Imagining Fatherhood through the Parenting Experiences of University Students from Poor Economic Backgrounds in South Africa

Tshivhase Vhuhwavho
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-1225-8491
University of Venda
South Africa
vhuhwavhoe@gmail.com

Kingsley Ekene Amaechi
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1594-7136
University of Venda
South Africa
kingsley101amaechi@gmail.com

Daniel Tsoaledi Thobejane
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7060-1165
University of Venda
South Africa
tsoaledi.thobejane@univen.ac.za

Abstract

While "fatherhood roles" are generally assumed to be formed along socialised masculine identities, analyses of how such socialised masculine identities are sensitive to economic realities around the people through which the identities are formulated, are hardly presented within the South African literature on gender. This article addresses this research gap by analysing how 10 purposefully selected young university students studying at the University of Venda in South Africa interpret their parental roles amid economic challenges at the university. A qualitative research methodology was followed in the collection and analysis of the data. Drawing on several semi-structured interviews with the students, the article argues that even though traditional cultural norms may form the basis for the initial perception of fatherhood, socioeconomic situations additionally provide an unpleasant but suitable background through which young people formulate a broader definition of masculinity. Economic challenges can be a catalyst for self-reflection and reassessment of family social priorities. As the study found, it provides the basis for young men to question societal expectations of masculinity, become more open and flexible to parental responsibilities that involve emotional support and nurturing to their children, and participate in domestic activities.

Keywords: academic life; fatherhood; institution of higher learning; masculinity; student-parent

Introduction

Student-fatherhood has permeated into the social space of student life in universities around the world (Moreau and Kerner 2015; Mukuna 2020; Okeke and Salami 2021). About one-tenth of male university students become parents while concurrently pursuing their studies (Cruse et al. 2019). These students often encounter distinctive and multifaceted challenges, including the management of "time poverty," housing insecurity, and financial constraints, thereby impeding their capacity to allocate substantial periods to academic engagements (Bukhosini 2019; Conway, Wladis, and Hachey 2021; Glendinning, Smith, and Kadir 2015; Lucchini-Raies et al. 2018; Okeke and Salami 2021). Furthermore, within sociocultural contexts where extramarital childbirth is associated with familial disgrace and ignominy, such students confront the dual burdens of social stigmatisation and discriminatory attitudes, originating from both familial circles and social acquaintances (Oppong and Kwame Abroampa. 2018). Such multifarious circumstances enable prevailing conditions that endanger concentration and timely completion of their academic pursuits (Oppong and Kwame Abroampa 2018; Vyskocil 2018).

The negative consequences of such student parenthood are even worse for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds in South Africa. In addition to the time management and social challenges, such student-fathers are often expected to serve as economic providers for their children (Matlakala, Makhubele, and Mashilo 2018). These kinds of expectations inadvertently create stress and force the students to seek full-time employment elsewhere, instead of devoting time to their studies. In some cases, where the understanding of the fathers' masculinity is connected to their ability to function as "breadwinners" for both their children and their "baby-mamas" (Enderstein and Boonzaier 2015; Rabe 2016), the inability to fulfil parental obligations can generate enormous pressure, which forces student parents to re-conceptualise new versions of fatherhood and masculine (Freeks et al. 2022; Zimbini and Nel 2023) that align with their socioeconomic situation. Yet, the relationship between socioeconomic conditions and emerging constructions of fatherhood among young fathers in sub-Saharan Africa (Onyeze-Joe and Godin 2020; Zimbini and Nel 2023) is hardly systematically discussed in recent South African gender studies literature (Roy, Chakraborty, and Chakraborty 2009; Swartz and Bhana 2009; Swartz et al. 2013). The current study is an attempt to address this research gap.

Three main questions guide the enquiry. Firstly, we pursue an identification of the array of challenges encountered by student-fathers in the intricate navigation of their parental obligations. Secondly, an appraisal is done of the strategies and mechanisms employed by student-parents to address the intricate economic challenges concomitant with their roles as "responsible fathers." Finally, an analysis follows of the student-fathers' justification of their involvement in parental responsibilities in the early stages of their

children's lives. Beyond the ability of these highlighted research objectives to elucidate the intricate interplay between economic circumstances and the young fathers' "perception" of fatherhood, exploration of these inquiries holds significant relevance in illuminating the nuanced complexities embedded within the experiences of an escalating populace of young male students who assume the mantle of parenthood while concurrently navigating their academic trajectories within the context of South African institutions of higher learning (IHL). The insights garnered from the probing of these questions also potentially inform the development of state and university-based support mechanisms that facilitate efficacious management of challenges encountered by this specific cohort of students. Furthermore, the inquiry can provide a distinctive opportunity to conceptualise the manifestation of agency among young people in sub-Saharan Africa in the discharge of their paternal responsibilities against the backdrop of persistent socio-cultural inequalities and the fluid evolution of masculine paradigms (Onyeze-Joe and Godin 2020).

The Social Construction of Fatherhood in South Africa

Most previous perceptions of fatherhood in South Africa (Cho, Roy, and Dayne 2021; Cohen and Kruger 2021; Deevia and Nkani 2014; Okeke and Salami 2021) have largely relied on cultural notions of fathers as breadwinners: what the South African scholar Rabe (2016, 128) calls the "breadwinner situation." Studies correctly demonstrate that there has been an unwritten assumption in South Africa that fatherhood entails not only a family's "social figurehead" but also an income earner and an economic provider for both the child and the mother (Deevia and Nkani 2014; Okeke and Salami 2021). In other words, fathers earn the much-needed respect and are regarded as "real men" and as "good fathers" when they provide material resources needed for the smooth running of their home (Cohen and Kruger 2021). Men who do not fulfil these roles are hardly regarded as "good fathers."

This normative conceptualisation of fatherhood is arguably based on the pre-colonial and pre-apartheid construction of fatherhood in South Africa, when men who fathered several children were accorded great status and respected in the household. In those contexts, as Okeke and Salami (2021) explain, the concept of fatherhood is drawn from men's ability to build a home through marriage and the payment of the "lobola." Men's value in their communities is based on their ability to reproduce heirs for their families, as well as their ability to provide sufficient economic resources to take care of the heirs. Men gain respect and power when they can provide these material resources that enable the smooth running of families and the continuity of their family names (Ampim, Haukenes, and Blystad 2020).

Also related to this is the cultural practice of paying "*inhlawulo*." "*Inhlawulo*" is the monetary or material resources provided by men when they impregnate a girl without wedlock. This payment often serves as a form of payment for the damage caused by the pregnancy. The payment is an acknowledgement and symbolic acceptance of fatherhood (Madhavan and Roy 2012). Men who do not pay such damages are often not

recognised as "legitimate fathers" of their children. In many cases, they are even restricted access to their children until the damages are paid. Such tradition has remained pervasive and continues to help reinforce the conceptualisation of fatherhood in financial and economic terms in the contemporary South African space. In situations where men fail to fulfil such financial obligations (irrespective of the circumstances), they develop a sense of inadequacy that affects other aspects of their lives (Kubeka 2016; Madhavan, Richter, and Norris 2014; Richter et al. 2012; Swartz and Bhana 2009; Swartz et al. 2013), including feelings of uselessness and emasculation, as the study of Ratele, Schefer, and Clowes (2012) found. Some who could not bear the shame have, in some cases, chosen to disappear from the scene rather than continue to remain in the lives of their children (Paranjothy et al. 2009).

Admittedly, this kind of thesis is valuable in the sense that it foregrounds the role of culture in the conceptualisation of "fatherhood" in South Africa, but it has hardly theoretically captured the changing perception of fatherhood among the younger generation in sub-Saharan Africa. Several recent studies (Ampim et al. 2020; Onyeze-Joe and Godin 2020; Zimbini and Nel 2023) have highlighted that many younger generations of Africans are moving away from traditional notions of distant or authoritarian father figures. There seems to be a gradual acceptance of involved, nurturing and emotionally connected fathers, who actively participate in their children's lives. This shift is partly influenced by global trends, increased education, and exposure to new parenting ideas.

Besides being inadequate, theoretical analyses of the concept of fatherhood that are based on the traditional breadwinner understanding obscure agency and neglect the fluidity that characterises how actors constantly reconstruct social phenomena amidst their socioeconomic situations. People constantly restructure their views of social phenomena based on continuously changing realities and choices that are available to them. Based on these, they often deliberately renegotiate their identities (including masculinities that form the basis of ideas of fatherhood) and shift their lives' focus in terms of how they make sense and add value to the new ideals (Ampim et al. 2020). Most traditional breadwinner analyses of fatherhood in South Africa have hardly accommodated this.

One of the few previous studies to have included the changing perception of fatherhood and incorporated the fluidity involved in the changing perception of fatherhood among young people in South Africa, is that of Ratele et al. (2012). In re-defining "fatherhood," Ratele et al. (2012, 558) point out that being a father incorporates more than being an economic provider, but also being psychologically present in the life of the child. A father—in line with this narrative—is supposed to be available to tutor and nurture his child. It entails a set of practices, which are enabled or constrained by structural forces in the child's upbringing. This is how Ratele et al. (2012, 559) describe it:

> While the meaning of fatherhood, and as such good family life, changes and is temporally and spatially contingent on the quality of how adult men in children's lives engage with their children appears to be important, as nurturant and supportive men engaged in their care, are valued. In most cases ... an under-appreciated element in fatherhood is "fatherly presence"; not necessarily and only physical presence per se but also "important presence" as a dialogical, psychosocial relationship.

The idea of being psychologically involved in parenthood not only complements the initial "breadwinner-ness" conceptualisation of fatherhood, but also provides an opportunity to accommodate the growing recognition of gender equality and men's growing acceptance of previously designated domestic roles as part of masculine identities (Ampim et al. 2020; Onyeze-Joe and Godin 2020). Within such conceptualisations of fatherhood, young African men can, alongside values of providing for their families, begin to also conceptualise ideals such as "emotional involvement" as adult masculine traits that indicate demonstrations of love and affection in the family setting.

While these new ideals may indicate a shift away from established socio-cultural gendered expectations of hegemonic masculinity and an initial economically buoyant "breadwinner-ness" concept of fatherhood, they, however, do not fully demonstrate young people's ability to construct a social identity (including masculine identity) that aligns with their socioeconomic situation. Studies (Komarovsky 2004; Seward and Rush 2016) show that unemployment or underemployment can affect the ability to fulfil one's role, leading to adaptations in family dynamics. This means that a young father's willingness to share household and parenting responsibilities with their partners may be more of his ability to adapt to his current socioeconomic situation rather than the challenging traditional gender roles in his society. Accepting shared financial responsibilities makes it practically possible for the young man to navigate his current and evolving socioeconomically difficult social terrain.

The current study incorporates this kind of analysis in the exploration of 10 student-fathers' performance and justification of their fatherhood responsibilities within the South African university's socio-cultural milieu. This means understanding how the students—who mostly come from economically disadvantaged families in South Africa (Amaechi, Thobejane, and Rasalakoane 2021)—exercise agency in fulfilling what they believe is their "fathering responsibilities" under conditions of pervasive social inequality and constantly changing economic situations (Ward, Makusha, and Bray 2015). Our assumption, based on previous studies (Nikiforidou and Holmes 2022; Okeke and Salami 2021), is that fulfilling such responsibilities at an IHL in South Africa is particularly challenging. It entails finding ways to navigate the difficult time-poverty situation and financial demands. As a result of this, the student is likely to deliberately try to reconstruct a sense of "masculine identity" and fatherhood that fits into their socioeconomic milieu, and through the choices that are available to them. "Masculinity," in this sense, is a negotiated concept that is based on constantly changing social realities around the individuals' environment.

Methodology

This article forms part of a larger ongoing qualitative research project, which investigates the relationship between the "new construction of masculinity among youths" and the difficult socioeconomic experiences of young people in the South African university space. In particular, the study phenomenologically explores how young student-fathers perform and justify their parental responsibilities in a rural-based university setting in South Africa. Given that phenomenology-based research design focuses on in-depth analysis of "real-life" behaviours and the experiences of people, this approach can provide nuanced insight into the emerging and changing notion of fatherhood that seems to be shifting from the established sociocultural-gendered expectations of hegemonic masculinity (Ampim et al. 2020). Moreso, the approach is also able to help provide significant insight into parental-care challenges and needs of student-fathers within the South African social space.

Data Collection

For the data, the study primarily relied on in-depth, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews through a set of questions posed to research participants, of which the idea was to probe for an in-depth understanding of the research subject (Hiver, Al-Hoorie, and Larsen-Freeman 2022). Semi-structured interviews were quite appropriate for this study, as this method allows participants to freely reflect on "their" realities and experiences on a subject matter that they may otherwise take for granted (Hiver et al. 2022).

A total of 20 interviews (with each of the participants being interviewed at least twice) were conducted over three months between March 2020 and May 2020. These interviews were conducted telephonically. Initially, the plan was to conduct these interviews face-to-face. Unfortunately, this plan was discontinued because of the Covid-19 pandemic's restrictions in South Africa, which made it impossible to carry out such activities during the pandemic (Amaechi et al. 2021). Alternatively, the researchers considered using other mediums such as Zoom, Google Meet or Teams. However, these were also discouraged because of internet network connectivity problems that characterised the rural accommodation of the participants at the time. As most participants lived in rural areas (with poor internet connectivity), attempts to use internet-based media such as Zoom, Teams, and Google Meet returned poor sound and blurred videos of the participants. After failed attempts, it was decided that the best possible option was telephone interviews. Admittedly, this option limited the study's ability to capture non-verbal clues from the interviews, which is important in qualitative research; it nonetheless provided substantial data for analysing student-fathers' experiences with parenthood. It also ensured that the researchers avoided any possibility of physical contact that could potentially put the participants in harm's way.

Most of the interviews were conducted by the first researcher. Before the interview sessions, a rapport was developed with each participant to create a friendly environment

for the discussions to occur. During this rapport, the researcher also shared the study objectives and invited them to participate. All the participants were asked to sign a consent form, where details of the research, including the aims and objectives, were expressed. An interview guide was also developed to serve as a guide for the researcher during the interview process. This interview guide was, however, used flexibly. Discussions covered essential themes, such as: what it means to be a good father; the expected roles of fathers during nursing and raising of the child; what kind of support a father should provide for the mother and the child; how to deal with the baby mother's family; what rights should the father have over the child. These themes were useful for exploring the young students' construction of their parental responsibilities.

Notably, the interview times varied from one participant to the other depending on the location and the interviewee. On average, each discussion lasted for about 30 minutes. The discussions often ended when it became clear that the interviewees had exhausted their thoughts on their experiences.

Population and Recruitment of Participants for the Study

Ten students between the ages of 18 and 24 participated in the study. At the time of the study, these participants were first-time parents who became fathers while pursuing their education at the University of Venda. They had children between the ages of six months to three years and came from poor economic backgrounds, in which case the ability to provide financial support for their children may have been very difficult. Focusing only on this set of participants (first-time parents, whose children were below the age of three) was purposefully meant to capture how the intersection of socioeconomic situations and parental exposure to infant cues may shape the parental caregiving behaviour of the student-parents. Paternal roles and behaviours of parents are shaped by social experiences at the earliest stage of parenthood (Rajhans et al. 2019).

Eligibility for participation was based on the following criteria:

1. Be a registered male student at the University of Venda.
2. Be under the age of 25.
3. Have a child or twins between the ages of 0–3.
4. Have the ability to communicate in English or Tshivenda (the local vernacular).
5. Be a beneficiary of the South African National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) to cover fees for tuition, accommodation, study materials, and meals. This criterion was meant to accommodate the poor economic background of the student.

Table 1: Detailed biographic information of the participants

Name	Age	Level of study	Number of children	Gender of children	Age of children	Relationship with the mother of the child	Home language
Phindulo	23	3rd year	1	Girl	1 year	In relationship	Venda
Manzhi	21	2nd year	1	Boy	2 years	Separated	Venda
Emmanuel	20	2nd year	1	Girl	1 year	In relationship	Pedi
Mpho	24	3rd year	1	Boy	3 years	In relationship	Tsonga
Tete	21	2nd year	1	Boy	2 years	Separated	Pedi
Olugaho	20	2nd year	1	Girl	10 months	Separated	Venda
Rue	19	1st year	1	Girl	6 months	In relationship	Swati
Lolos	24	2nd year	1	Boy	2 years	Separated	Tsonga
Joe	23	2nd year	1	Boy	3 years	Separated	Venda
Zwivhuya	23	2nd year	1	Girl	1 year	Married	Venda

The selection of participants for the study was largely through non-probability, purposive and snowball sampling techniques, which started with the identification of two participants from the first researcher's "call" for participation. This "call" was circulated on the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences' students' email listing. Through a referral from the two respondents, the researchers were able to identify another eight participants from the three faculties, namely: a) Faculty of Science, Engineering and Agriculture; b) Faculty of Management, Commerce and Law; and c) Faculty of Health Sciences at the university. This relatively small size of the sample was not necessarily considered problematic, given that the primary focus of the study was not the generalisability of the results, but an exploration of undocumented perspectives of male students' parenthood and emerging conception of masculinity.

In addition to its ability to provide the targeted population for the study, the use of the snowball technique for participant recruitment solidified the building of rapport and trust in the data collection process (Zohrabi 2013). The referral or use of chain sampling in this method meant that prospective participants in the study were often friends, acquaintances, and classmates of the other participants, who had already built trust relationships within a network (Bless, Higson-Smith, and Sithole 2013). Through these

relationships, most of them had trust and were very comfortable speaking with the researchers about their own experiences of parental responsibilities during the interviews.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data set was based on Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-step thematic approach. This includes, step 1: familiarisation with the data; step 2: generation of initial codes; step 3: searching for themes; step 4: reviewing of themes; step 5: definition of themes; and step 6: writing-up.

To ensure the credibility of the analysis process, all the researchers were involved in the data analysis. We started familiarisation with the data through a detailed transcription of the interviews from audio to written format by the first and last researcher. With this done, it was easier for other researchers to read and re-read the data. The generation of initial codes and searching of themes followed. Here, statements which stood out for the research were identified and categorised in a simple Microsoft document, using colours. Major issues were also recognised and organised as codes, separately by the researchers. The generated codes were then constantly compared with other researchers to ascertain the objectivity and dependability of the data. As these codes synchronised, it became easier to categorise them in terms of how they addressed the young fathers' construction of fatherhood responsibilities.

Furthermore, we proceeded with the fourth step, which entailed reviewing themes. This involved categorising all significant responses and all the recurring thoughts from the participants' statements in a way that related to the research questions. By categorising the codes, we were able to classify and attach conceptual labels to the data. This, in turn, made it easier to organise and interpret the data in the final stages, involving the presentation and write-up of the data in a narrative form.

Ethical Considerations

Some important ethical considerations were adhered to throughout the research process. These included the use of telephonic interviews rather than face-to-face interviews, which ensured that the researchers avoided any possibility of physical contact that potentially put the participants in harm's way, as the research was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic. Other considerations included getting informed consent, and maintenance of voluntary participation throughout the study. This means that all the students who participated in the study had deliberately expressed interest and were provided with the details of the study before participating in the study.

Finally, the confidentiality of the participants was maintained by attaching pseudo-names (such as Rue, Olugaho, Joe, Phindulo, Tete, Manzhi, Emmanuel, Lolo, Mpho and Zwivhuya) to the participants. These names were also used to present the participants' views in the data presentation below.

Results

The analysis of the participants' narratives suggests a strong relationship between poor socioeconomic situations and the construction of fatherhood among young fathers in South Africa. This is based on three main generated themes below: a) feelings of being stressed out; b) support structures; and c) being physically present.

Feelings of being stressed out

Based on the narratives from the data, feelings of being stressed out were influenced by three interrelated challenges: financial, psychological, and academic.

Financial Challenges

As students who benefited from NSFAS funding, the participants had no challenges with paying their tuition fees, accommodations fees, cost of textbooks, and transportation costs. However, they struggled with meeting other financial obligations their studies demanded. This included participation in sports and other extra-curricular activities, which could enrich their university experience. The students also struggled to find funds to cover expenses,such as clothing, toiletries, and day-to-day essentials of their student lives.

These challenges were further exacerbated by the additional economic demands of another human being, who, among other things, needed clothing, shoes, diapers, and other necessary materials for his/her existence. As a result of this, most of the participants were forced to find alternative ways to seek funding while continuing with their studies, including doing part-time jobs such as petrol meter attendance at filling stations, salesmen at shops around the campus, and hawking fruits and other perishable items. With such additional income, they were able to have additional funds to take care of their kids. However, even with these, they found it difficult to balance being able to provide for the material needs of their children and being good students at an institution of higher learning. Below is how two of the participants, who lived together with their children's mothers, expressed it verbatim:

> Due to the amount of pressure I have, I felt like I needed to get a job. If I don't bring home additional income, I won't be financially available for my child. ...This was super stressful. I have to balance this, or I lose out completely. (Phindulo)

> My son is my responsibility. ... I make sure that I reserve for my child at least R500 from the R1500 food allowance I get from NSFAS. …This is still not enough, as I am left with nothing to sustain myself. I can't even ask anyone because I know my parents don't have anything. It causes me a lot of stress and anxiety sometimes; I go without food because the money I have left can't get me through the month. (Lolo)

> It is difficult to avoid stress in my situation when you realise that you do not have the resources to take care of your responsibilities. How can my child need something, and I

am not able to provide it, and I relax. It is not possible. ... These things make me stressed even up till now. It hasn't stopped. (Phindulo)

Psychological Challenges

In addition to the financial challenges, participants' narratives indicate that the participants were also troubled by psychological challenges that had come from additional responsibilities resulting from being parents. This includes worrying whether their children could sleep well at night or not; worrying whether they occasionally had good or bad days; or whether they would recover well from certain illnesses. Such worries bring an enormous amount of stress that is very difficult for young fathers to handle. Manzhi, for example, who had a two-year-old son and was separated from his child's mother at the time, recounted how the stress that came from such worrying nearly got him depressed and made him almost quit his studies. It also made him question his fatherhood identity, and whether he was actually a good father:

> Most of the time when I think about my child ... I cry, I feel like I am failing at being the best dad. It is stressful to think about not doing enough for your child and also thinking about the amount of schoolwork I have. How can I have responsibility for this human being when I can hardly take care of myself? I asked myself, am I ever going to be able to do this? Will I ever be a good father to him? (Manzhi)

Manzhi's separation from his girlfriend could have introduced additional emotional and practical complexities into his life. Relationship breakdowns can often lead to heightened stress and emotional strain, which could have potentially compounded the challenges associated with being a young father and a student. The demands of managing his education, financial constraints, and the needs of his child might have intensified his stress and made it difficult for him to deal with the situation.

Academic Challenges

Being stressed out and anxious was influenced by the continuous academic activities. Taking time to deal with parental activities (other than studies) took a toll on the participants' studies. Firstly, they didn't have time to attend lectures; secondly, they couldn't do their assignments; and finally, they couldn't submit their presentations. As these happened, the students' grades suffered, as Sangawe's (2020) study also found. Olugaho and Rue, whose children were younger than one year, described it as follows:

> In this first year when I had my child, I failed almost all my modules. I couldn't attend classes, no lectures, nothing. I only did a few presentations. How do you expect to pass under such circumstances? Of course, I failed many of the modules. (Olugaho)

> It is not easy to be a student and attend to your parental duties in the first years of the baby's birth. … It is during this time, that you are expected to help your partner more. You have to help her with the cleaning and other house chores. You also have to stay up all night with her with the baby. When this happens in my case, I find it difficult to

deal with my academic duties. I hardly have the energy to do my assignments and prepare for classes. (Rue)

Participants' inability to fulfil their academic demands underscores the challenging trade-off that students are confronted with, wherein they must make a difficult choice between attending to their academic commitments and fulfilling their responsibilities as parents. On the one hand, they are enrolled in educational programmes that demand their time, attention, and dedication to meet coursework requirements, assignments and deadlines. On the other hand, they bear the essential responsibility of caring for their children's well-being, which includes providing emotional support, physical care, and creating a nurturing environment. When they opt to focus on taking care of their children, the consequences can extend to their academic performance.

Support Structures

According to the data, the participants relied on two main support structures to deal with some of the challenges associated with parental responsibilities, namely: a) the students' families and friends; and b) the university support structures.

Families and Friends

From our findings, one way the families and friends helped the students deal with the challenges was through the provision of funds and additional economic support to help the students take care of their kids. Coming from a culture where families and friends conceptualised kids as belonging to the entire family, the families and friends were often willing to sacrifice their own time, money and other resources to make sure that the students provided the necessary assistance their children needed. Below are some statements from the participants:

> My family is a blessing to me. They have supported me in ways I could not have imagined. ... They support me financially and emotionally; they always have a way of being there for me when I feel like giving up. I'm grateful. They sacrifice their time, their energy, their money ... everything that I need. (Zwivhuya)

> My father pays for most things related to my studies and helps me when I need help with my child. Not only that, but I also get great guidance from him, and I find it so helpful. ... So, you see, whenever I encounter challenges, I know where to run for help. (Rue)

For participants, it was also important to single out the role of other friends, such as female friends and other male student-parents. These sets of people, according to the participants, provided the emotional support that helped male student-parents carry along the difficulties of being a student-parent. This is how Phindulo put it:

> My support system is my family and other male student-parents, who happened to be my friends. When I'm away from home, my friends help me with the child. They also encourage and give me the emotional support I need for the task of being a young parent.

They support me when I'm at my lowest. They understand because they can relate. (Phindulo)

Manzhi also had a similar narrative:

My current girlfriend (who is not the mother of my child) is very helpful to me. She helps me a lot when I'm at my lowest. She is the only one I tell my problems to; she understands and knows how to lighten my moods. I know when I am at my lowest, she's the only one who can understand me and talk to me. (Manzhi)

The University Support System

Other than family and friends, student-parents in the study described how support from the university also played a very important role in helping them deal with their challenges. These include the provision of access to kindergarten (within the university premises for both students and staff), albeit expensive, and access to psychologists and social workers, who can, in general, advise students with such needs. With the availability of kindergarten in particular, student-parents have a nearby daycare centre that helps them take care of their children when they need to attend classes.

Having admitted the usefulness of these structures, most participants were also quick to criticise the university for their inability to introduce policies that are more child-friendly on campus. For instance, they criticised the university's policy of not allowing children at the undergraduate and postgraduate residential hostels on the campus. What that means is that student parents do not have the possibility of living together with their children if they intend to live within the university premises.

Well, we live here in Venda, but my girlfriend and I are from the Northwest, I have a very small family and my parents are always working. My girlfriend, on the other hand, is an orphan. Now, due to these circumstances, we live with our child here in a rental home because no student accommodation allows children. We can't split up as we have to support each other, and we do not have enough money. UNIVEN, on the other hand, makes no effort to help us. (Phindulo)

Being physically present

Most descriptions of fatherhood from the participants' narratives had an assumption of fatherhood responsibility that entailed the emotional presence of the student-father, which we categorised as "physical presence." The idea here is not that being a breadwinner or being "economically present" is not an important aspect of parenthood. This is also important. However, what is most important is not to ignore the spiritual presence of the father, over and above his provision of material needs to both his child and the mother. Such physical involvement is useful for the children's general growth and mental development. This is how two of the participants put it:

I must be there for my child before anything else. This is because I feel that is an important part of my duty. In my time, my father worked so much that he was not

physically there for us. I only saw my father on festive periods and holidays. ...I know he tried his best to provide for me and my siblings, but he missed the most important part. I don't want my child to have that kind of experience, or to feel the kind of void I felt. I'm going to make sure of that with my child. (Rue)

I don't want to be just a father who is there financially, I want to be there for my child, emotionally, physically and otherwise. That's what makes me a man. I am a man. ... Being there is the most important part of my job as a father. (Olugaho)

Furthermore, physical presence, as the data reveal, also entails active participation and engagement in various aspects of the children's lives and taking up roles that may have been previously regarded as feminine roles. These include bathing the child, feeding the child, putting the child to bed, dressing the child, and so forth. In the participants' views, these kinds of activities foster strong parent-child bonding and relationships, promote children's overall development, and contribute to children's long-term success. This is how Joe, who claims to have been involved in the life of his child for three years, expressed it:

My son's mom and I are no longer together so we exchange weeks with our son, I do everything by myself when I'm with my son, from changing the diaper, bathing, potty training and taking him to crèche. I've never missed an opportunity to do these things. I have also never missed an important day in his life. He's three, and our emotional bond is strong. (Joe)

Discussion

This study set out to explore student-fathers' perception of fatherhood from their performance and justification of parental responsibilities in a rural-based university setting in South Africa. The objectives were to identify the array of challenges encountered by student-fathers in the complex navigation of their parental obligations; to appraise the strategies employed by student-parents to address the intricate socioeconomic challenges concomitant with their roles as "responsible fathers"; and to evaluate the student-fathers justification of their involvement in parental responsibilities in the early stages of their children's lives.

The findings show that student-parents were able to justify involvement in parental responsibilities through a formation of masculine identity that includes the physical presence of the father. Being physically present in this sense includes engagement in activities such as potty training, changing diapers for the kids, bathing them, taking the kids to pre-school, putting kids to bed, and playing with them when necessary. Even if these kinds of activities are traditionally considered feminine in the South African context (Amaechi et al. 2021), they were adjudged as significant for strengthening the fathers' bond with their children.

However, being able to engage in these activities comes with significant challenges: financially, psychologically and academically. These challenges constituted a major

source of stress, under which the student-fathers were hardly able to cope with their studies. To manage the situation, the students often relied on material resources and the scant institutional support received from the university, as well as from informal support structures (friends and family members). Such forms of support, as previous studies (Cho et al. 2021; Cohen and Kruger 2021; Estes 2011; Lucchini-Raies et al. 2018; Nikiforidou and Holmes 2022) show, constitute a good pillar of support and substantial coping mechanisms for student-parents to cope with the challenges of student-parenting. In the most difficult situations, the students also took up extra jobs and resorted to petty trading that assisted them in raising funds to enable them to participate in the lives of their children. These efforts and positive attitudes towards physical presence and participation in the lives of their children show a sense of responsibility towards fatherhood that is rarely mentioned about young male fathers in South Africa's youth studies literature.

The direct relationship between stress and the management of fatherhood responsibilities for students has been discussed in previous literature (Chili and Maharaj 2015; Marandet and Wainwright 2010; McCourt 2018). The argument is that stress does not only hinder students' ability to concentrate and manage their time effectively, but it can also exacerbate the already existing challenges and make it difficult for them to perform well academically. Also, in dealing with stress, some student-fathers might resort to unhealthy coping mechanisms that further hinder their ability to engage in academic activities effectively.

The student-parent perception of fatherhood responsibilities to include more of the father's physical presence aligns with other findings (Freeks et al. 2022; Enderstein and Boonzaier 2015; Ratele et al. 2012), which affirm that despite the dominant cultural conceptualisation of fatherhood, contemporary young South African fathers could develop a more balanced conceptualisation of fatherhood that is beyond the breadwinner phenomenon. The student-fathers' perceptions of fatherhood responsibilities revealed an understanding of masculinity that differed from how fatherhood and parenting have been understood in most contemporary South African literature (Deevia and Nkani 2014; Okeke and Salami 2021; Rabe 2006; 2016). Rather than financial provision, emotional involvement and psychological presence (referred to as physical presence) seem to become the new keywords that define fatherhood responsibilities.

The incorporation of the involved and physical presence of male partners in the understanding of fatherhood significantly supports the new emerging perception of fatherhood within the new generation of sub-Saharan African youths (Ampim et al. 2020; Onyeze-Joe and Godin 2020; Zimbini and Nel 2023). The understanding of "fatherhood" within these kinds of literature studies arguably evolves as part of the emerging concept of masculinity, which accommodates men's emotional and practical contributions, caregiving and provision of succour in intimate partner relations and family dynamics. Drawing on this new conception, contemporary parenting paradigms have evolved, where fathers actively engage in nurturing, caregiving, and guiding their

children's development. This, as the findings in our study also show, challenges the traditional gender roles, which have often cast fathers as distant providers, while positioning mothers as primary caregivers.

Equally significant in the findings of the current study is the demonstration of the close relationship between men's personal socioeconomic experience and their changing construction of fatherhood. The student-fathers' construction of "fatherhood," which includes engaging in care activities, had happened in the context of difficult socioeconomic challenges. Young men often re-evaluate their values and renegotiate their masculine identities. In the face of socioeconomic difficulties, they often deliberately shift their life's focus and actively renegotiate their fatherhood responsibilities (Glendinning et al. 2015; Komarovsky 2004). Such shifts and acceptance of new values make it practically possible for them to navigate their current socioeconomically unpleasant terrain. This constructed understanding of fatherhood identity is rarely mentioned within South Africa's gender studies literature.

The relationship between socioeconomic experience and the changing construction of fatherhood can also be extended to how the students' socioeconomic conditions invertedly form the basis for living out the constructing ideas of fatherhood. As the findings show, socioeconomic situations not only influence the construction of new fatherhood ideas, it also bring young fathers closer to their constructed fatherhood responsibilities. The inability to be the sole financial benefactors of their children and children's mothers meant that the young fathers' possibilities of being involved in the lives of their children (both for those who were still in a relationship with their children's mother and those who were not) became limited to participate in caregiving activities or provide material resources. Under such limited possibilities, it made sense that physical, emotional and spiritual involvement in the lives of the children became more appealing since they had little material resources to give (Ward et al. 2015).

Limitations of the Study

One significant limitation of this study is its inability to draw from a larger population of young fathers from poor backgrounds. Focusing only on fathers from one university meant that the findings could hardly be generalised for all young fathers from such backgrounds in South Africa. A quantitative study that draws from a larger sample of young men from poor backgrounds, including those from outside IHL, could provide more nuanced generalised results.

Furthermore, the reliance on the specific kinds of participants that were based on referral opens up the study to inherent biases. Such biases may have limited the study's potential to produce less premeditated outcomes.

Recommendations

The findings from this study have implications, particularly for South African university authorities. Firstly, the importance of developing a more child-friendly student residence system that accommodates student parents and their children on the campus. This may include possibilities of having free or affordable daycare centres within the university campuses and around the residential buildings that make it possible for student-fathers (or student-parents in general) to take care of their kids, while concurrently pursuing their studies. Such accommodation may improve the learning environment conditions for the student-fathers.

Secondly, the possibility of providing opportunities for student-fathers to create specialised support groups for student fathers. Creating such specialised support groups tailored to the unique needs of student-fathers can offer an invaluable platform for mutual assistance and shared experiences, as such groups can provide a safe space for student-fathers to discuss their challenges, exchange advice, and access emotional support. Such support groups can also foster a sense of belonging and camaraderie, which may help to mitigate feelings of stress and helplessness that student-fathers encounter due to their dual roles.

Conclusion

The current study shows that there is an array of challenges for student-parents associated with raising children, upon which student-fathers deliberately draw to construct a sense of fatherhood responsibility that fits into their socio-economic milieu. Traditional cultural norms may form the basis for the initial definition of fatherhood; socioeconomic conditions can additionally provide an unpleasant but suitable background through which people formulate a contextual fatherhood identity. Fortunately, this conceptualisation of fatherhood identity can contribute to an emerging form of "masculine identity," which is based on care and other forms of support for children and women.

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