

YOUNG UNMARRIED FATHERS' EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF FATHERHOOD

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This article is based on a qualitative research study focusing on young unmarried fathers' experiences and perceptions of fatherhood. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine fathers in KwaZulu-Natal. The participants had a total of fifteen children, four of whom lived with their fathers and paternal families. Findings indicated that high unemployment, non-payment of maintenance and cultural damages, and disputes with mothers and maternal families impacted significantly on father-child contact. All the participants wished to be more involved with their children and their conception of fatherhood extended beyond being just a provider to more nurturing roles.

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INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, in response to a previous dearth of literature on fathers and fatherhood in South Africa, researchers have been paying increasing attention to these issues. Some of the research focus areas include the following. Swart and Bhana (2009) conducted an in-depth study in Durban and Cape Town, focusing on the voices of 27 teenage fathers in the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. Ratele, Shefer and Clowes in 2012 reported on men's construction and experiences of fatherhood and fatherlessness based on a qualitative study they conducted with 29 men in the Western Cape. Based on a Birth to Twenty cohort study in the Johannesburg-Soweto area Madhavan, Richter and Norris and Hosegood (2014) reported on fathers' financial support of children in contexts of chronic poverty and unemployment, and on father contact following union dissolution (Madhavan, Richter and Norris, 2016). Lesch and Kelapile (2016) conducted a qualitative study with six single Setswana-speaking black unmarried fathers in Pretoria and reported on their experiences of being restricted from becoming involved in their children's lives. These studies are of importance for the development of appropriate policy and for informing social work practice.

This article aims to add to the literature on fatherhood and is specifically focused on young unmarried fathers. The need to hear the voices of men has been noted by South African scholars. Luchtmeyer (2015:110), for example, has called for more researchers to focus on men in order "to hear the stories men and fathers have to share". The main aim of this study was to explore young unmarried fathers' experiences and perceptions of parenting their children. It sought to answer the following questions: What are young unmarried fathers' current relationships with their children? What are the factors influencing child-father contact and involvement? What are unmarried fathers' views of fatherhood? The key objectives of the study were thus to describe young unmarried fathers' relationships with their children and to understand the main factors influencing child-father contact and care. In addition, unmarried fathers' views of fatherhood were explored.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research study was conducted in the Hibiscus Coast municipality (recently renamed the Ray Nkonyeni local municipality) which falls under the Ugu District in KwaZulu-Natal. This municipality was chosen as the location for the study because it is characterised by significant high school dropout rates and youth unemployment, high teenage pregnancy rates and large numbers of female-headed households (Hibiscus Coast Municipality, 2016/2017).

A qualitative interpretive research approach and a descriptive research design were used to obtain data from nine young unmarried fathers. This approach was appropriate, because an interpretive researcher is concerned with developing in-depth understanding of participants' lives and believes that "the best way to learn about people is to be flexible and subjective in one's approach so that the subject's world can be 'seen' through the subject's own eyes" (Rubin & Babbie, 2013:56). The approach allows for less structured data-collection methods to be used in order for rich descriptions to emerge.

The theoretical framework of the study was social constructionism, which indicates how individuals create knowledge, make sense of the world around them, and construct reality and a view of themselves (Teater, 2010; Andrews, 2012). Reality and a view of oneself are seen to be constructed from one's experiences and perceptions (Teater, 2010). Social constructionism was thus used in the study as a means to examine unmarried fathers' views and experiences of fatherhood and its impact on their behaviour.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal ethics committee. Permission to conduct interviews in the area was obtained from the Mavundleni Traditional Authority. Participants were first informed about the purpose of the interview and given the opportunity to ask questions about the research. In addition to consenting to the interview, participants' consent was also obtained to voice record the interviews. Confidentiality was ensured.

Non-probability purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used. The sampling criteria were as follows:

- African unmarried fathers – aged 18 to 35 years. For the purpose of this study the age group of 18 to 35 was used because 18 years is defined as the age of majority in the Children's Act, 38 of 2005. The upper limit of 35 years was determined by the National Youth Policy 2015-2020 (The Presidency, National Youth Policy, 2015), which defines young people as falling within the age group of 14 to 35 years;
- Having a child who was at least a year old and who was conceived outside of marriage;
- Not currently living with the mother of the child;
- Residing in the Hibiscus Coast local municipality.

In obtaining the sample, first two young unmarried fathers who met the above criteria were selected. These two identified fathers were given the first author's contact details to give to other unmarried fathers who wished to participate in the study. Three participants who were referred by the first two participants met all the study criteria and were included in the sample. A further four participants were obtained through snowball sampling. Interviewing of each participant continued until saturation was reached, that is, no new relevant information was being generated. A total of nine young unmarried fathers aged between 18-29 years were interviewed in 2016.

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide with identified themes. The advantages of semi-structured interviewing as a method of data collection for this study were primarily its naturalness and spontaneity, flexibility, control of the environment and direct contact with the participants (Rubin and Babbie, 2013). Semi-structured interviews also allowed for in-depth probing of participants' experiences and behaviours (Guest, Namey & Mithell, 2013). A further advantage of the semi-structured guide was that it ensured that all identified themes were covered, irrespective of sequence. Questions could also be adapted for each interview to follow up on the answers given, so as to obtain clarity when needed. The interviews lasted approximately an hour per participant. Initially one interview was completed, translated and transcribed to check if any changes needed to be made to the semi-structured interview guide and if more probing was needed. The remaining participants were then interviewed until saturation was reached. All participants consented to the interviews being voice recorded. Additional handwritten notes were taken during the interviews. Interpretative analysis was then used to analyse the interview data. The analysis involved five steps, namely, familiarisation and immersion, inducing themes, coding, elaboration, interpretation and checking (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006).

The interviews were conducted in IsiZulu by the first author and subsequently translated into English. A potential inhibiting issue anticipated prior to the research was that the interviews were being conducted by a woman. In order to address this the researcher, who lives in this area, was mindful of being culturally sensitive. This was achieved by showing respect, which included not standing while a male participant was sitting down, using a lower tone of voice and a conservative dress code. Social work techniques for building rapport were also applied to create an environment conducive to open discussion. No communication problems were experienced during the interviews and none of the participants expressed any reservations about being interviewed by a woman.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

In the discussion below, a brief profile of the participants is first presented. Then the themes and sub-themes which emanated from the data are discussed in relation to each of the research objectives. Pseudonyms are used in this article to protect the identity of participants.

Profile of the participants

The ages of the participants ranged between 18 and 29 years. Two of them were 17 years old when they fathered their first child. From the mothers' ages as provided by the participants, some of them were also young at the time of pregnancy, with at least three below the age of 18 years and the youngest aged 15 (some of the participants did not know the ages of the mothers). Despite the teenage pregnancy rate decreasing nationally (Ward, Makusha & Bray, 2015), in this municipality it is on the increase (Hibiscus Coast Municipality, 2016/2017: 71). McCloy (2013) noted that many young men in South Africa became fathers as young as 17 years, whilst Swart, Bhana, Richter and Versfeld (2013) found that in KwaZulu-Natal young men may become fathers from as young as 14. Statistics South Africa (2017) reported that nationally about 5.1% of females aged 14 to 19 years were pregnant in 2015.

In this study the nine participants had a total number of 15 children. Six of them had one child each. The other three had two, three and four children, respectively, all from multiple partners. Although in this study the majority of participants had just one child, the findings of Levto, Van der Gaag, Greene, Kaufman and Barker (2015) revealed in their State of the World's Fathers' Report that many young South African fathers have more than one child with different women.

Participants' relationships with their children

In order to provide a context for the discussion of the study results, a brief synopsis is provided of relevant sections of the Children's Act, 38 of 2005. The Act, which came into force in 2010, provides that all biological mothers have automatic responsibilities and rights with regard to their children (section 19). However, only certain categories of unmarried biological fathers acquire automatic responsibilities and rights. To acquire automatic responsibilities and rights to their children, unmarried fathers must be living in a permanent life-partnership with the mother. Alternatively, a father may acquire automatic responsibilities and rights if he has consented to be identified as the father, has paid damages in terms of customary law, and contributed towards the maintenance of the child (section 21). Fathers who have not met the section 21 requirements and thus do not have automatic responsibilities and rights may acquire these by entering into an agreement with the mother (section 22). An unmarried father may also acquire responsibilities and rights through the courts (section 23). Thus under the Children's Act unmarried fathers may acquire responsibilities and rights in various ways (see further Schäfer, 2011; Heaton, 2012; Bosman-Sadie, Corrie & Swanepoel, 2013; South African Law Reform Commission, 2015).

Four responsibilities and rights are stipulated in section 18 of the Children's Act. These include caring for a child, maintaining contact with a child, contributing to the financial maintenance of a child and acting as guardian of a child. Unmarried fathers may acquire some or all of these responsibilities and rights. All unmarried fathers, whether or not they have responsibilities and rights, are legally required to provide maintenance. For more details on the nature and extent of each of these responsibilities and rights see Schäfer (2011), Heaton (2012) and Matthias (2017).

A significant finding of this study is that none of the participants knew that they could either automatically acquire responsibilities and rights, or obtain these through agreement with the mother or through the courts. The arrangements with the mothers and/or the maternal families thus tended to be informal. Only four of the 15 children lived with their fathers. These children, however, were not living alone with their fathers. Other family members in the household included participants' mothers and sisters, who assisted with the daily care of the children. Financial constraints affecting their children's mothers were identified by three of the participants as the main reason for them and their families (the children's paternal families) assuming care responsibilities. For example, Qaphela revealed that his

partner had difficulty supporting their child financially and he therefore took on this responsibility. In the quote below he discusses how the arrangement was made:

"I think the child was one week [when he came to stay with me]. I said [to the mother], let's have an agreement here. If I take this child, the child will be mine. I support him and I do everything for him...or you take him and you do everything for him ... choose ... and she was not powerful in finances ... and she saw that she must give up the child ... now the child stays with me ... the child lives at my home."

Similarly, Mqondisi indicated that his child had to stay with him, because he did not have the money to pay for a crèche. He therefore decided to care for the child at his home.

"The child stays here at home with me ... even though she [the mother] did not want to – we fought about it ... she had to go back to school ... I had no money to pay for crèche for the child and she wanted to go back to school, so she was forced to let me stay with the child."

The participants above clearly used their financial leverage to get the mothers to give up care of their children. Phrases such as *"she was not powerful in finances"* and *"so she was forced to let me stay with the child"* show how the unmarried mothers' lack of finances crucially influenced the living arrangements of the children.

Khulekani somewhat differently cited the mother's unsuitable lifestyle as the main reason for him taking on the care of his child:

"...[she] wanted to go out, jive and drink alcohol freely ... Because at the beginning she was very stubborn [not allowing me to stay with the child], then later on I do not know what happened, she just became soft and weak and allowed the child to stay with me and my family."

It is clear from the above comment that the mother gave up her child with some reluctance and that the father's construction of her reason is his reflection of the situation.

None of the four fathers whose children were living with them and the paternal family had acquired responsibilities and rights formally in terms of the Children's Act. These fathers were unaware of the legislation and therefore the legal requirements. They had not entered into legal agreements with the mothers and neither did they acquire responsibilities and rights from the courts. The consequence of this is that, whilst the fathers are providing physical care and maintaining the children, all the guardianship responsibilities and rights rest with the mother (who is the legal guardian), or with her guardian if she is a minor (section 19(2)). This means that the father will have to obtain the mother's consent on an application for a passport or other legal matter requiring a guardian's signature (see further Matthias, 2017; Matthias & Zaal, 2016).

The fathers were identified on only three of the 15 children's birth certificates. These participants did not know what this meant in relation to their parental responsibilities and rights. However, Khulekani, whose child lives with him, indicated that because he is not registered as the child's father, the child cannot access his family's medical aid. The problem is compounded by the fact that the mother's whereabouts are unknown. Some of the other participants indicated that they did not know their children could be registered with their surnames. None of the participants understood the nature of legal guardianship, including one participant who is a social worker.

Aside from the four children living with their fathers and paternal families, the other eleven children lived with their maternal families. In the South African context this finding is in line with national statistics indicating that mothers are primarily responsible for the care of children. For example, only 4.3% of children live with their unmarried fathers in KwaZulu-Natal (Hall & Budlender, 2016). The study statistics are also in line with Letamo and Rakgaosi's (2000) earlier finding that day-to-day care is mostly provided by mothers and maternal families. Similarly, Hall, Meintjes and Sambu (2015)

found that most children born of unmarried parents in KwaZulu-Natal stay with their mothers and the maternal families.

Of the study participants whose children did not reside with them, only three had regular contact through visiting the children and by way of telephonic communication. The reasons given for irregular contact or no contact by the other participants included unemployment, non-payment of cultural damages, and disputes with the mother and or maternal family. These barriers to contact are discussed in more detail in the section below.

Factors inhibiting father-child contact and involvement

Unemployment

None of the participants living apart from their children was permanently employed. Two were at tertiary institutions and received financial aid and the others participants relied on temporary jobs. The temporary employment included work in construction, supermarkets and restaurants, and one participant was tutoring at a University. Only one participant had a continuous source of income for maintaining his children. This participant was a self-employed traditional healer. The other participants' child maintenance payments were ad hoc and irregular. Research has shown that non-payment or irregular payment of maintenance impacts adversely on fathers' meaningful involvement in their children's lives, since they are unable to meet their needs for financial support (Makusha, 2013; Madhavan, Richter & Norris, 2016). Swart *et al.* (2013) found that young fathers were rejected by mothers' families if they were unable to contribute financially. The following comment by Vusi in the present study illustrates this:

"The maternal family said our relationship should stop because I am not bringing anything for the child."

Unemployment further impacted on the ability of participants to pay cultural damages, which is discussed next as a factor.

Cultural damages

As mentioned earlier, the Children's Act indicates that payment of customary law damages is one of the factors to be considered when determining whether an unmarried father is eligible to acquire parental responsibilities and rights. The legislature thus recognised the significance of cultural practices and how they determine ongoing relationships between unmarried fathers and mothers and their families. Payment of damages in terms of cultural law differs among ethnic communities; in Zulu culture it may include virginity damages, maternal family cleansing damages and child damages (see Letamo & Rakgoasi, 2000). As will be shown below, an unmarried father in the study locality and/or the paternal family may be expected to pay all three categories of damages or just one or two. Payment may be made by giving cattle, or money equivalent to the cost of cattle, as the tradition requires (Letamo & Rakgoasi, 2000).

Virginity damages are payable to the maternal family to compensate for the fact that the education and marriage future of a girl tend to be adversely affected by an extramarital affair (Letamo & Rakgoasi, 2000; Mkhize, 2006; Lesejane, 2006). Traditionally, once the maternal family has discovered that their daughter is no longer a virgin, they go to the boy's family to report the matter (Langa & Smith, 2012). After the young man acknowledges his action, his family takes responsibility to negotiate *inhlawulo* (damages) and payments of *inkomo kamama* (virginity beast) or money equivalent to it (Langa & Smith, 2012).

A similar process is followed to claim child damages after the discovery of pregnancy. The maternal family reports the matter to the paternal family for the payment of compensation (Hunter, 2006; Swartz & Bhana, 2009). The cultural practice of maternal family cleansing refers to payment of damages for the disgrace caused to the family for impregnating their daughter outside of marriage (Letamo &

Rakgoasi, 2000). Payment may be made either by the unmarried father or the paternal family (Letamo & Rakgoasi, 2000).

Previous studies have shown that payment of damages by unmarried fathers is likely to result in their being granted contact with their offspring (Lesejane, 2006; Edin, Tach & Mincy, 2009). Makusha (2013) found that in African communities in KwaZulu-Natal, an unmarried father was likely to be recognised by the mother and the maternal family only after he had paid damages for impregnating her, or after paying bride wealth. In addition, failure to pay cultural damages could lead to the maternal family denying a father access to his children (Swart *et al.*, 2013).

In this study, whilst most participants expressed a desire to pay for child damages and maternal family cleansing, they did not all feel the same way about the payment of virginity damages. Themba, for example, did not see the need to pay virginity damages, because the mother of his child was impregnated during group sex. He did, however, accept the child as his when she was three years old, because he dreamt that she was his:

"I did not take her virginity. It is for the one who started, he is the one who needs to pay. It's better to pay what I know. The virginity damages have nothing to do with me, the damage that I'm connected with is the one for the child. I will cleanse the family and pay for the child only."

The participant Nhlakanipho stated very similarly: *I will pay only for the children. For both the mothers there was no virginity.* A third participant, Balo, acknowledged that he was responsible for the payment of virginity damages, but did not do so because he was unemployed and could not afford to pay. He thus only paid for family cleansing and child damages in relation to the first woman he impregnated:

"I went to respect the elders for impregnating their child. I then bought blankets, child's clothes and sheep to respect the family. I was supposed to ukhlonipha [pay respect to] her mother and father ... but due to the extended family I ended up buying for all of her family members. I paid for the child and cleansed the family."

Balo indicated that his payments for damages had a subsequent positive impact on his relationship with the three children he has from this mother, since he is allowed regular contact with them. He has subsequently had a child from another relationship and has not paid any cultural damages to the second maternal family. He revealed that he is not allowed to have a relationship with this child.

Participant Mhlengi paid damages to three maternal families. He indicated that, as a result, he has a good relationship with all these families, which enables him to remain involved and maintain contact with all his children:

"I paid for three of them ... the first one I paid R6,800, the second one I paid R4,000 and some money and this one I paid R7,000 that goes with a goat. The first one I paid for her virginity and the goat yokhlawula isisu (pregnancy damages). The second one – I haven't paid for the child – just for virginity damages before she got pregnant. For the last one – I have paid for her ... what is left now u ukuthi ngiyokhokha amalobolo [is to pay for the bride]."

While some participants did not report any negative effects from not paying damages, two participants indicated that they were affected. Balo's failure to pay child damages for the child in the second relationship as discussed above resulted in the mother and the maternal family prohibiting him from having contact with that child. Participant Vusi was also not allowed contact with his child because of non-payment of cultural damages:

"I did not pay for damages and her family no longer allows the child to come to my home ... and I separated from the mother. Everything is caused by [not paying] damages ... If I want to see my child, she says... ulikhipha lonke elokuthi kuzomele ngiqale ngiyokhokha inkomo"

yesaphulo [I must pay a cow for damages first]. I do not even know when I will get a job to be able to pay these damages to be able to see my child. . . She (mother of child) was being told by her family that she was selling herself for free ... They were saying that my mother has an educated person because I was in college. Why does he fail to pay child damages because he can pay big money at school?"

Although all of the participants in this study were aware that they were expected to pay cultural damages and purported to be willing to pay (except for the virginity damages in some cases), many cited financial constraints as the reason for not paying. Khulekani put this as follows:

"Inhlawulo... inhlawulo [damages] no no no, for now the situation is not allowing ... You see, I do not have enough money since I am not working. You see even at home they do not have enough money."

Nhlakanipho had negotiated with the maternal family of a child who is not living with him to pay the cultural damages only once he was employed:

"They [maternal family] spoke with me, they told me that since I made damage, I must make sure that before the child grows old I must pay damages ... since I made a mistake."

Aside from unemployment and its impact on payment of maintenance and cultural damages, other factors also inhibited father-child involvement. These are discussed below.

Distance, gatekeepers and disputes

For three of the participant fathers, a significant barrier to contact was that the mothers of their children subsequently moved to distant locations that were harder to visit. For two of these fathers, this was compounded by disputes with maternal grandmothers acting as gatekeepers. Themba indicated that he had irregular contact with his child because of their separate locations and the fact that the maternal grandmother did not allow direct communication. He thus had to wait to make arrangements with the mother, even though the child lived with the maternal grandmother.

"That is what makes it to be difficult, because I have to wait for the day when the mother would be at home. I need to tell the mother, and the mother would then tell her granny and younger siblings to bring the child to me."

Vusi's child also moved to live with the maternal grandmother:

"The maternal grandmother took over responsibility to care for the child since the mother was still at school."

Aside from the expense of visiting as discussed above, Vusi was now prohibited contact by the grandmother, because of his non-payment of cultural damages and not providing financial support. Balo also indicated that he had irregular contact with his child from a second relationship because of non-payment of cultural damages. But in his case a conflictual relationship with the mother was also a factor:

"She is very rude ... One day I decided to go and see the child, but it was a challenge. I fought to get to the child for at least two days [he did not succeed]."

The above findings are similar to those of Skevik (2006) and Madhavan *et al.* (2014), who found that mothers and the maternal family often act as gatekeepers by limiting or prohibiting unmarried fathers' contact with their children. Similarly, Swart *et al.* (2013) found that mothers and maternal families tend to exclude young unmarried fathers who no longer have romantic relationships with the mothers. With separated unmarried young parents, there is a greater possibility that the romantic relationship ends and they establish subsequent relationships with new partners. Madhavan *et al.* (2014) found that fathers in subsequent relationships were more likely to be involved with children from these relationships than with their earlier children. However, Makusha (2013) noted that, given the opportunity, fathers who were not living with their children spent quality time with them. It is

significant that all the participants in the present study expressed the desire to spend time with their children and to be involved in their lives. As will be explained below, this desire was often encouraged by their own experiences of fatherhood.

Participants' own fatherhood experiences and views

A father's family of origin and formative years impact significantly on how fatherhood is experienced by him (Richter, 2006; Makusha, 2013). Four participants in this study indicated that they had close relationships with their biological fathers. Three of them had married parents and one whose parents were not married indicated that his father still lived nearby. These four participants described good father-son communication, with mutual trust, love and care. They indicated that their positive experiences with their own fathers encouraged them to seek the same with their children. Of note is that two of these participants (Khulekani and Qaphela) had their children living with them and their paternal families.

Five participants grew up without their fathers. Their reasons given for the absence of their fathers were substance abuse addiction, parental separation or death. The impact of not having a biological father as a role model is evident from two of their comments:

"It made me not to know ukuthi ukuba ubaba kuyinto enjani [what it is like to be a father] ... and the father's love. We know father as a snake ... I can see that my child fears me. At the same time I want to practise the 21st-century fatherhood...I do not want my child to fear me." (Themba)

"With my biological father there are many of us with different mothers. That is painful to me because I grew up hard, raised by my stepfather. I am a father now and I want to close that gap ... I do not want my children to suffer." (Nhlakanipho)

In African communities it is important to consider the role played by social rather than biological fathers, that is, other males in the family and community. Lesejane (2006) and Lesch and Kelapile (2015) found that in KwaZulu-Natal fatherhood is often culturally viewed as a collective responsibility, supported by the extended family. Only one participant in this study discussed a constructive role played by an older man in the community who guided him:

"I am a person ... who gets admonitions and everything along the way ... I would listen to the fathers who are older than me and those who are married, you see. There is one who is particularly my role model." (Njabulo)

Morell (2007), Makusha (2013) and Swart *et al.* (2013) all found that many youths wanted to be better and more responsible fathers than their own unsupportive fathers. Their inadequate nurturing motivated them to prevent exposing their children to the kind of unpleasant life circumstances they had experienced. They saw themselves as more than just providers. Similar findings emerged in this study:

"To be a father, you have to be a role model ... a father does not only mean to be a provider." (Themba)

"... father is someone who protects and supports you ... he listens. A dad is the one who needs to show you direction ... he needs to stand as a head." (Khulekani)

"In the future I wish to stay with my child ... I do not want my child to treat me as his dad, but I want him to treat me as his brother ...to be able to talk to me as a boy if he is facing any problem. I want him to be able to sit with me and say, "Dad I have this and this problem". I do not want him to be scared because I am coming home." (Vusi)

"To be a father means you are a real man. You are a male if you can have family, you are a person who can build the family of his own, which brings hope. My children ... I wish them to be people, because their mothers are not educated ... only one [mother] is educated ... The second and the third ones [mothers] did not finish school. I wish my children to get better

education. To have a good connection with them [children] zibone ukuthi [for them to see that] ... I am a father who looks after them.” (Mhlengi)

“It is hard to be a father, especially to be a father and not be in a relationship with the mother. If you are a father not dating the mother of your child, even if you try to tell her your problems, she thinks you are not telling the truth. So, the influence my father had on me, he opened my eyes, what happened to him I do not want it to happen to me with my children.” (Nhlakanipho)

The narratives above reveal the complexity of feelings and future desires that the young unmarried fathers had concerning their children. As in other studies (Richter, 2006; Ratele *et al.*, 2012; Madhavan *et al.*, 2016) fathers in the present study wished to be providers, protectors, breadwinners and role models. In particular, participants revealed their desire to have close and loving relationships with their children. Ratele *et al.* (2012:557) similarly found that young fathers particularly valued opportunities for “being there”, which was associated with time spent with their children, rather than only material provision. Although they faced numerous obstacles, young fathers in both the present study and other studies significantly strongly expressed the desire to be actively involved in the lives of their children (see also Langa & Smith, 2012; Swart *et al.*, 2013). Langa and Smith (2012) also found that young fathers were capable of embracing the multiple roles of fathering, including provision of emotional care, love and nurturance of their children.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Whilst small in scope, the present study appears to accord with national statistics indicating that the majority of South African children are being raised by their mothers and maternal families. Just four of the 15 children lived with their fathers and paternal families. Paternal family support emerged as particularly important in contexts of high unemployment and payment of cultural damages. It is striking that all the participants expressed a desire to be involved in their children’s lives, many because of their own life experiences of not having good father figures. Also significant is that participants’ desires concerning fatherhood extended beyond mere material provision to encompass a nurturing role. However, as shown, father-child nurturing was frequently inhibited. Important barriers identified in the area of the study were poverty, lack of understanding of unmarried fathers’ legal rights, lack of paternal role models for participants, maternal family gatekeeping and problematic relationships with the children’s mothers. Most of these factors could be addressed by early intervention strategies and psychosocial services. Provision of such services could facilitate involvement by young unmarried fathers in their children’s lives. Prevention of teenage pregnancy and youth unemployment programmes as identified in the municipality IDP (Hibiscus Coast Municipality, 2016/2017) are also supported.

Some specific strategies which are recommended are:

- Dialogue with traditional chiefs and traditional councils and community members should be initiated to find solutions to the payment of cultural damages in the context of high youth unemployment in the area;
- Young unmarried fathers showed very little legal understanding of their parental responsibilities and rights. Information on parental responsibilities and rights as provided in the Children’s Act must therefore be made available through community meetings, radio and print media. Information should also be disseminated through social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube;
- In order to avoid a top-down approach, peer education and support groups should be initiated for young men to explore their roles as fathers, the meaning of fatherhood, masculinity and the use of contraceptives;

- Early intervention programs for young parents should be developed to support and equip them with parenting skills. Mothers must be included with a view to educating them also on the importance of constructive long-term paternal relationships for their children;
- Psychosocial support services must be tailored to unmarried fathers. For example, the participants in this study were eager to talk about their experiences and fatherhood aspirations. They had not previously been given this opportunity.

Although the Children's Act makes provision for mediation services to be provided by social workers, none of the participants were aware of these services. More information on social work services in relation to parental responsibilities and rights needs to be disseminated. In addition, social workers have a crucial role to play in the development of prevention and early interventions services for both young unmarried mothers and fathers. A recommendation for future research is exploration of social workers' knowledge about the parental responsibilities and rights provisions of the Children's Act, as well as ascertaining their views on how these can be more effectively implemented.

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