in Zimbabwe who grew up for a larger part of their childhood without their biological fathers. The research adopted an explorative case study design and used semi-structured interviews to collect data on the lived experiences of the students. A total of fifteen participants aged between 20 and 25 years were selected for this study using snowballing sampling technique. Data was analysed using the thematic content approach. Results indicated that the majority of female students who grew up in father absent homes turned out to be resilient as they had gone through difficult periods in their lives. The nature of father absence had varying effects on the female students with those who were abandoned by their fathers expressing anger and sometimes even hatred towards the father. A common feature among all the participants was that they had unstable romantic relationships and some looked up to their boyfriends to fill the void left by their absent fathers. This study recommends that future researchers should explore the psycho-social differences that exist between women who grew up in father absent homes and those that grew up with their fathers.

Keywords: emotional detachment; father absence; psychosocial; students

Introduction

In the past two decades and beyond, a number of marriages have been ending in divorce, parents; especially fathers have been migrating to foreign lands in search of greener pastures and there has been a growing preference for new families which lack a strong father (CDC, 2015; Popenoe, 2009). The

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aforementioned trends have led to a phenomenon of father absence in the affected children's lives. The trends are leading to a disappearance of fathers in the girl child life.

Father absence has been defined differently by various scholars with issues regarding the differing definitions being on the question of the length of time that warrants a condition to be labeled as father absence as well as the reason of the absence of the father. The other issue which creates debate is whether father presence is equivalent to father involvement. Fathers who are present but not involved may just as be as good as absent fathers (Makofane, 2015). According to Mancini (2010), absent fathers either do not usually stay with their children or stay far away for long periods of time. This include those fathers who may be divorced, incarcerated, separated, travel regularly for business and are absent at home much more than they are present.

Father absence in a homestead has psychological and sociological effects on children's behaviour. This usually leads to the deterioration of the child's self awareness and self esteem. The term father absence encompasses a number of aspects and literature does not only classify it as the absence due to death or separation only but rather it brings out many other reasons that are proved valid with today's generation (Landale, 2011). There are several causes of their absence in the household, for example, death, divorce, resettlement, among others (Molongoana, 2015). Thus they are many aspects which include family backgrounds, poverty and inability to take responsibility of their children that can be linked to father absence though we are yet to understand more on this matter.

Fathers generally have as much or more influence than mothers on many aspects of their daughters' lives. For example, the father has the greater impact on the daughter's ability to be confident, and to relate well to the male counterparts, well-fathered daughters are usually more confident, and elicit positive behaviours, and more successful in school and in their careers than the former (Nielsen, 2007).

Moreover, the presence of a father can help in building the morals of a daughter and their absence leads to some incongruence in their ability to cope well with life situations (Krohn & Bogan, 2001). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the share of children living in mother-only households has risen from 8 percent in 1960 to 23 percent in 2010 (Freakonomics, 2011).

A father's involvement with his children is believed to be closely linked to all kinds of beneficial outcomes, from higher educational achievement, improved social and emotional well-being, to lower incidences of delinquency, risk taking, and other problem behaviours (Holborn & Eddy, 2011).

In the western societies, daughters who have little or no contact with their father have colossal complications forming long-term relations with men despite the fact that the opposite works well for daughters with present fathers (Krohn & Bogan, 2001). If this representation is encouraging and affectionate, a girl will view the differing sex with confidence and dependence. If the representation is pessimistic, the girl will view the opposite sex with apprehension and distrust. It seems then that girls are going to have expectations of how they will be treated and valued by men.

Father absence has also been on the rise in Africa, with Namibia having the highest number of non-resident fathers in Africa followed by South Africa. In Namibia, only about a third of pre-school children co-reside with their fathers (Makusha & Richter, 2015). Here in Africa, the causes of father absence are more or less related to those in the Western world with a few more factors that point to the peculiarities of this continent. Labour migration, violence, abandonment, AIDS, civil wars, poverty and unemployment have been the leading causes of father absence in Africa (Hosegood & Madhavan, 2010). Research findings in Africa show divergent views on the effects of father absence on children. Makusha and Richter (2015) argue that having children living apart from fathers, especially due to migrant labor does not automatically mean that the children are being neglected or not being cared for by their fathers, especially given that most migrant laborers return their earnings to their families in the form of remittances. They further argue that father absence does not equate to a break in social connectedness between a father and child.

In South Africa 36% of children are raised without fathers (Meintjies & Hall, 2010). Clearly, the indication is that such children will develop differently from those who are raised by their fathers. However, Makofane (2015) argues 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. Nevertheless, father involvement is a very difficult variable to measure because of its subjectivity. In a study in Capetown, South Africa, Madhavan, Townsend and Garey (2012), posit that, the absence of a father in a child's life, physical or emotional, can profoundly disadvantage that child in

adulthood, and they also tend to be vulnerable to many societal problems including alcohol and drug addiction, promiscuity, teenage pregnancy, crime and violence.

Zimbabwe has not been spared from this father absence trend. Zanamwe and Devillard (2009) estimate that 28% of children in Zimbabwe could be emerging from father absent homes. Divorce, migration and other socio-economic challenges have led to the absence of fathers in families. In boys, it is known that father absence leads to criminality during adulthood, (Schwartz, 2004). In addition, studies have shown the effects of absent parenting on children (Nordahl, Zambrana, & Forgatch, 2016; Makofane, 2015; Makusha & Ritcher, 2015; Nyanjaya & Masango, 2012), however, no study known to the researcher in Zimbabwe and probably a few in the region has specifically focused on the experiences of women who grew up in father absent homes. The current study was inspired by the increasing number of girl children in Zimbabwe who grow up in the absence of their fathers, and the disconnectedness between the two groups (Ratele, Shefer, & Clowes, 2012).

Objectives

The specific objectives of this study were:

- i. To explore the emotional experiences of university students who grew up in father absent homes
- ii. To reveal the educational experiences of university students who grew up in father absent homes
- iii. To unveil the social experiences of university students who grew up in father absent homes

Method

Population

The target population of this research were female university student at a local Zimbabwean university who grew up in father absent homes with their ages ranging from 19 to 25 years.

Sample and sampling techniques

A total of fifteen (15) female students participated in this study. Participants were identified using the snowballing sampling technique. All the participants were university students in level 2 and level 4.

Data gathering instrument

The study adopted the semi-structured interviews to collect in depth information about the experiences of university students who grew up in father absent homes.

Interviews in qualitative research enabled the researchers to acquire detailed personal information.

Procedure

The researchers met each participant individually before the interviews and informed them about the research. Participants were then informed in detail what the research was all about and that they were free to participate or not. This was done verbally. In addition, where clarity was demanded in the event of failure to interpret the questions, further probing was done to clear ambiguity. Permission from the University was granted and consent forms were given to the participants. Permission to audiotape was granted which saved as a backup plan and notes were taken during the interview and the questions were readily available.

Design

The study was informed by the Qualitative research paradigm. The qualitative research paradigm mainly focuses on discovering and understanding the experiences, perspectives, and thoughts of participants (Harwell, 2011).

The researchers then specifically employed an explorative case study design. According to Yin (2003), an explorative case study is used to explore those situations in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear, single set of outcomes. This design enabled the researchers to gain in-depth knowledge about the subjective experiences of women who grew up in father absent homes.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse data. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analysis method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns

within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It minimally organizes and describes data in rich detail. Some of the themes which emerged include social experiences of growing up without a father and adjusting to the life without a father. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants.

Results and discussion

The results of this study show that women who grew up without their fathers experience psycho-social strain however they manage to adjust to that experience with resilience.

Factors that lead to absence of fathers in homes

Death proved to be the most prevalent factor that led to father absence. Some respondents pointed to death as the factor but amongst them some attributed father absence to have been caused by an illness then others attributed father absence to road accidents. One respondent, (Ruth) explained that “...my father passed on when I was just 4years old after a long illness”. Molongoane (2015) is for the view that death is a contributor to father absence.

Divorce was attributed as another reason of father absenteeism. One respondent (Tecla) said, “...ever since my dad divorced with my mum, I have been seeing him very infrequently, sometimes just once after six months”. Four other respondents also concurred that they were separated from their fathers due to divorce. Harper and Fine (2006), assert that divorce is a major reason for father absenteeism in Westernised societies.

Parental migration was also seen to a major contributor to father absence. Three respondents noted that they lived without their father due to the fact that they migrated to South Africa and Botswana. Raviro said, “My dad went to South Africa about six years ago, at first he used to communicate with us through the phone but of late he has been quiet...”. Studies have shown that parental migration is a common cause for parental absence in the developing world (Batistella & Conaco, 1998). Zirima (2012) argues that the economic hardships that have continually plagued Zimbabwe has led to an absence of parents in children’s lives.

Emotional experiences

This research found out that students who emerged from father absent homes were anxious, distressed and worried due to the situations they encountered. As noted in the following dialogues:

“...sometimes when I think about my father I feel empty, I feel as if I lack something as he left us when I was still in primary school”.

“I really feel the gap of not having him around”.

“....some of the times I will be thinking about him during lectures...I find it difficult to concentrate when I start thinking about my dad”.

“It was not easy being separated from my father at such an early age...I feel distressed when I think about him”.

From the expressions noted above, there is a sense of regret that is emanating from the respondents who believe that their lives would have been emotionally richer if their fathers were present. According to Holborn and Eddy (2011), children who grew up in father absent homes are more likely to experience a number of instabilities and among these are exerted feelings of sadness, and loneliness.

Rudo, a respondent who said that her father abandoned them expressed that, *“I am angry with my father because he left us when we needed him most....i do not think I will be able to forgive him”.*

It can also be noted that respondents who were abandoned may express feelings of anger at higher proportion than other respondents who would have failed to stay with their fathers due to other factors such as migration or death.

One of the respondent clearly stated that if her father had been alive, he would have offered her emotional support. *“...I believe if my dad was around I wouldn't be so distressed by some life events such as heartbreaks the way it affects me now...I am sure he would be supporting me”.*

This shows that the father is not only there to provide financial or material things but he is also there to provide emotional and psychological support.

Ellis, Bates, Dodge, Fergusson, Horwood, Gregory, Pettit and Woodward (2003) study revealed that fathers' presence in children's lives is essential as the child would be developing and suggest that father absence has a number of outcomes for children and adolescents. Fathers determine how their

daughters view the world and themselves; it is not only a matter of a self-concept but rather how they interpret the world, or life situations.

Respondents also expressed that having a father around helped to create sense of rootedness or belonging.

One of the respondents noted that,

“I think having a father was necessary because some of my friends had their dads, so I wanted to have him just as them, I’m sure having my father around would help to know where I come from, my relatives and to know where I really belong to”.

This means that the father brings a sense of belonging to a child which also helps them in their search for an identity. This view is supported by Richter and Makusha (2015) who stated that fathers provide a child with a family name which is the root of their identity. This was consistent with the findings where some of the respondents were more concerned with their identity.

The presence of the father in the family also needs to be backed up with connection with the children. In a longitudinal study conducted by Nielson in 2007, he found out that the world views of daughters were more determined by the presence or absence of the father. Results revealed that women wished for a more personal connection with their fathers so as to address issues of life and this is congruent with the findings which showed that there is a need for support in every aspect of life.

Way and Gillman (2000) 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) suggest that the interaction of non-resident fathers with their children is more important than the amount of time they spend together.

Social experiences

This study revealed that the absence of the father affected the adult lives of their daughters socially especially in the area of relationships whether romantic or not. Findings revealed that most relationships with the opposite sex were influenced by the absence of the father in the girl’s life. Some respondents noted that

“... I have coped with life without him and this made me to have more male friend than the female ones”.

“as a girl, they are some things that I expect to have for instance clothes, money and laptop my grandmother could not afford all those stuff, therefore it affected me as I was depending on other people’s things for me to cope with university life” and she also explains that she understands the implications now than then when her father passed on she was very young.

We noted that without the father, daughters are at higher risks of getting into other alliances so as to fend for themselves. Other respondents actually stated that they had more male friends than female ones due to father absenteeism. They explained that they may end up engaging in romantic relationships with older men in order to fill in the gap left by their fathers.

“...I have always felt that dating an older guy is good for me because they always take care of me the way my dad would have done....”

Around 10% of young ladies in the United States and 7% young ladies in the New Zealand between the ages of 15 and 19 years get to be pregnant every year as examination have demonstrated that father non-attendance place little girls at exceptional danger for early sexual action (Ellis, 2003). In support of this, Krohn and Bogan (2001) indicated that young ladies from fatherless families grow more wanton characters and experience trouble in shaping or keeping up sentimental relations later in their advancement. These behavioral examples are seen as they enter into womanhood and might be the reason for their unfulfilling associations with men.

Other than that, Nduda and Jewkes (2012) highlight that spontaneous pregnancies are connected with young ladies from father absent homes and these pregnancies bring about early school drop a number of infectious diseases.

Investigations by Blankenhorn (1995), revealed that fathers are an essential element for a successful society and he observed that in a fatherless society, violence, sexual abuse, teen pregnancies are likely to be more pronounced. This is also implied in the expression below by one of the respondents.

“...my social relationships were a total mess, I had multiple relationships and unproductive social life”

However, it emerged that most respondents had actually grown to be resilient in light of the father absence that they experienced. Tsitsi expressed that, *“when my father passed on I was in form 2, I then grew up with my mother, I have since grown to be self reliant, I have learnt to work hard in order to get what I want”*. Another respondent also said, *“we grew up without a father because he abandoned us, our mother taught us that we should be able to stand up for ourselves since we have no father, ...I never knew my father, as such, my mother is also my father”*. This finding correlates with Ganga and Chinyoka (2013), who concluded that while children who grow up without parents experience needs deprivation mainly due to poverty and abuse, such children learn to be independent and responsible beings because of the experience gained from staying without parents.

Educational experiences

Findings revealed that father absence has a bearing on educational performance and progress. Respondents expressed that they could not attend their preferred schools due to the absence of their fathers. They also expressed that they will be disturbed by thoughts of their fathers sometimes during lectures.

A number of our respondents shared similar concerns and this is noted in the dialogues below,

“.....maybe I would have been able to go to better schools and get better education”;

“It was very hard for my mother to raise the school fees that was required hence I was affected greatly”;

“.....my grades are always fluctuating,” “I haven’t been to the schools I desire”;

“...if my father was alive I was going to fulfil my wish of going to an international university”;

“There are some things I want to do in my life but the fact that I cannot approach my grandmother freely it will affect my goals in my life”.

In line with the existing literature it is noted that father absence indeed does affect child development in a number of ways. Studies by Holborn and Eddy (2011), Mboya and Nesengani (1999) and Nduna and Jewkes (2012) concur that academic achievements are affected negatively by this phenomenon of father absence. The study established that many children are disadvantaged in terms of academic achievements but these facts tend to contradict with research findings as all of the respondents are already in the university differing in levels which indicated advancement in education to a greater extent though they stated that they would want more in terms of resources.

Another respondent in tandem states that father absence was a numb experience to her as she says that *"I did not face any challenges, as I had loving guardians"* thus hypothetically without these guardians her life would have been different and she would probably not be saying the same words. The reality in most traditional African set up is that the position of the father is usually replaced by some members of the extended family especially when the original father dies.

Financial implications of father absence

This study revealed that the absence of a father had financial impact on the lives of the girl child left behind. Most respondents expressed that they felt the void left by their fathers due to the financial strain that they experienced. However some felt that their fathers absence had no effect on them as they did not financially help even during their presence.

One respondent expressed that *"....he was the bread winner and the only male present in my life"*;

Whilst another respondent said that *"He was not necessary because he did not care and provide for the family"*;

This shows that the role of a father is to supply and support. Eva, another respondent also expressed that *"...he was the financial provider and also supported us emotionally"*. *"...they are some financial problems my grandmother is facing that my father could have solved if he was alive"*.

Madhavan, Townsend and Garey (2008) 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.

Conclusions

This study revealed that father absence affects women even in their adult life. Some women who grew up without their fathers expressed feelings of sadness, resentment and sometimes anxiety. Social relationships of women who grew up in father absent homes are moderated by the nature of the absence of the father. Women who were abandoned or whose fathers divorced their mothers largely expressing they dated older men in order to fill the gap that was left by their fathers in their lives. Some of those whose fathers passed on expressed that they dated older men for financial support. It also emerged that female students who had been abandoned by their fathers early in life largely expressed anger towards their fathers.

This study revealed that father absence gives birth to a number of psycho-social challenges for women when they grow into adulthood. The problems have financial implications which were widely felt by most respondents; psychosocial implications included self-efficacy, self-confidence and emotional stability. These problems seems to have detrimental effects on the person`s wellbeing, that is various dimensions of human development seem to be affected by these challenges. This includes personality development, academic development, career development, and other dimensions of human development. This study also revealed that women who grew up in father absent household tend to be resilient and focused in their lives. The absence of a father made some to realise that they should stand up for themselves in order to survive in life.

Recommendations

The researchers recommend effective sensitization programs that can bring awareness to families and communities on the implications of father absence on the girl child.

The researcher recommends that professional health care workers should assist on mentorship programs that help parents and families on parenting styles and their implications. This will cover children of the divorced or separated.

Future studies should focus also on the influences of the extended family, in particular Zimbabwean families as this can be a moderator of the behaviours of children who grew up in father absent homes. Extended families

should focus more on being helpful and supportive to the vulnerable children who would have lost their fathers.

It is recommended that future studies should target a larger sample of the population so as to obtain a more inclusive range of experiences. Psychological implication should be further explored in a longitudinal study with specific context in Zimbabwe.

Future studies should look at the experiences of married women who grew up in father absent homes so as to explore if father absence affects marriage life. Moreover, researchers should explore the psycho-social differences that exist between women who grew up in father absent homes and those that grew up with their fathers.

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