



THE IMPACT OF FATHER ABSENCE ON THE SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR OF FEMALE STUDENTS AT A SELECTED COLLEGE IN MASVINGO, ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

The importance of a father in the lives of children is often taken too lightly, however research constantly show that fathers play a crucial role in many aspects of child development, including areas such as emotional well-being, educational achievement and social interactions. This research studied the impact of the father absence on the sexual behaviour of college female students at a selected college in Masvingo. The research adopted the quasi-experimental research design as the study is quantitative in nature. More so, the study relied on information which was collected using standardised questionnaires which were self-administered. Stratified random sampling was used in the collection data. Results from this study indicated that the nature of father absence does not have a significant effect ($p>0.05$) on the sexual behaviour of the female students as female students from father present and father absent households had the same sexual behaviour. Furthermore the study revealed that father absence has an impact on sexual debut since there were significant differences ($p<0.05$) in the age of sexual debut between female students from father present and father absent households. The findings on the relationship strategies show that there were no significant differences ($p>0.05$) in the relationship strategies of female students who grew up in father absent households and those who grew up with their fathers although there were significant differences in the use of sex for food and for rent ($p<0.05$) with father present female students using it more than father absent students. Based on the findings it can be recommended that colleges, through their counselling department need to identify and attend to the social needs and issues of such students and assist them grow into better and more responsible people.

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Introduction

Fathers have been viewed in a variety of ways and fathers have previously been regarded as mere observers, breadwinners, sexual role models, and fostering (Qureshi & Ahmad, 2014). Fathers, often regarded as having minimal contribution towards the development of the child, have played the role of sole provider for the family (Thorne, 2009). However due to quick changes in the social set up resulting from globalisation, there have been increases in female-headed and single-parent households, implying that an increased number of children are living in families where there is no resident father (Ellis, Bates, Dodge, Fergusson, Horwood, & Woodward, 2009). Father absence has mainly been caused by split-up marriages or separation, death and career demands and father absence as a result of divorce or death impacts on the emotional development of the child (Qureshi & Ahmad, 2014). Nonetheless, inferences on the effects on emotional development of the child differ based on the causes and timing of paternal absence (Sheppard & Sear, 2011) and as such this study intends to determine how the different forms of father absence impact on the sexual behaviour of college students in a Zimbabwean context.

Paternal and maternal love are equally important as they both have great impact on the child's health, cognitive and social adjustment (Ellis et al., 2009). The relationship between the father and the child creates a peculiar tie and closeness which influences the development of a very strong bond in the life of a child. The special attachment shapes the development of the child, as it predetermines the child's good and bad emotional disposition. The relationship between the father and the child gives the child an exemplary figure, from whom they get disciplinary and supervisory guidance thus contributing towards monetary and physical well-being (Ellis et al., 2009). Thus, paternal presence impacts positively on life prospects, academic achievement, physical and emotional health, linguistic, literary and cognitive development of the child (Mazembo, Hayley, & Karabo, 2013). Although the links between an absent biological father, sexual activity, and pregnancy have been documented repeatedly, there is conflicting and incomplete knowledge about why having an absent father during childhood/adolescence puts teenage girls at greater risk of

pregnancy than those whose fathers were present during this time (Hinton-Dampf, 2013). Thus with the conflicting results on the impact of father absence on pregnancy, this study intends to determine the timing of father absence and how this affects the sexual behaviour of female college students.

Above half of the global population consists of people below 25 years, a group that college students generally fall within and the bulk of the young people are in less developed nations (Kassa, Degu, Yitayew, Misganaw, Muche, Demelas, & Ayehu, 2016). Due to their age and the risk taking behaviour, young people have high potential of engaging in risky sexual behaviours. Developing nations, have witnessed high rates of risky sexual behaviours which include unsafe sex, inadequate contraception use, promiscuous behaviour, sexual intercourse with a person of unknown sexual history and early sexual debut. According to Kassa et al. (2016) these risky sexual behaviours account for the greater number of new sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) annually. The rise in STDs is a result of young people aged 5 to 24 engaging in risk behaviours such as smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol and using drugs. As a result, these behaviours predispose young people to low risk perception and end up indulging in sexual activities (Kalina, 2012). With the negative impacts of paternal absence and positive impacts of father presence, the occurrence of father absence poses a mammoth problem which needs attention (Mazembo et al., 2013). It is against this background that it becomes imperative that father absence needs to be thoroughly investigated especially within the Zimbabwean context. As such the sexuality of young people can be inferred through their parents' perspectives (Ngidi, Moyo, Zulu, Adam, Babu, & Krishna, 2016) and for the purposes of this study, there is need to determine how the sexual behaviours of female college students in Masvingo are influenced by the timing of father absence.

Previous researches on father absence have mainly focussed on the following areas: father absence and academic performance (Qureshi & Ahmad, 2014), sexual risk and teenage pregnancies in United States and New Zealand (Ellis et al., 2009), father-daughter relationship and teenage pregnancy (Hinton-Dampf, 2013), father absence and sexual maturity in British men (Sheppard & Sear, 2011), father absence and risk of teenage pregnancy (Ellis et al., 2009), father absence and adult choices (Thorne, 2009) and father-absence from a psychoanalytic perspective (Jones, 2007). More than three quarters of the studies about father absence have been carried in the developed world, for

example the effects of father absence not only on the mortality and health (Hoskins, 2014; Salmon, Townsend, & Hehman, 2016; Shenk, Starkweather, Kress, & Alam, 2013), but also on the reproductive behaviour of children (Delpriore & Hill, 2013; Ellis et al., 2009; Mazembo et al., 2013; Thorne, 2009). However there has been little or no attention paid to the impact of father absence in the context of the developing world on the sexual behaviour of college students. Thus it can be hypothesized that father absence promotes short to medium-term sexual behaviours among female college students.

Objectives

The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. Examine the impact of the nature of father absence on the sexual behaviour of female college students in Masvingo.
2. Assess if onset of sexual debut of female students who grew up in father absent households differ from those that grew up with their fathers.
3. Assess if the relationship strategies of female students who grew up in father absent households differ from those that grew up with their fathers.
4. Make recommendations on the coping mechanisms that can be used by female students who grew up in father absent households.

Method

Research design

The research adopted the quasi-experimental research design as the study is quantitative in nature. The research design goes far beyond just data collection as it deals with cause and effect relationship between two or more variables (Bhattacharjee, 2012). Measuring, classifying, analysing comparing and data interpretation are key components in this design (Adams & Cox, 2008). Quasi-experimental designs do not manipulate or control the variables under study (Chitiyo, Hughes, Changara, Chitiyo, & Montgomery, 2017). Specifically for this study, the control group consisted of female students with present fathers while the treatment group consisted of female students whose fathers were absent. The quasi-experimental design was preferred because it is conclusive, caters for samples with large representation and has structured data collection procedures (Phellas, Bloch, & Seale, 2011). Furthermore, the

research design and approach support hypotheses testing for any significant differences in terms of sexual behaviour within and between the groups.

Population

For purposes of this study, population refers to all the registered 1st, 2nd and 4th year female students under a specific department at the selected college in Masvingo. In this case the total population was 123 registered female students at the time of carrying out the study and from the check of records.

Sample and sampling strategy

The study used Stratified-random sampling, a two stage sampling strategy. The participants' academic years formed the three strata, namely first, second and fourth years. Random sampling of participants was done in the different stratum. Cards inscribed "Yes" or "No" were put in a box and each female student in each academic year was given a chance to select a card at random. Female students who picked "Yes" became part of the study. The sample size was proportional to the stratum size as compared to the population. Specifically, the sample size calculator (www.raosoft.com/samplesize.html) was used to determine the sample size. A total of 55 female students participated in the study, representing 44,7% of the population.

Data gathering instruments

The research adopted a standardised questionnaire from Buss (2013). The questionnaires were self-administered and were simple and straight forward with closed and open ended questions which ensured that as much of the required information as possible was collected.

Procedure

Prior to carrying out the study, permission was sought from the University Registrar's office. The questionnaire was pre-tested in the University's education department whereas the actual study was carried out in the Department of Psychology with assistance from lecturers and class representatives.

Data analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS Version 16) was used to analyse the data and Microsoft Excel 2010 was used to collate the data.

Participants' demographic data was analysed through the use of descriptive statistics. Data was analysed based on their nature (continuous and categorical) and specifically, data on the age of sexual debut and number of sexual partners was analysed using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and the differences between groups was analysed through the use of independent t-tests. Chi-square analysis was used on categorical data to determine the effects of the nature of father absence. Mostly the data was analysed to test for any differences in sexual behaviour and relationship strategies for those students who grew up in father absent or father present households.

Results and discussion

Impact of the nature of father absence on the sexual behaviour of female college students in Masvingo

Results that the dominant cause of father absence was death which accounted for 47% of the respondents, followed by separation (18%), abandonment accounted for 17% of the female students used in this study. There were 12% of the respondents who indicated that father absence was due to work while 6% indicated that father absence was due to divorce.

Results revealed that female students whose fathers absented them due to death incorrectly used family control methods more than other causes of father absenteeism. Similarly female students whose fathers absented due to death also had a sexual strategy of multiple sexual partners. Oral sex was another sexual behaviour which was shown by female students from fathers who were not present in their households due to death. No student indicated that she used anal sex regardless of the nature of father absenteeism.

Results indicate that the nature of father absence and relational strategies was done and it was noted that most of the risky sexual behaviours such as sex with a person of unknown history, inconsistent condom use, sex after alcohol, sex without a condom, fondling and kissing were mostly done by female students whose fathers were absent due to death. The findings further revealed that of the 17 female students with absent fathers, 8 were absented early in their lives (at 0-5 years, 6 were absented in their mid-childhood (6-13 years) while 3 were absented late in childhood (14 years and above).

ANOVA was used to determine if the nature of father absence had an impact on the sexual behaviour of female students. The results showed that

most of the students lived a risky sex lives (F=1,251) for multiple sex partners and F=0,798 on incorrect Family Planning Method use, F=3,039 on oral sex, F=1,892 for most recent sex without a condom, F=2,988 for inconsistent condom use, F=1,623 on sex under the influence of alcohol, and F=1,251 for sex without a condom. All these characteristics were an indicator of risky behaviours for the female college students. Anal sex is a risky sex behaviour but in this study F=0 which shows that the female students do not have this risk. Thus to a larger extent it can be stated that the study failed to reject the null hypothesis that nature of father absence does not have a significant effect on the sexual behaviour of the female students.

The study showed that father absence due to death, divorce, separation, or abandonment resulted in risky sexual behaviours in females. It can thus be drawn that to a larger extent the nature of father absence does not have a significant effect on the sexual behaviour of the female students. Female students absented through death engage with multiple men probably to find a father replacement. However they fail to make attachments since the very first female-male attachment in their lives was a flop. The father-daughter attachment would have equipped them with skills necessary for intimate relations and how to deal with men in general. It is this instability in the family set up (the ecological system) resulting in the female students' risky sexual behaviour. Similarly, O'Dwyer, (2017) alluded that father-present homes are the ideal structure for children and that any deviation from this must be considered inherently damaging to children. More so those females from father absent homes due to abrasion have a tendency of revenging and by so doing engage in risky sexual behaviour. Thus the study used the attachment theory to explain how the different forms of father absence can be used to explain the different sexual behaviour of the female students.

In a review that was carried on divorce's impact on children, conclusions drawn are that children who experience their parents' divorce (compared to children from intact, two-parent families) had more developmental and behavioural challenges, poorer psychological adjustment, more negative self-concepts, more social difficulties, and more problematic relationships than those with both parents (Thorne, 2009). One of the key factors to enable children to come to terms with their parents' divorce is the amount of support they receive from their parents before and after the divorce. In one of the studies of adolescents from divorced parents it was revealed that

those adolescents who had pronounced themselves as having a secure attachment with their parents and in other relationships were those children whose parents, although divorced, gave them support prior to and post the divorce, and whose parents were courteous to each other after the divorce. Contrary, children who identified themselves as having an insecure attachment were those who had parents who provided very little support to them, and whose parents had many disagreements and fights before and after the divorce (O'Dwyer, 2017).

Effects of father presence/absence on the onset of sexual debut of female students

Results of this study indicated that students from father absent households had early sexual debut (around 15 years) compared to their counterparts from father present households who start sexual encounters at a more mature age of 20 years. Thus it can be noted that there were significant differences between the mean ages of sexual debut between female students from father present and father absent households. This comparison was critical as it brought out how father absence predisposes college female students to early sexual behaviour, thus bringing out that there is some significant association between father absence and female students 'age of sexual debut. It is quite evident that father absence is related to early sexual debut of the female college students. In this case the study failed to accept the null hypothesis that there are no significant differences in the age of sexual debut between female students from father present and father absent households.

Effect of father presence/absence on number of sexual partners in the last 12 months

The results of this study indicated that female college students from father absent households have more sexual partners than those students in father present households. Thus, there are significant differences ($p < .05$) in the number of sexual partners between the female students from father present and father absent households. In this case female college students from father absent homes had multiple sexual partners which is a risky sexual behaviour. Thus there was an association between father absence and risky sexual behaviour. The mean number of sexual partners for father absent female college students doubles that of their counterparts, 1,06 versus 0,53

respectively. In this case father absence is related to multiple sex partners in college female students.

The results further showed that although the female college students with present fathers (38) outnumbered those whose fathers were absent (17), one night stands were quite common among female students whose biological father was absent as evidenced by a group mean of 1,0588 and a standard deviation of 2,988. In addition, female students whose biological fathers were absent tended to have more casual sex partners indicated by a mean of 0,6471 and standard deviation of 1,2718 and that the mean pregnancies for father present and father absent are 1,9737 and 1,7647 respectively while the standard deviation for father absent female students was 0,4372 (higher than that of father present students).

There was significant difference in the number of one night stands and number of casual partners between father present and father absent female students. This showed clearly the risky sexual behaviour female students are predisposed to due to father absence. Notably there were no significant differences in the average number of unwanted pregnancies between the two groups (father present/absent) $p > .05$ (Table 1).

Table 1. Summary t-test for sexual risk of the female students from father absent/present households

Variable	F	t	df	p
One night stands	15.82	1.42	53	.036
Casual partners	18.72	1.82	53	.011
Unwanted pregnancy	34.25	1.91	53	.07

Findings from the study clearly revealed that father absence does to a great extent influence the age of sexual debut for females growing up in father absent households. For this study in particular, the mean age of sexual debut for female students in father absent households was 15 years while for their counterparts in father present households it was 20 years. This confirms related literature on the studies carried out in New Zealand and United States of America in which females from father absent homes have early sex encounters compared to those in father present homes. Similarly those females from father absent homes had sexual onset around 15years while their counterparts started around 16 years in New Zealand and United States of America. The results of the study tend to collaborate with findings from Husin (2013) who defined,

early sexual debut as an adolescent engaging in sexual intercourse before he/she is 15 years old. One of the profound factors that has been shown to be related to early sexual debut is the absence of the father, referred to here as father absence (Ellis et al., 2009). Girls from a stressful environment (father-absent homes) were more likely to experience an early sexual maturation (early onset of puberty/menstruation, early sexual activity). Therefore, father absence exposes adolescent girls to adverse behavioural choices, and that father presence may offer protection against the vulnerability associated with these choices.

Notably, although females from father present households have sex onset later than their counterparts, those from developing countries start at a much late age. Probably this could be attributed to the fact that they had all the attention they needed from both parents hence the delay in sexual debut. The much late onset for female students at a college in Masvingo can generate yet another research in comparison to those from developed nations. Father absence is therefore a predisposing factor to females' early sexual debut as they lack in paternal investment of the father's disciplinarian role. The attachment theory postulates that they lack paternal attachment so they tend to seek attachment from any male figure especially the romantic partner.

Relationship strategies of female students who grew up in father absent households differ from those that grew up with their fathers

On the relationship strategies used by female students from father present/absent households the results showed that there were no significant differences between the female students from father present/absent households ($p > .05$). Thus it was inferred that female students from both father absent and present households used more or less the same relationship strategies. From the study it was inferred that to a larger extent the null hypothesis could be accepted that there were no significant differences in the relationship strategies of female students who grew up in father absent households and those that grew up with their fathers.

As noted from the issue of father absence in the lives of female children, the females in such a predicament tend to lack in self-confidence and self-esteem to the extent that they do not view themselves as worthy of any lasting romantic relationships. Furthermore they do not value themselves as

they jump from one sexual partner to the other. In this regard the following preliminary recommendations were drawn as coping mechanisms:

- To abstain from sex and all other activities that end up exposing them to sex until they are mature enough to make sound decisions about sex.
- To develop a positive view of themselves, to believe in themselves and have self- confidence and self-esteem about who they want to be.
- To develop goals and visions that are positive and future oriented and strive to achieve them.

In addition, the female college students from father absent households prefer relationships that do not demand much of their commitment or investment as evidenced by the findings on multiple partners and these are in line with the findings by Ellis et al. (2009) who alluded that they engage in insecure attachment romantic styles. The results further showed that female students from father absent households tend to have multiple partners, on a higher mean of 1,1 than their counterparts whose average number of partners in the past 12 months is at 0,4. This risky sexual behaviour is attributed to father absence and precipitated by the instability and changes in the ecological setup whose ripple effects manifest in the individual's behaviour. The findings are dissociative from the attachment theory as the female students do not want attachment with their partners but rather opt for relationships that have no commitment and no emotional attachment as confirmed by related literature. The strategy of having multiple partners as supported by related literature is meant to fill the father figure void in the lives of female students growing up without their biological fathers. More so results showed that female students from both father absent/present homes had preference for masculine men as a relationship strategy. Therefore, male masculinity cannot be a protective tactic to cover up for paternal void.

Furthermore, the results exhibited that 3,6% of the female students in the study were married and 90,9% were single, yet the majority of the students had sex, this implies that the majority of the students had pre-marital sex as a relationship strategy. This characteristic is even high among students from father present households which could also be a result of either living alone or with friends resulting in lack of parental monitoring and peer pressure took charge as affirmed by East, Jackson, and Brien (2007). Results of this study are in tandem with Delpriore and Hill (2013) who revealed that adolescents, mainly

women, raised in single-parent families are more likely to engage in pre-marital sexual behaviour than those adolescents from two-parent families.

Conclusion

Based on the results presented, the following conclusions were drawn. The nature of father absence has no significant influence on the sexual behaviour of female college students. Females absented by their fathers due to death had risky sexual behaviour just as those absented due to separation, abandonment and divorce. The study was in line with the ecological theory as it showed that the disruption of the family ecological set up (father absence) led to female students taking risky sexual behaviour.

There were significant differences in the onset of sexual debut between female students from father present and father absent. Specifically students from father absent households had their first sex earlier than students from father present households. Thus the findings from the study corroborated with the attachment theory as the female students lacked parental attachment and as a result tend to seek attachment with a male figure.

There were no significant differences in the relationship strategies between female students from father absent and father present households in terms of using sex for school work, use of short and long term sexual encounters. However, students from father absent households used sex for food, rent, and clothes and initiated contact with adult males and sought attention from adult males than female students from father present households.

Recommendations

Based on the given conclusions, the following recommendations were made:

Similar studies to be replicated in other different types of colleges within Zimbabwe so as to capture variability in the problems that are identified among female students from father present/absent households.

In terms of public departments, policy makers could task, for example the department of health and psychological services or the student affairs to highlight to the female students (as part of orientation) the dangers associated with using sex for food, rent or clothes and also the dangers associated with inconsistent use of condoms and unprotected sex.

Since the female students from father absent households have risky sexual behaviour, there is need for colleges, through their counselling department to identify and attend to the social needs and issues of such students and assist them grow into better and more responsible people. This can be better done right from the time they get into college because for some of the female students this could be their first freedom from home so it is important to nip them in the bud.

Future studies need also to include aspects such as the time at which the father absented himself from the family as the length of absenteeism affects the level of attachment with the father and eventually affect the relational strategies and also the sexual behaviour of the concerned children.

Although knowledge was generated by this study, there is need for use of a larger sample size so as to improve on the quality and generalizability of the research findings. A larger sample size for future researches, can determine the perceptions of present and absent fathers to enhance understanding on caring for the female child.

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