MATERNAL NON-DISCLOSURE OF A CHILD'S BIOLOGICAL FATHER: METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS FROM A JOHANNESBURG STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Due to a dearth of research on mothers who have not disclosed the true biological identity of fathers to their children, there is lack of information on suitable methods for studying this topic. This article aims to share some methodological experiences from the field. Eight one-on-one narrative interviews were conducted with participants who were mothers or female guardians of a child who did not know his or her biological father. The study was located in Johannesburg and explored circumstances that contributed to non-disclosure of a biological father. Participants were recruited through snowballing and were a non-probability sample. They were aged between 33 and 60 years. Each participant was interviewed once. Methodological reflections reported here cover recruitment, interviews and ethics. This article reports a challenge with recruiting middle-class participants when gate-keepers felt that the topic was sensitive and may have legal repercussions for participants. We report on successful recruitment via online platforms and face-to-face community-based announcements. Whilst the response to recruitment was vast, not all interested parties were eligible, including men who did not know their fathers. Women in this study mainly opted for one-on-one interviews instead of focus group discussions. There was a challenge

with maintaining complete privacy as some participants themselves agreed to have other family members nearby during the interview. Also, working in this community posed challenges with obtaining member-checking and receiving feedback on the transcripts. This article reports on a number of experiences that are relevant for future similar studies with women in low-income settings. The article suggests an adoption of gender-sensitive recruitment strategies with sensitivity regarding the gendered social gaze that is directed at women who have not disclosed the father's identity to a child. The positive response from prospective participants indicated willingness from the general population to talk to researchers about unknown fathers. Ethical imperatives such as auditory and visual privacy and the imperative to conduct member checking need to be adapted for local contexts.

Keywords: mothers; qualitative methods; South Africa; unknown fathers; undisclosed paternity

To date there is only one study from South Africa that has been conducted with women (and female guardians) who live with a child who has not been told the identity of his or her father (Nduna, under review). Though there are a few publications in this research area of unknown and absent biological fathers these report on studies that have been conducted with young people or with men (Clowes, Ratele, & Shefer, 2013; Langa, 2010; Nduna & Jewkes, 2011b; Nduna & Sikweyiya, 2013; Phaswana, 2003). This leaves no reference for researchers interested in studying this topic with women on how to go about designing their studies, what factors to take into account when conducting interviews and how ethics apply in this research. This article aims to contribute knowledge in this area by reporting on the authors' experiences from one such study. The findings of this study are reported elsewhere, and the focus in this current article is only on the methodological reflections.

Undisclosed father identity refers to a situation where a person has not been told who their father is; they may know or may not know the person, but are unaware that he is their father (Nduna & Jewkes, 2011b; Padi, Nduna, Khunou, & Kholopane, 2014). In a number of papers mothers are somewhat blamed by participants for keeping secrets (Langa, 2010; Nduna & Jewkes, 2011b; Phaswana, 2003). This raised interest in the researchers to study this question from a mother's (or female guardian's) perspective. This study focused on women's experiences as the major burden of child rearing is left upon women with minimal societal judgment on men who abscond from their paternal obligations. The aim of this article is to reflect on the methodological journey and make recommendations for future research. At the time of undertaking this study and writing this article, we were not aware of any other published article, which had investigated this topic. Known methodological reflections in this field are based on research conducted with children (Nduna, Khunou, Sikweyiya, Pambo, & Mdletshe, 2014; Nduna, Sikweyiya, Khunou, Pambo, & Mdletshe, 2014).

METHODS

Study design

An exploratory qualitative approach was chosen to guide the examination of the phenomenon within a South African context. This approach was appropriate as it provided information of personal stories and lived experiences and is beneficial for investigating areas where there is insufficient information about the phenomenon (Gray, 2004). Data were analysed from the perspective that people socially and symbolically construct their own realities, thus allowing for a more human-centred way of generating knowledge by making meaning of the subjective data provided by the life experiences of the participants (Burger & Luckman 1967; Langdridge, 2007, cited in Rowlands, 2005). Data were collected using narrative interviews. The narrative method permits for the teller to bring sense to an event or experience and may also be useful in revealing varying meanings and reasons for action (Kiguwa, 2006). Interviews were mainly conducted in homes whilst two participants opted to meet in public spaces. The interview commenced with the researcher asking the participant how they related to the subject under study, and the interviews lasted an hour on average.

Research sites

Participants for hermeneutic phenomenological research have to be varied enough from one another in order to garner the salient feature(s) about the phenomenon. Thus, four culturally and socio-economically diverse sites from the Johannesburg Metropolis were identified for the study. There were contacts who could assist in gaining entry to the communities and the geographical location permitted ease of travel. Roodepoort is described as an ethnically heterogeneous district, which encompasses the suburb of Florida. Even though the affluence level varies, the residents of the area can be classified as middle class (Chipkin, 2012). It can be said that Mondeor shares the ethnically heterogeneous aspect with Roodepoort, and in a study about social interaction between races conducted in the area, interviewed participants categorised the neighbourhood as a middle class community (Jewan, 2009). Another site was Diepkloof in Soweto. A study by Mafukidze and Hoosen (2009) reports that determining the affluence level in Diepkloof is not easy as the area is divided into several zones, with some zones predominantly housing informal settlements, and some zones exclusively housing the African middle-class segment. Another study reports that households in this area are deemed to be generally poor, and unemployment rates are very high (Strassburg, Meny-Gibert, & Russell, 2010). The last site, Freedom Park, is described as a semi-formal settlement area characterised by high unemployment levels where most of the residents rely on social grants (Kgobe, Baatjes, & Sotuku, 2012). More details about the participants, their location and relationship to the child are tabled elsewhere (Manyatshe, 2004).

Study Participants

Mothers and guardians are located ubiquitously in society but due to the phenomenological 'idiosyncrasy' or rather particularity of the type of mother key to this study, purposive snowball sampling had to be used. Purposive sampling was suitable as the target population had been defined. The inclusion criteria were that (i) the woman was either a mother or a guardian, (ii) the child under her care did not know their biological father (iii) the mother or guardian had not told the child who the biological fathers is. Initial contact was made at a place where mothers can be found (such as schools), and those mothers could assist in referring and recruiting more mothers who meet the criteria. According to Trochim (2006) snowball sampling is an efficient and useful method to locate populations who are not readily accessible. The technique allows a referral network to develop and consequently permits for the possibility of including more participants meeting the sample criteria. The shortcoming of this technique is that its success is dependent on the initial contacts and connections made, as well as the ability to keep the information flow going. Besides meeting the criteria as set out in this study, a pivotal ethical precondition to recruiting participants is that they have to be willing to participate and to talk about their experience. The target number for this study had been six to ten, and eight willing volunteers were suitable to be included in the study.

Description of Participants

Out of the eight participants included in this study, three of the women were guardians of children who did not know their biological fathers, and five were biological mothers. The circumstances around the women obtaining guardianship varied. Two participants became guardians due to the children being maternal orphans, and in one case the biological mother had "abandoned" the child in the guardian's care. The women's ages ranged from 33 to 60. Five of the participants were from Freedom Park and three came from other areas within Johannesburg. Seven of the women were of African descent and one was Caucasian. The education level of the Freedom Park women ranged between primary and high school levels. The participants from the other areas had all completed their high school education, and two of the women had postgraduate degrees. During an interview, it was found that one of the participants (Janice[1], 45 years old) had grown up not knowing her father's identity and her child was raised with an absent father whose identity had been disclosed to the child.

ETHICS

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of the Witwatersrand's Non-Medical Human Subject Ethics Committee (protocol number H120418) as well as the Psychology Department's internal ethics committee before the commencement

of this study. The study was conducted under the guidance, mentorship and training of an experienced researcher (second author) in the subject and all ethical concerns that presented themselves during the study were communicated to her, and her advice was taken accordingly. Potential participants who did not respond to follow-up emails were deemed as not being interested in participating in the study and the researcher respected this choice. Potential respondents were informed that filling out the screening questions had no financial benefits, and the purpose of the survey was to assess if mothers and guardians met the criteria to be included in an ensuing academic study. As the information sheet had not been translated from English, participants from Freedom Park were verbally informed about the contents in their own languages (Zulu, Sotho and Xhosa) during recruitment and prior to the interview. Pivotal aspects relating to informed consent (voluntary participation, right to withdraw, guaranteed confidentiality and consent to be audio recorded) were reiterated before the commencement of each interview and participants affirmed their understanding by signing the informed consent sheet. Audio recordings of this study ensured an accurate capturing of the data, and are kept safe and secured together with all the raw data as a paper trail for auditing and quality assurance purposes. The researcher adhered to the strictest confidentiality. Interviews were conducted between June and August 2012, and permission to keep the data for future learning purposes was verbally obtained from the participants. In order to protect identities pseudonyms and aliases were assigned to any names that were mentioned in the interviews. Research strategies were altered where appropriate to ensure that the participants' wishes were not infringed upon; these are discussed in the findings section that follows.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Recruiting Participants

The first author was responsible for the recruitment of participants. She telephonically contacted Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), nursery, primary and high schools to request their assistance in facilitating recruitment of the participants. The heads of the schools and NGOs were briefed over the phone about the study and an information sheet was emailed to them. The schools placed an advertisement in their newsletters inviting mothers and guardians to be volunteers in the study, and for interested mothers to contact the researcher through email or to send a text message to a mobile number.

A lesson that we learnt was that some of the schools were not in agreement with forwarding the information sheets about the study to mothers, which one particular school labelled as 'touchy'. It could be said that the school administrators acted as gatekeepers for the community and decided on behalf of the community what a

'touchy' topic was. Although we do not dispute that research on undisclosed father identity is sensitive, findings from previous recent South African studies suggest that undisclosed father identity is a publicly known phenomenon yet not freely spoken about experience (Nduna & Jewkes, 2011b; Nduna, Khunou et al., 2014; Nduna & Sikweyiya, 2013) and some affected mothers are willing to unreservedly talk about their experiences. As researchers, we see barring access to participants on the basis that this is a touchy subject as bordering on oppressing the voices of prospective participants who may be willing to participate. This negates that the greatest harm that can be done is to ignore such research questions. Perhaps communities need to be educated that concerns about the sensitivity of some topics should take a secondary place to concern for those who may benefit from the research.

In Florida, an NGO that helps with skills development among single women had initially agreed to assist with the recruitment process. We were later informed that after the head of the NGO discussed it with the women involved, the organisation was unable to assist further as the women deemed being involved in the study would have adverse (legal) consequences for them. The anticipated legal consequences were not spelled out, but the researchers responded by accepting the fact that they declined further participation. This is the second lesson learnt and it is an aspect that may suggest that perhaps people's awareness of children's rights prompted them to think that it was illegal to not tell a child who their biological father was. Another possibility could have been that a wrong biological father had been identified and was known to the child, a phenomenon reported in a similar study in this province. Until recently, there was no provision even on the South African birth certificate to register a child's biological father's information (Department of Home Affairs, 2013). We do not know yet, with the proposed unabridged birth certificate, if failure to disclose the father's information will be prohibited and it is still unclear what mechanisms the State will use to enforce this progressive move to include information about both parents.

Our third experience was that minimal interest was generated through the newsletters distributed by the schools as fewer than five mothers sent emails requesting further information about the study, and no participant was secured from this. This could either mean that mothers do not read school newsletters or, as reported previously, individuals from higher socioeconomic classes are harder to recruit in studies as affluent people perceive fewer benefits and more inconvenience in participating in research (Human Science Research Council, 2012; Richter, Norris, Pettifor, Yach, & Cameron, 2007). The less enthusiastic response from Mondeor can be contrasted with the more personal approach in Freedom Park which yielded a more positive response. In this district, an NGO dealing with orphans and vulnerable children invited the researcher to a meeting with the guardians to brief them about the study. During this meeting, participants were verbally informed about the study. Women who were interested in participating provided their contact details and

were advised that they would be contacted at a later stage to schedule the in-depth interview. Even though the women had been enthusiastic about participating, some of the guardians could not be included as they did not meet the recruitment criteria.

Upon initially contacting one of the assisting nursery schools in Mondeor, the headmistress remarked that the issue of undisclosed fathers was pertinent to her situation as she was tired of the number of children whose fathers' details were not provided on school application forms. When questioned, the mothers would often say that the father was deceased. She stated that this occurrence had become so common that she had started requesting death certificates as verification. As we uncovered this practice, which undoubtedly arose out of the headmistress's frustration, we experienced tension in learning that this unofficial practice may make life difficult for mothers and guardians who at times use the statement that the father died as a more socially acceptable way of communicating that the child's father is '*unknown*'(Manyatshe, 2013). This may also pose a challenge for mothers who are unable to access death certificates of their long estranged partners as asking his family for this may raise suspicion of their intentions. Officials in various government departments are reported to misuse their positions of power and ask for documentation to verify a father's deceased state when there is no official requirement to do so (Mohale, 2013; Wamhoff & Burman, 2002). This is disingenuous and at the most affects poorer women who are unemployed or in low income and precarious jobs and where failure to produce the father's identity or death certificate can be used to wrongfully deny the mother (or guardian) access to maintenance, a support grant, or schooling for the child.

Selecting suitable participants

Apart from the issues raised above, which highlight some of the challenges with recruiting participants for this study, in this section we explore challenges with getting suitable volunteers. An online and paper-based survey with short screening questions was created to evaluate if participants met the criteria to be included in the study. The screening questions collected some situational information about the participant, for example: "*Are you a mother?*" ["*Yes*" or *"No"*]; "*Do you have any children under your care that do not know the identity of their father?*". This question was qualified with a sub-script, which explained that perhaps the mother had not disclosed or that there may be another reason. Participants who responded "*yes*" to the survey questions were considered suitable for participation in the study. The survey had provision for respondents to leave their contact details so that they could be contacted to schedule an interview. In line with the snowball sampling principle, respondents were kindly requested to forward the online survey link to other females who they thought would be interested in participating in the study.

Our experience was that the use of screening questions was an efficient and

time conserving method. The survey allowed for the responses to be compiled in a spreadsheet format indicating when the survey had been completed and which respondents had responded positively to the inclusion criterion question. The online screening survey obtained 42 respondents of which 11 responded *"Yes"* to the criterion questions. This indicates that there were people who showed interest, but they did not meet the criteria as set in the screening questions. Prospective participants' enthusiasm illustrates that the concern for sensitivity and concern about illegality as reported in the preceding findings section may not be necessarily shared by all women. In terms of handling volunteers and determining those who met the criteria, the online screening proved to be less laborious. It was an easier and less cumbersome way compared to physically recruiting volunteers only to turn them away because they do not meet the criteria. We can assert that this means that there are people who want to participate in being interviewed and sharing their stories, even though the topic is viewed as sensitive in some circles. People want a platform to express their experience, and the cathartic value that people may find talking about their experiences has been documented (Nduna, Sikweyiya et al., 2014).

Some respondents had expressed initial interest in participating in the study but did not respond to further emails scheduling an interview day; in such cases we did not persist with contact. Only one face-to-face, in-depth interview was secured using the online recruitment. To augment our recruitment process, a regional radio station was approached to assist. Information about the study was announced during a live show and listeners were given the researcher's contact details. It was mostly men who had grown up not knowing who their fathers were who called the researcher to enquire more about the study. We interpreted these finding to probably indicate that in a low socioeconomic context women share their experiences because it is more culturally acceptable for them whereas non-participation of middle-class people could be linked to them not perceiving benefits and it could be that the internet may have aroused suspicion in terms of who is the researcher.

In the Freedom Park area, participants had expressed interest to volunteer in the study based on the researcher mentioning to the women attending the NGO meeting that she was conducting research on children who do not know their fathers. The aforementioned statement could not be qualified with "*and the guardian has not told the child who the father is*" as participants were being recruited in a group setting and this would have potentially alienated prospective volunteers. The group's literacy level also did not permit the paper-based survey to be conducted. The biography tool was included to ascertain the context of undisclosed paternal identity and to reaffirm the suitability of including the participant. Some of the questions required "*yes*" or "*no*" responses and included: "*Father's whereabouts known*", "*Mother/ guardian has told child who (biological) father is*". This tool also served to collect demographical data, age, race, age of the child, et cetera, and other information that could contribute towards the findings. These questions were asked at the end of the

interview and the form was completed by the researcher. The inclusion was very beneficial as it facilitated triangulating some of the information that had already been provided in the interviews and some participants were prompted to provide further valuable details as the form was being completed.

Data collection and the interviews

Due to the unavailability of previous studies, and in order to ensure that we explore pertinent issues around the phenomenon of maternal non-disclosure we had aimed to use some of the findings of the focus group to ground the questions for the in-depth interview. Women facing maternal non-disclosure in a group setting would have provided varied views and insight into some of the issues that were of concern to them and these would have been explored further individually (Patton, 2002). All participants were given an option to choose how they preferred the in-depth interview to be done (i.e., email, telephonic or face to face). They were also asked if they were comfortable participating in a focus group. Providing options on how the interviews would be conducted was an approach to put potential participants at ease so that those who wanted to maintain a higher sense of anonymity by having an email or telephonic interview could still be included (Turney, 2005). This principle was also borrowed from the feminist ideology of allowing women to express themselves in a space which they are comfortable in (Brayton, 1997; Sarantakos, 2005). In our study, there were an insufficient number of participants interested in sharing their experiences in a focus group discussion (FGD). The Freedom Park participants had been clear that they would prefer in-depth interviews. This contrasted with Nduna's work, where participants unreservedly contributed their experiences in a group setting (Nduna, 2014).

The interview schedule was based on the objectives of the study. They were open-ended questions, which allowed probing and for participants to respond in their own words. The schedule's questions were translated into the local language (Zulu and Tswana), to ensure that the core issues of the investigation were still maintained in the translated format. This process also allowed the researcher to familiarise herself with the interview schedule.

The first author conducted all the interviews at a time convenient for both participant and researcher, which was mostly over weekends or after working hours. Two to three interviews were scheduled per Saturday. The women were asked to suggest a meeting place and most of the participants invited the researcher to their homes. Herzog (2005) acknowledges that interviews dealing with highly private issues are best conducted in the home of the participants as the setting would offer a sense of "intimacy" and "friendliness". However, in our experience one participant suggested meeting at a coffee shop and another was also insistent the interview took place in a public space and not at her home. She explained that she did not want her

husband, who was not the biological father of her son, to know that she was involved in discussing her son's biological father, as he would not approve. We honoured this women's concern regarding possible partner wrath.

Conducting interviews at the participants' homes allowed a certain degree of comfort for the women as it was their personal space. However, it brought certain challenges as there would sometimes be disturbances. For instance, the researcher tried to ensure auditory privacy by requesting to be alone with the participant during the interview, but this was not always possible. The interviews were conducted during winter and in Freedom Park where the households are situated in very small spaces, it was at times inevitable that a family member would be nearby. The researcher made the participant aware of this and the women acquiesced to the family member's immediacy. The length of the interviews ranged from one hour to one and a half hours. There were two anomalies involving interviews that lasted about 30 minutes each.

During the interviews, a finding that perplexed the researchers was that some guardians freely discussed the undisclosed paternity issue around the children who are under guardianship whereas they themselves were mothers to children who did not know the identities of the biological fathers, but did not discuss their own non-disclosure. As both the participants and the interviewer were women, we hope this allowed a certain level of rapport and comfort. Gender-matched interviews are normative in similar studies and are encouraged in order to avoid gender power dynamics, create a safe space for women and encourage honest disclosure (Nduna, Sikweyiya et al., 2014). The interviewer was considerably younger than most of the guardians and they may have felt that they could not discuss some aspects of their lives. Previous experience ensured that the researcher was comfortable interviewing the women. However, this did not necessarily mean that the participants themselves would be comfortable sharing some aspects of their stories. As the researcher is instrumental in eliciting data through interviews perhaps interviews with older women should be conducted by similar aged women to allow for greater rapport and trust.

Although the researcher had familiarised herself with the recording device, problems were encountered with a microphone resulting in three interviews that were not recorded. Equipment failure is a common challenge which has been noted in the literature (Easton, McComish, & Greenberg, 2000). The data were however salvaged by explaining to the participants what had occurred and requesting their willing assistance in scheduling another interview. The second interview inadvertently triangulated what was said in the first interview as similar questions were explored. During this process the researchers became cognisant that the actual interview between the researcher and the participant is a multifaceted, temporal interaction that can never truly be recaptured even through the second interview. As the researcher downloaded the audio at the end of each interview day, notes were

made while they were still fresh from memory and forwarded to participants to validate the contents.

The interview took the form of a conversation and commenced with the interviewer asking the participant how she related to the topic under study. This allowed free expression without constraints of a specific question. It was an interactive dialogue where the interviewer attentively listened as the participants told their narratives, and issues of interest that arose were probed further lest they shed new light on the topic. The conversation narrowed from the general to the more specific as questions from the interview guide where addressed when it was appropriate for probing to occur. A retrospective approach facilitated by memory and language was required as the participants needed to reflect on their past lived experiences (Kahn, 2000). Adequate time was spent with each participant to ensure that all had been said. Some participants became emotional during the interview, and they were offered the option to stop the interview and assistance from the referral inventory was offered, which they declined. Disinterest in taking up referral is reported in similar studies with affected children (Langa, 2010; Nduna & Jewkes, 2011a).

Transcription and analysis

A transcript should be understood as text that "re-presents" what was said during the interview; a re-construction of reality. Thus the main challenge in any transcription process is to ensure that the transcript retains the trueness and intended meaning of what was said during the interview (Ross, 2010; Setati, 2003). The researcher transcribed each of the interviews, and the transcription per interview was done over a period of two days. The first day consisted of transcribing the audio into the text and the second day was for checking the accuracy of the text against the audio and verifying that the punctuation reflected the meaning of what was said. The researcher developed a transcription format with the first interview which served as a template for subsequent transcribed interviews. The transcription template as recommended ensured that the textual data for all transcripts were generated in a consistent and systematic manner and ready for analysis (Easton et al., 2000). The transcripts were on average 14 pages, with the shortest interview yielding five pages and the longest 20 pages. As the spoken word and the textual format are never the same, to give a bit more depth to the text, the transcript included underlining words and phrases which were emphasised when they were said by the participants, gestures and emotions expressed during the interviews were described in the transcript, and ellipses were used to notate the participants' pauses. The one noted challenge was that interviews conducted in public spaces had certain segments that were inaudible due to intruding sound from the environment, and this was noted in the transcript. As there was a lapse of time between when the interview was conducted and when the data were analysed, further notes were initially included in order to enhance

understanding about the context in which certain things were said, and what the researcher understood as being implied at the time.

While verbatim transcription was possible for the interviews conducted in English, interviews conducted in Setswana, Xhosa and Zulu had to be translated and transcribed into English. Even though certain strategies can be used to facilitate the translation process, it important to acknowledge that the cultural component within a language means that at times ideas, concepts and feelings might not always translate in the exact form from one language to another. One example that comes to mind is that in Setswana, social convention dictates that certain words be used to convey respect when addressing someone older than oneself. Even though the described social convention was used during interviews it could not be reflected in the translated transcript resulting in a loss of some cultural meanings. Furthermore, some terms from local South African languages may have multiple English equivalents that can be selected to "re-present" what was said (Masanyana, 2005). An illustration is the Setswana word, *re tla simulla,* meaning 'we can *start',* the phrase 'we can *begin'* can also be used when translating. Thus during the translation process it can be said the first author "interpreted" how the non-English participants expressed themselves based on assumptions about meaning equivalence of what was said which makes the translator a cultural broker in the process (Temple & Young, 2004). Irrespective of the language used, utterances carry with them a set of assumptions, feelings, and values that the speaker may or may not be aware of. Furthermore the conversation is still filtered and understood within the researcher's experiences and world sphere which may not necessarily be conveyed in the receiver's understanding (Temple & Young, 2004).

Nonetheless, for this study the translated transcripts endeavoured to capture the nuances and meanings as intended by the participants and as understood by the researcher without compromising the validity of the data. The translation process was a negotiation between (i) capturing exactly what was said (substituting the African word with English equivalent when available), (ii) retaining the original meaning, (iii) making grammatical sense in the target language, as well as (iv) communicating the social meaning of what was said, in line with the ethos of a covert translation. The fact that the first author had conducted and translated the interview was beneficial, as when a selected word did not adequately signify what was actually said or meant, the researcher could recognise this. A native speaker of that particular language would be consulted to obtain the next best match, which at times was not available. In those cases a transliteration was provided with the word or phrase italicised in the original language and the implied meaning provided in parenthesis. For some bilingual participants the interview was conducted mainly in English and the conversation moved back and forth to their native languages. For purposes of this study the non-English parts were translated. All audio was checked against the text by both authors independently to ensure a proximal match. Three

transcripts were sent back to the participants who had email addresses for member checking and verification, and only one participant (Pamela, 33 years old) responded back and was in agreement with the contents.

During data analysis, the transcripts were read and re-read in an active manner in order for the researchers to familiarise themselves with the breadth and content of the data. Each response in all of the individual transcripts was coded, sentence by sentence, and text that supports the code was extracted and grouped accordingly. Data were analysed inductively. Microsoft Excel was used for this analytic process as it provided an efficient and user-friendly framework for cutting and pasting the relevant codes and supporting textual responses onto a spreadsheet. Each transcript had its own provisional sub-themes, which were then collated for the entire data set. The entire data set was then re-read to verify that the provisional themes form a logical pattern within each transcript and in relation to the whole data set, bearing in mind how these themes related to the study's objectives and research questions. Thematic maps indicating the relationship of themes and sub-themes to each other were formulated and the themes (and sub-themes) were further refined and defined. This process involved writing a detailed account about what the theme is about and how it related to the overall data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researchers then interpreted the themes against further literature reviewed and these are reported elsewhere (Manyatshe, 2013).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The experiences as described here contribute to an understanding of how to conduct similar studies with women. This article suggests that gender neutrality is not appropriate when researching women who may have life experiences that they assume are illegal, for instance holding back disclosure of biological paternity from a child. Women's assumptions of what this means to the society and their experiences of a judgmental society towards them means that we should adopt gender-sensitive recruitment strategies and, most importantly, interpret the findings with awareness of the gendered social attitudes and norms. As the recruiter did not speak to all prospective participants in person, but through gatekeepers in some sites, the picture about non-participation of middle-class mothers and guardians remains partial. We cannot conclude with certainty that they are unavailable, as some seemed forthcoming when recruited through the online forum. Perhaps if the recruiter had had an opportunity to speak to the prospective participants in person, the outcome would have been different. The two reasons given by the gatekeepers, the school principal and the NGO Director, that the topic was touchy and may cause legal implications for the women, were presented as being in the interest of the women and therefore non-participation was meant to protect the women. We conclude that this has other consequences as it contributes to a culture of silencing of women's

experiences and does not elevate the issue of non-disclosure of a biological father to a scientific and political level for it to attract attention. It relegates the issues, which contains so many oppressive elements, to a private and domestic sphere. This experience, which seems so much like a private, personal or cultural issue, is also a political one and should be addressed as such (Manyatshe, 2013). More research is needed in this area in order to experientially learn and develop research guidelines on how to conduct ethically and methodologically sound studies with women on undisclosed biological father identity.

Declaration of conflict of interest

We declare that we have no financial or other competing interests.

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ENDNOTE

1   Not real name.

BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

Livhuhani Manyatshe completed her Master of Arts degree in research psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand. She is working within a multi-disciplinary research interest group that examines Father Connections in South Africa. The focus of her study was on mothers and guardians who do not disclose to their children who their biological fathers are, and the findings of the study have been presented in numerous local conferences, including The *Southern African Students' Psychology conference*. Her other research interests include public policy issues, community psychology, neuropsychology and social psychology.

Mzikazi Nduna (PhD) is a NRF Y-rated scientist and an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa. She has research interests in HIV/AIDS, Father Connections, sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender and gender-based violence and psychological distress pertaining to women, children and sexual minorities. She is an alumnus of the Sexuality Leadership Development, the Carnegie and the ICP CHANGE Fellowships. She has co-authored 31 peer reviewed journal articles, presented in international and local conferences and reviewed articles for more than five international journals. She is a member of the gender-based violence Prevention Network for the Horn, East and Southern Africa and the SANAC Women's Sector Expert group.

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