



## **PSYCHOSOCIAL EFFECTS OF FATHER ABSENCE ON MALE CHILDREN: INSIGHTS FROM MUCHEKE F COMMUNITY, MASVINGO, ZIMBABWE**

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### *Abstract*

*This qualitative study explores the psychosocial experiences of male children who grew up in father absent households using a case study of Mucheke F community. The objectives of the study were to explore the cognitive experiences of male children who grew up in father absent households, to determine the emotional experiences of male children who grew up in father absent households and to identify the moral behaviors displayed by children raised by single mothers. With the use of purposive sampling, a sample of 20 male children from 10 to 18 years was selected as well as 4 single mothers from Mucheke F Community. A qualitative research design was employed in the collection of the appropriate and relevant data and the researcher made use of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to get insight into the subjective personal interpretations of the perceived psychosocial effects of father absence on male children in Mucheke F Community. The findings of the study show that a number of children are affected morally, cognitively and affectively due to father absence in Mucheke F. More so, the study revealed that due to the absence of a father figure male child face a lot of challenges at school and some are even school drop outs, emotionally their self esteem is diminished and suffer from identity confusion, on the moral part male children tend to disrespect their mothers and are*

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*victims of improper language. The study also recommended teachers to take note of diversities in current families. Recommendations of further research were also given as well as research on the effects on mother absence in the event of children growing up.*

Keywords: father absence; father figure; adolescent; psychosocial

## **Introduction**

The study focused on the perceived psychosocial effects on the absence of a father figure in male children. The topic seeks to explore how children from 10-18 years of age are affected psychologically and socially due to the absence of a father figure in their development and behaviour. The study focuses on the cognitive and emotional experiences of male children who grew in father absence. The effect of father absence during a child's development is a rich and multifaceted subject. The twenty-first century has seen the speedy social change and alteration of the contemporary family arrangement, in which arising absence of fathers is experiential. Developmental theories mainly rely on the conformist family model as it is generally traditional fact that for better development of the child he/she should be living in a home where the mother and the father are there, supportive, helpful, compassionate and caring. Accordingly, this study seeks to highlight and discuss the effects of fatherly absence, on the psycho-social development of male children.

Father absence has great effects on the upbringing of a child and these effects tend to affect the child in three psychosocial dimensions which are moral behavioural, cognitive behaviour and affective behaviour. One study, (Lamb, 2016) found out that significant advancement has clearly been made by researchers over the last 30 years in relation to the effects of parenting on children. A number of studies have been done effectively on the observed literature, as theorists have further elaborated and advanced the theoretical frameworks planned to clarify fatherhood, parental roles and father-child relationships as illustrated by (Fagan, Day, Lamb, & Cabrera, 2014). Lamb (2016) further goes on to say that, (a) fathers indeed play a crucial role in child development (b) were frequently prominent in the life of their children and (c) affected the route of their children as they developed, for better as well as for worse. This illustrates the significance of family as a component in the development of the child. However, despite the family as a component in the development of the child, some inevitable circumstances like death and also the

economic hardships in Southern African countries specifically Zimbabwe, have been discovered to be the most drive in the upbringing of children. This has cemented by Zirima (2012), who posited that, hardships that have continually plagued Zimbabwe has led to an absence of parents in children's lives.

According to Van den Berg and Makusha (2018), family is a grouping of people in which two or more people of the same blood line stay together. Family is further defined as a multifaceted makeup that has same history, living together and sharing a warm bond with one goal. The family is considered the powerful institution for child growth and the main reason for parental separation to be considered in this study is divorce and out of wedlock pregnancies. Divorce mostly affects children more than it does to the parents same as out of wedlock pregnancies. After divorce has occurred, most children feel anxious and are victims of the 'feeling of complexity'. A quantitative research study done by (Mancini, 2010), proved that 28 percent of all households with young children, were maintained by a single parent, that adds up to over twelve million families and over twenty million children. 84 percent of the numbers of one parent families were headed by single mothers in 1998, that added up to more than 9.8 million families. In addition, 2.1 million single parent families were headed by men. This rise in single-parent families is a consequence of a boost in divorce, marital separation, and out of wedlock pregnancies rather than death of the other counterpart. More so, in 2008, sixty-three percent of Black American families, thirty-seven percent of Hispanic families, and twenty-seven percent of white families were headed by one parent (Sonker, 2021).

Mancini (2010) states that, girls openly uttered the effects they experience in father absence. From the study by Mancini (2010) findings brought out, presented that growing up without the father figure had a negative effect on how these girls would view their fathers and the relationship between them. As a result of the perceived lack of love and interest, the girls expressed feelings of anger, hurt and less respect for the absent father (Mancini, 2010). Furthermore, the research of the above-mentioned scholar presented that daughters felt that, the absent parent was not able to provide for them. A review of literature applicable to criminal behavior and adolescent academic and behavioral outcomes resulted in that, there is a correlation between the teachings of socially acceptable behaviors, self-control and existence of male role models (Eastin, 2003). Thereby drawing a conclusion that father absence has a larger role to play than what may be thought of. Studies relating to fatherhood reveal that, unlike to children

growing in two-parent homes, children who grew up without their fathers considerably have worse outcomes, on standard, on almost every compute of well-being (Lamb, 2016).

In addition, in African nation analysis findings recommend that children are also plagued by the link with the parent and by the amount of education of the parent. True, but gets worse if the parent may be a single parent and no support is obtainable by the opposite counterpart and this tends to affects educational success of the child at the top. Findings conjointly show that children of single parents face lots of frustration and branding in some instances (Dlamini et al., 2017). Most social scientists doubted that fathers broadly speaking formed the experiences and development of their children. Current appreciation of the all-around, multidimensional roles that fathers play in family life nowadays is explored during this study. There are direct and indirect influences of fathers on children's development (Lamb, 1998). In comparison behavioral issues and educational success among children from single parent headed families and families with a father and mother, (Eastin, 2003) found that children from single woman-headed families had considerably a lot of behavioral issues and significantly poorer educational accomplishment.

The idea of parenthood from a child's view is fairly explicit. In contrast, the numberless of possible interactions from the view of a parent is far-off multifaceted. At one chance, there may be a relationship that comes from pregnancy and birth. On instances like that, the linkage between the father and child may vary from being non-existent to fairly wide-ranging, with many fathers continuing to see the child though they may not be staying together. Maintaining a strong link with father who does not stay with the child is very unusual, especially among black families (Hereyah & Purwanti, 2021). On the other hand, people may ignore all odds and marry prior to the existence of the child and live together.

Furthermore, in all of these conditions, the father of the child may be present now and then or sometimes be never present. If the father is unavailable it then goes on to affect his relationship with the absent father and the child clings to the present parent.

## **Objectives**

This research aims to investigate the psychosocial effects of father absence on male children in Mucheke F Community.

The specific objectives of the study are to:

- a. Identify moral behaviors portrayed by children raised by single mothers.
- b. Explore the cognitive experiences of male children who grew up in father absent households.
- c. Determine the emotional experiences of male children in mother headed families.

#### *Delimitations*

The research study was conducted in Mucheke F community in Masvingo focusing on psychosocial effects of male children who live in father absence households. The participants under the study were male children who were domiciled in Mucheke F. The study focused specifically on the male children within the community.

### **Method**

#### *Population and sampling strategies*

The population interests for the research were boys residing in *Mucheke F*. The research had to interview 20 children through focus group discussions. The population consisted of 20 boys between the age of 10 and 18 years. 4 single mothers were also interviewed on their experience with male children. Convenience sampling which is a non-probability method was used to select the participants for the study. The reason for using this sampling technique was to identify “information-rich” participants who shared similar experiences in life. Convenience sampling is a matter of taking what one can get and it is an accidental type of sampling which relies on the available subject (Engel & Schutt, 2014). This allowed the research to elicit detailed knowledge and direct experience relevant to the phenomenon of interest, which are the psychosocial effect of absence of father figure on male children in Mucheke F.

#### *Demographic characteristic of the respondents*

As shown in Table 1, the targeted participants were 20 male children and the participants ranged from 10 years to 18 years of age. Four participants were in the age range between 10 and 13 years, 7 participants were in the age range between 14 and 16 years and 9 participants were in the age range of between 17 and 18 years. The distribution indicates that most children in the study were aged between 17 and 18 years of age and less between 10 and 14 years of age.

Table 1. Age distribution of Male participants

	Years		
	10-13	14-16	17-18
Age range	10-13	14-16	17-18
Number of participants	4	7	9
Mean	15.4		
Standard Deviation	2.437		

As illustrated by Table 2, of the 20 participants, 2 boys had been living without a father figure for two years, 3 boys had been living without a father figure for 3 years, 2 boys again had been living without a father figure for 4 years, 5 boys had been growing with a single mother for five years and 8 boys had been living without a father figure for 6 years and above. As shown in the table, most of the boys in study had been living without a father figure for at least 2 up to 6 years and more. More children are ranged from 6 years.

Table 2. Period of father absence

	Years				
	2	3	4	5	6
Years lived without a father figure	2	3	4	5	6
Number of participants	3	2	2	5	8

Note: Total number of participants = 20

### *Instruments*

In depth interviews and focus group discussions were used as they allowed the researcher to solicit in-depth information about the subject under study.

### *Research design*

This study utilized the explorative case study research design to assess the psychosocial effects of absence of father figure on male children in Mucheke F. A case study of this nature is an exploration of a case over time through detailed in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, a case study research design assisted the study in accessing relevant information pertaining to factors associated with father figure absence in Mucheke F. In addition, the focus of the study was to get answers on “what” are the dominant psychosocial effects on the absence of the father figure; “How” do children raised by single mothers behave? “Why” are children raised in the absence of the father figure displaying certain behaviors? “What” is the role of the father in the upbringing of a child? Therefore, a case

study research design is of particular interest as the researcher wished to gain a rich understanding of the context of the research and the process being enacted (Cypress, 2018). Applied to the study the researcher was interested in gaining a detailed understanding on the psychosocial effects of absence of father figure on male children in Mucheke F.

#### *Research procedure*

To carry out this study, the researcher was approved by the local authorities in Masvingo. The letter was approved by the director at the community local board. During the research twenty male children and four parents were interviewed. These people were interviewed individually and in groups with interview questions.

#### *Data analysis and interpretation*

The study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which involves trying to understand the experiences an individual has in life, how they made sense of them and what meanings those experiences hold (Coolican, 2017). It is concerned with trying to understand lived experiences and with how participants themselves make sense of their experiences; it is phenomenological in that it involves detailed examination of the participant's life. Moreover, it is with an individual's personal perception or account of events as they occur as opposed to an attempt to produce an objective statement of the event itself (Ishtiaq, 2019). IPA aims to offer insights into how an individual would make sense of a given phenomenon in a given context. Therefore, IPA was used as the study was subjective and assessed the psychosocial effects of father absence on children raised by single mothers with insight from Mucheke F.

In analyzing, the first analytic stage involved several close and detailed readings of the data to get a holistic view. The second stage of analysis involved identifying initial themes as they occur in the data which in the present study consisted of the perceptions of the experiences of the respondents. Thereafter, themes were organized into clusters and the themes identified were continually checked against the data (Coolican, 2017). The third stage of the analysis involved refining, condensing and examining the themes to establish connections between themes. The emphasis of this stage was to reduce the themes into specific clusters and the reduction involves establishing connections between the preliminary themes and clustering them accordingly. Frederickson, et al, (2012), states that this stage may involve dropping some themes as others come in due to

lack of compatibility of the themes. As new themes emerge Frederickson et al (2012), postulates that a table at this stage might be produced so that each theme with the subordinate themes that follows it will be compatible.

Frederickson et al. (2012), states that the final stage of the analysis involves narrative accounts of the interplay between the interpretive activity of the researcher and the participants' account of their experiences. This final stage of the analysis emphasizes close contextual reading of the participants' accounts and moving between descriptions. It is worth noting that even though IPA offers insight into the perception's participants have towards their experiences it also poses some challenges (Alase, 2017). Generally, people might have difficulties in expressing what they are thinking or feeling, which there might be reasons for not disclosing the information. In such a scenario, the researcher had to interpret people's mental and emotional states from what they say. This is not an easy thing to do as the researcher might misinterpret the mental or emotional state of the participants in question.

## **Results**

The findings show that male children face many challenges in their development when they grow up without a strong male role model. These 20 male children showed some challenges at school, morally as well as affectively.

### *Cognitive challenges faced by children with father figure absence*

Participants' responses brought out that they experienced negative effects of living with a single parent. They were concerned with having proper school uniforms and the challenges with fees payment. Austin one of the participant remarks;

*I feel unhappy and ashamed, she cannot afford to pay fees on time (for the four children) we are often sent home to ask for money while the rest are learning, and at the end of the year I fail and repeat the same grade.*

Findings put forward that children may get affected by the connection with the parent and by the level of education of the parent. Tinashe a 16-year-old boy learner in Form 2 reiterated that;

*My mother has no time for me, she spends the whole day selling (vendor) so when she comes back she will be too tired and will go straight to bed.*



Concerning the effect of the level of parental education, Owen confirmed that;

*Sometimes I have no one to help me with school work because my mother does not have good academic grades and had no one to assist her at home. This affects me emotionally when we are given an assignment that requires assistance from my parent.*

At some point the children indicated that life would be better if both parents and they illustrated that they wish they could change the situation if only they could. Tichaona one of the boys stated that;

*If only I lived with both parent's life would be easier. I would be having someone to assist me with my homework and provide a lunch box for me.*

#### *Affective effects of father figure absence*

Findings have also shown that male children living with single mothers encounter a lot of irritation, annoyance and faced stigmatization in some instances. This was the case with Ernest who posited that;

*I'm emotionally disturbed because I'm just like an orphan, my parents do not give me any help of some sort. I do not know my father and my mother always avoid discussing issues concerning my father.*

The findings of the study also show that children from single parent households experienced identity crisis and undefined confusion. This is confirmed by Erikson psychosocial stages of development, under one of his stages, that of identity crisis vs confusion. In the words of Denis;

*My father left before I even had a birth certificate. For me to attend school my mother just used her National Identification. So apparently, I'm using my mother's last name instead of using my father's last name.*

Anashe a 16 year old boy who stays with his mother who is a money changer noted that;

*My friends say that I behave like an elderly person since I always say I have things to do at home. My mother lives home so early for work so I'm the one who takes care of my little brother, cooks and clean.*

Findings suggest that children were aware of some of the challenges and hardships that their parents had to wrestle with. One of the boys Tatenda stated that;

*My mother is always stressed, sometimes shouts at me.*

Results also indicate that some of the boys hoped for the best from the situation they were going through though they faced challenges like others, Peterson a 17-year-old boy note;

*It motivates me to do better and make my mother proud; however, I sometimes get depressed.*

Father absence and living in a single parent headed family may bring excessive pressures and immense stresses on both the children and their parents. This is, for instance, reflected in the comments of Farai a motivated 14-year-old boy who was in Form 3;

*I have to work extra hard to impress my mother & make her happy. If fail, she will shout at me and may not talk to me for some time. Each time I ask about my father, my mother avoids the topic.*

Findings equally show some of the male children hoped they lived with both parents and they envy those who had both parents. According to Enepia a 17-year-old in Form 2 stated that;

*I feel unhappy and anxious when other children eat from their lunch boxes in front of me, have their pocket money and wear proper uniform.*

This was also echoed by Leon an 18-year-old boy;

*I miss that fatherly love and guidance... every time I think about it, my eyes fill with tears. Some of the things I will be experiencing while growing up I cannot ask my mother about them.*

Sellino who lives with his mother also suggested inquisitiveness and a desire for the one absent father which may affect their relationship with the mother;

*I know a little about him. He was a caring dad...I feel jealous especially when I see some children with their fathers. I prefer my dad to my mom.*

#### *Findings from single mothers*

Four single mothers were interviewed on their experience with male children in line with their moral, affective and intellectual behavior all these parents approved of negative effects on the affective behavior of a child. Only one parent approved her son was performing well at school others complained of slow learning capabilities and failure.

*I don't even know what to do with my son because he is not even interested in school. Even if I force him he dodges.*

A mother of three children (two boys and one girl) also reported a different behavior in her male children from the girl. She said that;

*My male children behave wildly in so many cases than the girl. Even at school they perform averagely unlike the girl.*

## **Discussions**

The discussion of the results are in line with the objectives of the study. The objectives were to explore the moral behavior displayed by children raised by single mothers, to identify perceived affective effects of father absence on male children and to explore the perceived cognitive effects of father absence on male children raised in a family without a father figure. The results indicated that most of male children experiencing father absence are negative. Consequently, this makes some of the male children to have low self-esteem. However, some of the male children have positive experiences particularly in cognitive experiences and hope for the better. It emerged from the study that as a result of father absence, some of the negative experiences faced by male children experiencing father absence may lead them to moral problems.

Mensah and Kuranchie (2013), argues that there are unique parenting roles which make the fathers important such as disciplinarian, protector and role model. If therefore these unique roles have no one to fill them the child may end up seeking comfort in the streets with gangs. These aspects may then lead to feeling of loss which would then affect the self esteem of a child. Literature revealed that due to father absence self esteem is reduced and depressive moments are most likely to occur. As Erickson's theory outlines at this stage a child tends to suffer from identity crisis. Most of the boys complained a lot about using their mother's last name. There by resulting in feelings of anger, hatred and bitterness (Erickson & Empey, 1963). The concept of family is put at stake, the Human Ecological System theory, as offered by Bronfenbrenner (1989), is focused on the relations and mutual dependence of human beings. As proposed by the theory, human progression is a mutual and life-long practice of contact between individuals and their surroundings, which unveils in a customary structure. How these structures are named is based on their distance from the

individual (Falana, Bada, & Ayodele, 2012). The individual's close environment like the school, family, and peers is the microsystem. The macro-system is comprised of the cultural context, containing the state economy, laws, cultural and political systems.

*Perceived affective behavior expressed about father absence*

The participants had to face the challenge of living without a father though knowing that he exists. This can be noted by the terms that were continuously used by the participants which reflected their emotions. Older children at the age of 17 and 18 were quite positive about their future than the younger children as they seem to understand the situation at home for something positive though they could think much of the effects the absence of the father had on them. Children between 10 and 16 are in a world of your own with discovering themselves so they do not take much attention and interest in what happens at home as compared to these who have grown quite older. This goes hand in hand with what Erikson suggested that at this age children explore possibilities and begin to look for their identity (Falana et al., 2012). If the adolescent according to Freeks (2017) explores such roles in a way that is healthy the life path will be positive and they follow a positive path and achieve positive identity.

As male children wish to identify with their fathers, if they never had a memorable relationship with their fathers it would cause negative affective behavior and they would express feelings of hatred. The findings revealed that most children did not know their fathers so they felt discriminated and unwanted when other children talk about their families. Some children mentioned that they had developed hatred towards the irresponsible parent. This was bound to have negative effects on the psychosocial development of the child. Lindsey, Brown, and Cunningham (2017) states that, the family is the ground for a child to develop as he or she have a proper relationship. Hence, if no sound relationship is built with the parent the child will not be able to have a sound relationship with anyone. The participants expressed various emotions namely, guilt, sadness, loss, anxiety and remorse. Some confirmed they tended to abuse alcohol and drugs to forget their misery.

*Perceived cognitive behavior*

Children do not just grow in their homes and the society but the school is also a great developmental environment for them. Most of the participants

explained that they had difficulties at school and faced a number of challenges. Most of the participants reported that most times they cannot get their work done in time. There also studies that were conducted earlier which reveal familiar results, Hereyah and Purwanti (2021) indicated that more academic challenges were noted from children coming from single parent headed families as the single parent which in most cases is the mother has a lot of commitments hence spending less time with the children and some mothers reported not to be educated enough to help their children with school tasks. Lamb (2016) further states that children essentially perform better at school when both parents are concerned and help when there is a difficult task leading them to score much higher.

#### *Moral behavior of children raised by a single parent*

Most of the participants who are school drop outs indicated they belonged to a gang. The reasons amongst others were a lack of socialization hence they take drugs and hang around. Most of the participants indicated that the gang is more like family to them and they make them feel better in a way. One participant indicated that not even his mother can discipline him because he knows that the father does not exist hence he does as he pleases. Thus, drawing out the fact that there are many facets of life for those individuals who are raised without a father figure present in their lives, (Karunanayake, Aysha, & Vimukthi, 2021). Drug abuse is also at its peak as they have fewer commitments and would spend most of their time with gangs in the streets. Influence from the gang turned out to be mostly negative.

### **Conclusions**

In a way of concluding the research on the perceived psychosocial effects of father absence on male children from Mucheke F community it can be noted that, there are a number of negative effects on the child due to the absence of the masculine parent. It is not easy to raise children as a single parent since one has to deal with multiple issues all alone and this may lead to spending inadequate time with the children. As children are growing up in female-headed households with mothers who are struggling to support their families their relationships with their mothers are troubled and respect for this parent appears to be lacking. Male children from Mucheke F community reported much of psychosocial difficulties which pertain to moral behavior, cognitive and affective behavior. Most of male

children experiencing father absence tend to become under achievers at school. Emotional anger, low self-esteem, feelings of loss, denial, depression amongst others are characteristics of the effects of father absence in male children. Moral behavior is at stake, when these children grow quite older they believe they are the head of the family hence giving less respect to the mother, being part of a gang and abusing drugs seem out to be their juvenile behavior.

#### *Recommendations*

The researcher recommend fathers to be part of their children's lives through-out assisting in all dimensions they can, offering help be it academically socially or behaviorally. Based on the findings of the study it would be reasonable to suggest that single parents need some counseling that may better position them to help their children develop psychosocially. Children living with single mothers should be granted the opportunity to have some contact with their fathers as it is their right.

Academically, the part of the teachers, the researcher would recommend that teachers take on to understand diversities in current families. Knowing these children will help especially the guidance and class teachers' deal with the children better with an understanding of the exact circumstances at home. Teachers must be aware that since the children spend the better part of their life at school, the school then becomes second important environment for the psychosocial development of the children that is the microsystem under the human ecological system theory. Teachers therefore need to be properly trained and equipped to deal with issues relating to the psychosocial effects discussed in this study.

There is need for civil issues to receive a big punishment if not met and a policy that forces parents to take full responsibility of their families and failure to do so to result in serious punishment.

#### *Areas for further research*

The study only focused on male children's experiences. Further research might be useful on single mothers and how they manage to compensate for the absent parent. Research on the effects on mother absence in the event of children growing up can be also useful.

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