



Young people's discursive constructions of fatherhood in South Africa

Nick Malherbe & Debbie Kaminer

To cite this article: Nick Malherbe & Debbie Kaminer (2020): Young people's discursive constructions of fatherhood in South Africa, Journal of Family Studies, DOI: [10.1080/13229400.2020.1739549](https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2020.1739549)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2020.1739549>



Published online: 11 Mar 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 11



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Young people's discursive constructions of fatherhood in South Africa

Nick Malherbe ^{a,b} and Debbie Kaminer ^c

^aInstitute for Social and Health Sciences, University of South Africa, Johannesburg, South Africa; ^bViolence, Injury and Peace Research Unit, South African Medical Research Council-University of South Africa, Cape Town, South Africa; ^cDepartment of Psychology, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

ABSTRACT

The voices of young people remain, for the most part, under-considered within research on South African fathers. The present study relies on photo-elicitation interviews to explore how isiXhosa-speaking adolescents construct fathering roles and responsibilities in South Africa. Using discursive psychology, it was found that participants drew on the 'Essential Fathering' and 'Social Fathering' discourses to construct South African fatherhood. The discourses appeared to valorize biological fatherhood situated within the nuclear family, while - at the same time - valuing socialized paternal formations that need not be constituted biologically. It is suggested that although genuine paternal abandonment should not be excused, policy, parental programmes and legislation in South Africa must consider the voices of young people as well as the myriad parenting modalities that exist outside of hegemonic family forms.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 August 2018
Accepted 3 March 2020

KEYWORDS

Discourse; fatherhood;
Photovoice; adolescents;
South Africa

Introduction

With the emergence of the gold and mining industries in South Africa in the 1800s (the so-called Mineral Revolution which would eventually usher in industrial capitalism), the racist State-imposed taxes on 'black'¹ people living in rural areas so that they would seek jobs in cities (Roy, 2008; Worden, 2011). By creating a migrant labour force, family life in the country was interrupted, with 'black' fathers having to spend most of their time away from their families, sometimes seeing them just once a year (Morrell & Richter, 2004). During apartheid, the Group Areas Act of 1950 did even more to disrupt families deemed to be 'black', 'coloured', and 'Indian', by forcibly relocating whole communities which were racialized in these ways. Men in these families could work in cities on one-year contracts and were prohibited from bringing their families with them. Pass laws and job reservation also ensured that these men had little chance to live with their families. In contemporary South Africa, the effects of apartheid legislation (which was officially repealed in 1991) are observed in numerous ways, including rapid urbanization, racialized poverty and wealth inequality. Added to this, gendered roles

CONTACT Nick Malherbe  nicholas.malherbe@mrc.ac.za  Institute for Social and Health Sciences, University of South Africa, P. O. Box 1087, Lenasia 1820, Cape Town, South Africa

© 2020 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

within the family, along with fragmented family structures, have become especially entrenched (see Anderson et al., 1999; Helman et al., 2019; Morrell et al., 2016).

Paternal non-residence in contemporary South Africa is relatively high. Using data obtained from the General Household Survey (see Statistics South Africa, 2017), the 2018 State of South Africa's Fathers report found that although 71% of children who are 17 years old or under live with an adult male in the same household, of these children, only 36% live with their biological father, with the remaining 35% living with an adult man to whom they are not related (Van den Berg & Makusha, 2018). Hatch and Posel (2018) note that only 11–12% of children in the country receive primary care from their fathers. Indeed, single-parent households in South Africa are often headed by women who provide physical and financial care for children, irrespective of their biological relation to them.

The reasons for such high rates of paternal non-residence are myriad and complex. While fathers are certainly expected to engage in care work (Ratele et al., 2012), traditional masculine performance remains entangled with waged labour (Helman et al., 2019). This masculinized expectation for fathers to provide, coupled with the feminization of poverty, may, as argued by Morrell (2006), render ashamed those fathers who are unable to provide financially (see Hatch & Posel, 2018). Added to this, a residual effect of apartheid is that, today, unemployment – which affects 29.1% of the country's population (Statistics South Africa, 2019) – and consequently poverty, are especially salient among 'black' families. Resultantly, the ability of 'black' men to 'provide' has been systemically undermined, with expectations around paternal provision not having shifted significantly. Indeed, Spjeldnaes et al. (2011) observed that for South African teenage boys from low socio-economic backgrounds, being a man meant providing for one's family in financial as well as emotional ways. Similarly, Helman and colleagues (2019) found that adolescents from two low-income South African communities drew on a 'Father as Provider' discourse to establish legitimate fathers as those who provided financially for their families. In turn, this discourse rendered fathers personally responsible for systemic economic inequalities. Speaking to these kinds of expectations that are placed on fathers in South Africa, Hatch and Posel (2018) argue that paternal non-residence does not, in every instance, indicate father absenteeism. Indeed, it should not be assumed that a father's physical absence results in his financial or emotional absence (Dermott, 2008).

In South Africa, most academic fathering literature focuses on the developmental contributions of positive fathering and/or the developmental deficits of paternal non-residence. Very few studies have examined how children perceive, experience, understand or discursively construct fathers and fathering (Dermott, 2008; Helman et al., 2019). Resultantly, our knowledge of fathers and fathering (and parenting more broadly) in South Africa is myopic in its adult-centric orientation. If we are to begin developing more holistic and context-sensitive understandings of families *in situ*, the voices of children must be taken seriously. While these voices should undoubtedly be considered alongside those of adults, it is also important that we work with young people to engage fathering independently from adults. Speaking to this gap in the research literature, the present study critically explores how children from South Africa construct the complex notion of fatherhood (that is, *situated* fathering) and how these constructions are able to inform policy in a manner that resists adult-centrism and that does not take static and largely irrelevant nuclear family models to be the familial gold standard.

Essential and important father hypotheses

Fathering refers to individual paternal practices. It should be emphasized that such practice is not necessarily enacted by a child's biological father (Dermott, 2008; Morrell et al., 2016). Fatherhood, on the other hand, may be considered a socially constructed category that pertains to the wider social context in which fathering is performed, and relates to the public meaning associated with being a father. Men, therefore, do not need to be biological fathers to embrace fatherhood (Hatch & Posel, 2018; Morrell, 2006). With respect to both fathering and fatherhood, Pleck (2010) espouses two hypotheses by which the father can be understood. The Essential Father Hypothesis proposes that it is crucial that a child's biological father performs fathering activities. Conversely, the Important Father Hypothesis asserts that it is good fathering practice which should be prized over a child's relationship to the person carrying out such practice. These hypotheses, Pleck (2010) argues, influence discourses surrounding fatherhood. However, as discourse is used for different purposes at different moments (see Potter & Wetherell, 1987), it is possible, we argue, that one person is found to support both hypotheses, rendering the discursive constitution of fatherhood one that is always multiple and tremendously complex.

With respect to the Essential Father Hypothesis, Popenoe's (1996) dated but influential systematic review concludes that a biological father is a crucial determinant of positive child development. He insists that men who do not have a biological connection to a child tend to display low levels of involvement in that child's life; will not be motivated to develop a rapport with their children; and will ultimately disengage from them. Fatherlessness is, therefore, a 'social disaster' that places children at a psychological disadvantage. From a qualitative perspective, Nduna's (2014) study shows that people who experience their fathers as absent demonstrate a yearning to discover the identities of their biological fathers, indicating that the Essential Father Hypothesis is indeed influential in how people perceive their experiences of being fathered. In another qualitative study, Richter and Smith (2006) found that South African children expressed an intense kind of longing for, and even idealization of, a father. Popenoe (1996) goes on to state that although it is a somewhat unrealistic ideal, families should strive toward the nuclear family model.

Looking to the Important Father Hypothesis, Pleck (2010) maintains that although fathers are important to child development, they are not essential, and occupy a kind of 'middle ground' in this sense. Certainly, infants are able to form strong attachment relationships with adults to whom they are not biologically connected, with the gender identity of parents not affecting the quality of these relationships (Pleck, 2007). Morrell (2006) insists that the developmental essentiality of the father is a discourse drawn on to pursue anti-feminist campaigns which reduce the autonomy of the mother in an effort to ensure her dependence on the father. In another study, Ratele and colleagues (2012) found that South African men did not construct biological fathering as developmentally essential. The study concludes that the Essential Father is an ideal propounded by dominant Western parenting discourses. It would seem then that the Important Father Hypothesis influences how people discursively engage with the father, and perhaps necessitates further research.

Social fathers as important fathers

All over the world, and particularly in South Africa, social fathers constitute an especially pertinent kind of Important Father. These are men who take on fathering duties for children to whom they may not necessarily be related. The social father, a status that is ascribed rather than attained (Richter et al., 2010), can be an uncle, stepfather, grandfather or any other male figure who takes on *de facto* paternal responsibilities for children. Social fathering usually – but not always – occurs when a child's biological father is not physically present. Although children may feel a sense of loss for an absent biological father – regardless of the role, if any, that he plays in their lives (Nduna, 2014) – they may also feel content with social fathers (Richter et al., 2010). Indeed, for children, social fathers frequently fulfil immensely meaningful roles (Morrell, 2006), many of which have shown to improve children's resilience (see Hatch & Posel, 2018).

Nsamenang (2010) highlights that in many African societies, 'illegitimate children' do not exist in the Western understanding of the term. Instead, a number of cultural scripts render social fathers an acceptable form of fathering. These men are said to take on a collective enterprise of fathering. Further, in examining how 'black' fathers from low-income communities in South Africa and the United States work with their kin to secure fathering, Madhavan and Roy (2012) observed that these men responded to structurally impoverished living circumstances by working together to ensure the well-being of children in their communities. The authors identified three paternal processes in their analysis, namely: negotiations between maternal and paternal kin (observed when childrearing is supported by the respective kin of a father and a mother), a pedifocal approach (where numerous people look after a child), and flexible fathering (noted when a man plays many paternal roles for numerous children). It would appear then that although the importance of biological fathers in the family should not be discounted (Nduna, 2014), the Essential Father and the nuclear family are not realistic or even reliable indicators of a child's experience of paternal support (see Hatch & Posel, 2018; Morrell et al., 2016). Although a number of seminal works have been instrumental in promoting fatherhood research in South Africa (e.g. Madhavan et al., 2008; Richter & Morrell, 2006; Swartz & Arvin, 2009; Van den Berg & Makusha, 2018), the discourses on which South African children draw to construct fatherhood, including social fathering, remain largely unexamined in the academic fathering literature. In this sense, academic discourse, generally, does not construct young people as autonomous social actors who are capable of contributing meaningfully to the study of fatherhood (see Suffla et al., 2012).

Research aims

In attempting to bring the voices of young people into paternal and family-oriented policy-making in South Africa, the present study explores how young people discursively construct fatherhood within the contemporary South African context. In particular, the study critically interrogates the manner by which young people attribute meaning to a variety of fathering forms as they exist in South Africa.

Theoretical framing

This study is informed theoretically by Burman's (2008) critical developmental psychology (CDP). As a means of challenging the assumed universalism of traditional developmental

psychology, Burman's theoretical standpoint posits that the position of children in a given social context will determine their particular subjectivities. If children have control over the language of their experiences, including their experiences of parenting, new youth-centric forms and variations of contextually-situated childhoods are made available. It is thought that by conceptualizing children as engaged social actors, we are able to attain richer understandings of human development.

Following CDP, we argue that fatherhood cannot continue being formulated by universalized, adult-mediated processes and understandings. If these dominant, adult-centric conceptualizations of fathering in South Africa and abroad are to be challenged in a manner that meaningfully considers the context-sensitive positionalities of young people, youth constructions of fatherhood must be afforded greater credence within academic research. Youth perspectives may then be drawn on in concert with those of parents and adults to inform family programmes and policy-making.

Method

Sample and setting

This study was conducted in an almost entirely isiXhosa-speaking peri-urban community near to Cape Town, South Africa. The community was established by the apartheid State in the 1950s for 'black' migrant workers. Today, most of the community's approximately 65 000 residents live below the subsistence level. The community consists predominantly of government-funded houses as well as shack dwellings; has considerably low levels of resources, including education facilities; and observes high rates of unemployment, crime and violence (Statistics South Africa, 2011). Unfortunately, census data for this particular community (as with many low-income South African communities) are insufficient and out of date, and thus do not adequately cover the community's historical, demographic, infrastructural and parenting profiles.

Two separate groups of participants – all of whom were between the ages of 13 and 16 and identified as 'black' South Africans – were recruited by their school teacher, who had agreed to assist in coordinating the study. Developmentally speaking, adolescents are said to encompass higher-order cognitive skills, and have engaged with notions of community and family on a grander scale than younger children (Gant et al., 2009). This age group was therefore considered to be ideal for the purposes of the present study. Initially, ten boys and ten girls were recruited for participation. However, as three participants dropped out midway through the study, the final sample constituted eight girls and nine boys. None of the participants were themselves parents, and no parent was present during the study.

Although consent forms required that each participant make clear whether he or she currently receives biological fathering and mothering, it was later realized that such information, although interesting, was a problematic requirement. Indeed, committing one's parenting experience to simplistic, binary parental categories inadequately attends to same-sex or gender non-conforming parenting; instances where one does not live with, but is nonetheless supported and cared for by particular parents; and experiences of social parenting (a heterogeneous parental category riddled with complexity). Further, in a South African context where shame and social stigma are written into 'alternative'

familial compositions, participants may not have felt entirely comfortable sharing such detail. It was for these reasons that we assured participants that, despite what they had written on the consent forms, they would not be required to explicitly divulge or explain their experiences of fathering, and that the study was interested only in what they felt comfortable sharing. Future fatherhood studies should seek to challenge, in a power- and psychologically-sensitive fashion, the complexities inherent to articulating one's parental experience against specific socio-historical contexts, and within static, gendered and/or predetermined parenting categories.

Data collection

This study utilized Photovoice as a method of data collection. Speaking to a particular topic, Photovoice involves providing cameras and some basic photography training to participants and later interviewing them – individually or as a group – about their photographs (Wang, 2006; Wang & Burris, 1997). The method has been employed in a variety of research settings – albeit most typically in under-serviced or marginalized communities – and allows participants the opportunity for critical reflection, group discussion, catalyzing social change and exploring the meaning-making capacities of individuals as well as groups (Carlson et al., 2006).

For one month, we met with participants each week at their school. During these meetings, we introduced the project to participants and incorporated their feedback into its design. At each meeting, participants were provided with lunch vouchers. Once participants appeared confident and satisfied with the project's conceptualization, they received photographic training, after which they were given disposable cameras. Participants were then given two weeks to photograph what being a father, or what the idea of a 'father', in South Africa means to them. Each disposable camera is able to take a maximum of 27 photographs. While participants were encouraged to take as many photographs as possible, we emphasized that they were not required to use up the entire spool.

After participants had taken their photographs, they were interviewed using photo-elicitation interviews, which introduce photographs taken by interviewees into the interview context as a way of eliciting personal accounts and illuminating aspects of interviewees' lives, thereby triggering memory and evoking more layered responses than traditional interviews (Croghan et al., 2008). These interviews were facilitated by this article's first author and a research assistant. The interviews took place during the afternoons at participants' school. A translator was present throughout these interviews. As interviews, in general, tend to fatigue both interviewer and interviewee if they exceed an hour (Adams, 2015), it was decided that participants would not be interviewed on every photograph that they had taken. Instead, they were requested to select five of their favourite photographs and were asked a number of questions regarding the meaning, content, and purpose of these photographs (see Table 1). As participants were familiar with one another, we made use of paired interviews (with one group of three) as a means of reducing potential anxieties.

Data analysis

The study's data corpus comprised of the accounts collected in the interviews. Situated within a social constructionist paradigm, the study utilized discourse analysis to

Table 1. Semi-structured Interview Schedule.

1	<p>Content</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe what is happening in the photograph. • Who/what are the people/things? • Where was this taken?
2	<p>Meaning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why did you choose/take this photograph? • What does this say about fathers in your community? • What does this say about the lives of people in your community? • Do you like what you have photographed? Why?
3	<p>Fathers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What story does this photograph tell us about fathers? • How does this relate to how you feel about fathers?

examine participants' linguistic discourses. The method of discourse analysis proposed by Potter and Wetherell (1987) – later dubbed 'discursive psychology' by Edwards and Potter (1992) as a means of differentiating the method from the various other discourse analyses used across the social sciences – conceptualizes discourse as a means of constructing social reality. Discursive psychology utilizes discursive techniques to analyse talk, and applies these analyses to real-world settings (Potter & Hepburn, 2007). This study made use of a revised version of Potter and Wetherell's (1987) stages of discourse analysis. Rather than a set of definitive steps, these stages served as a loose guide for conducting the discourse analysis, and were continually revisited and adjusted. The first step in the analysis is coding the data. This article's first author worked to code all participant responses that overtly or implicitly addressed fatherhood. A series of subsequent conversations with another project team member meant that the codes were continually revised. Subsequent to this, the codes were evaluated by this article's second author. After some time modifying and grouping the codes, they eventually became more comprehensive discourses.

The next stage was the main analysis, wherein all participant interviews were considered. This stage did not encompass a single methodological procedure. It would appear that the only prerequisite for discursive psychology is examining participants' use of interpretive repertoires, which are grammatically coherent and socially-specific discursive toolkits that constitute the inner-workings of a discourse. They are typically structured around a number of metaphors and see much variability (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Therefore, identifying interpretive repertoires pertaining to fatherhood in the participants' community, as well as questioning our reading of these data, formed the primary focus of this stage. It was repeatedly asked what specific discourses were trying to achieve at particular moments, and why they were trying to achieve this. With respect to the analysis process itself, the discursive action model and techniques of fact construction discussed by Edwards and Potter (1992) were heavily drawn upon. The variability and consistency of identifiable patterns within the discourses were noted, as were the function and consequence that these discourses served. When referenced in participants' linguistic discourses (and in accordance with their visual clarity), the visual discourses drawn on in participants' photographs were briefly examined using Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) *Reading Images*. A more thorough visual analysis was beyond the scope of this article.

The final step of the analysis, known as validation, employs two prominent techniques. Firstly, the coherence of the discourses – which relates to the researcher's understanding of

a participant's response – indicates whether a text can be considered for analysis at all. In the case of the present study, if there was a large degree of ambiguity or indecipherable speech, the discourse was discarded. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, fruitfulness refers to the value of the discourse with respect to the researcher's ability to produce a relevant interpretation of it. As fruitfulness is entirely subjective, the two of us, along with a research assistant, continually called into question our interpretations of the data.

Findings and discussion

What follows is an analysis of two seemingly distinct, yet interrelated, discourses, namely: 'Essential Fathering' and 'Social Fathering'. Where the former sought to advocate the Essential Father Hypothesis, the latter challenged rigid, nuclear family forms by championing the Important Father Hypothesis through favourable representations of the social father.

Essential fathering

The biological father was almost always established by participants as the 'real' or irreplaceable parent. Constructions of the biological father alluded to a kind of 'specialness' that was absent from the discursive constitution of the Important Father. This may be due to sociocultural valorization of the biological father in South Africa (Nduna, 2014), as well as the relative precarity by which Important Fathers (especially social fathers) are typically perceived.

P2: ... It is a very important thing to have a mother and a father because if you lose one parent, you just know, there's going to be something wrong here. There's going to be something missing, you see?

When examining the importance of biological fathers, P2 utilizes a discursive form of systematic vagueness as a means of obscuring the rationale for such importance: 'if you lose one parent, you just know, there's going to be something wrong here. There's going to be something missing'. The word 'something' works to attribute a particular allusive specialness to the influence of the biological parent (without having to explain such specialness) that cannot be replicated by a social parent.

As a result of such paternal 'specialness', four participants discursively granted to biological fathers a kind of unconditional forgiveness that was not extended toward non-biological fathers. In examining the visual discourses drawn on in [Figure 1](#), the photograph does not frame one subject as occupying more prominence than another. Rather, the individual subjects are of close proximal distance to each other, and engage viewers by meeting them at eye-level. The photographic subjects appear equal, with the implication that each child – having received equal parenting – is as developmentally sound as the other (see Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). In explaining this photograph, P4 notes that:

... he [a father] is not her [a child in [Figure 1](#)] biological father, he is not her blood but he can take care of a child even if she's not his biological child. It's like fathers can take care of a child even if they don't know them. And then children must not forget that they have a biological father. It's like I must have a place where I just forgive my father one day. Don't say 'I will never forgive my father' – it's wrong.



Figure 1. P4's photograph of three sisters.

Thus, by referring to the father in the photograph as 'not her [the child's] blood [relative] but he can take care of a child', the notion of the adequate father as necessarily biological is somewhat destabilized. However, this Important Father does not function independently from – that is, exist without mention of – the Essential Father. Within P4's discourse, although the biological father may not feature in a child's life, he symbolizes immense significance for a child. It would seem that in the discourse, such significance is attributed to the elevated status that a biological connection holds (Nduna, 2014; Pleck, 2007), and therefore cannot be entirely emulated by a parent's romantic partner social father, no matter how successful a parent he may be (see Jayakody & Kalil, 2002).

Regardless of his parental aptitude, the biological father is rarely rendered unimportant. P4 states that 'children must not forget that they have a biological father. It's like I must have a place where I just forgive my father'. Here, the discourse attaches innate importance to the biological father. By declaring 'Don't say 'I will never forgive my father' – it's wrong', P4's account positions poor fathering – performed by a child's biological father – as inherently excusable. Discursive constructions of this kind, which may be especially prevalent in contexts of high biological father absenteeism, can act to perpetuate the notion that social fathers are lesser parents who lack the innate 'specialness' exemplified by biological fathers. Although the (in this case, romantic partner) social father may possess the 'dignity' of biological fathers and is indeed able to 'take care of a child', it would seem that he is constructed as unable to entirely replace the biological father. It can also be assumed that because this unconditional forgiveness is not extended toward the social father, he is placed under harsher scrutiny than the biological father. Indeed, the social father cannot be granted such unconditional forgiveness if the biological father is to retain the vague 'specialness' to which he is discursively attributed.

With most participants' repeated referrals to a biological father's ability to offer his child 'something' developmentally unique, it may be inferred that participants' discourses ultimately favoured the Essential Father Hypothesis over the Important Father Hypothesis. Social fathers were, in this way, regarded as competent yet incomplete parents. An inherent paternal 'lack' is therefore embodied by social fathers who – despite often exhibiting adequate parental practice – operate outside of the hegemonic nuclear family ideal (Hatch & Posel, 2018; Lamb, 2010; Madhavan et al., 2008).

Despite, over three decades ago, Adams et al. (1984) declaring that the nuclear family is an archaic and mostly unobserved construct, the 'Essential Fathering' discourse was drawn on by participants to sustain the value placed on a biological paternal connection, thereby privileging this uncommon family form. This may be due to a number of reasons, such as the connection of successful hegemonic masculine performance to biological fatherhood, and/or to hegemonic representations of the nuclear family.

Mimetic of the larger data set, the 'Essential Father' discourse appears to reflect a gendered hermeneutic. While most participants certainly seemed to value biological over social fathering, it was predominantly male participants, like P2 and P9, who discursively fixed this value to gender. In addition to having stake in the hegemonic patriarchal social order, male participants may have drawn on the discourse in this way as a means of signifying, in the presence other male participants, a masculinized form of solidarity.

Participants seemed to refute Dermott's (2008) claim that the nuclear family ideal holds greater relevance to middle-class families. Participants in this study were from low socio-economic backgrounds, yet most placed considerable discursive worth on this kind of family form. Clowes, Ratele and Shefer's (2013) assertion that the social father holds a significant and important place in South African society was then only partially reiterated here. Within most participant interviews the social father – no matter how competent – was rarely able to surpass or even equal the idealized biological father. Nonetheless, there were a number of participants who engaged discourses on social fathering in favourable ways.

Social fathering

Seven participants expressed the value and competency of social fathers. Their discourses seemed to subscribe to Nsamenang's (2010) conception of fathering as a collective enterprise. Although participants asserted that social fathers were uncommon in their community, all men were expected to engage in some form of social fathering, whether this was directly interacting with children, or partaking in community projects.

Like those participating in Richter and Smith's (2006) study, each child in this study identified someone who fulfilled a paternal role in their lives. Two kinds of social fathering were discursively established across the interviews. The first of which represents one father who parents many children, and is similar to what Madhavan and Roy (2012) refer to as flexible fathering, while the second was embodied by a number of men who work to parent one child.

In considering this first kind of social father, Figure 2's visual discourse sees a subject walking alongside a somewhat plain background. Here, his action orientation is communicated as the image's chief communicative message. His movement emphasizes his

involved or active fathering over and above any other discursive signifiers (see Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). In describing this photograph, P8 noted that:

- P8: Yes, like in the community he [an elderly male] plays an important role ... for everyone.
- Co-researcher: In what ways, besides the fact that he cares for his children?
- P8: Like he can communicate. Even when kids are fighting he can go there and ask them what's the problem and he can solve the problem between those who are fighting, yes. Even when we come back from school he asks 'How was school? What happened?' – something like that, yes. He's a great father.

It would appear that what makes the man in P8's photograph 'a great father' is his ability to 'communicate'. This point is reiterated when P8 suggests that this father 'asks children and stuff like that'. Again, we can interpret the gendered dimension of the discourse, whereby P8, as a female participant, prioritizes a man's parenting over a specifically masculinized paternal engagement. The social father is not 'great' merely because he enacts fathering. Indeed, this is as an expectation that is extended to all men in the community. Rather, this man is valorized because he is able to successfully embody fathering activities by expressing interest in children, communicating with them, and asking them about their lives. P8's evocation of a 'great father' indicates that social fathers are indeed considered to be fathers rather than subsidiary parents.

- P14: [I] think that it's better to have both parents ... so that [a child] can get the love of her mother and the love of her father ... [However, a particular social father in the community], he plays the role of the father and the mother and that he can do both at the same time and he doesn't care what people say about him ...



Figure 2. P8's photograph of a grandfather who cares for children in the community.

P14 discursively acknowledges that although it is ideal for a child to have two parents present, such a situation is not essential for a family's functioning. This reiterates Lamb's (2010) assertion that having two parents is beneficial because of what each parent is able to offer a child, and not because of any kind of adherence to a particular familial form. The social father to which P14 refers is able to perform 'the role of the mother and the father', thereby functioning adequately without a co-parent or embodying the all-important position of the biological father. By not capitulating to 'what people say about him', this social father is able to flourish as a parent because of his active rejection of the traditional masculinized activities and performances that are expected of him as a father. In other words, he engages – in a context of racial and patriarchal capitalism – in both waged productive labour (masculinized) and unwaged (feminized) reproductive labour. It is precisely because of this subversive paternal practice that he is evaluated favourably within the discourse.

The second kind of social fathering, where many fathers work together to father one child – also known as pedifocal relations (Madhavan & Roy, 2012) – was observed in P5's account.

- P5: I do [have fathers] here at school: {name omitted} and {name omitted}. {First omitted name} is my father.
- Researcher: What sort of things does a school father do?
- P5: Like when I'm asking for, like when I didn't have a school lunch then I can go to him and ask 'Father can you buy for me something to eat if I don't have the money?' and maybe they can buy me something to eat.
- Researcher: Do you think that, as a young person, you can have a few fathers?
- P5: Ja, if you want, you can be my father. I can say 'Hello father'.

Here, the discourse focuses on the importance of lexical semantics associated with social fathers who are characterized by pedifocal relations. Despite not having any kind of biological connection to the children for whom they care, these social fathers are labelled 'father' and are able to fulfil various expectations attached to fatherhood. P5 considers these men to be her fathers and addresses them as such. Later, speaking to the male interviewer, she remarks 'if you want, you can be my father'. Here, she draws on a discourse that agentalizes men in a manner that looks beyond hegemonic masculine performance by constructing them as able to assume social fathering if this is something that they 'want'. Social fathering thus depends on men's willingness to undertake such a practice.

The pedifocal relations described by P5 characterize social fathering as performed by men who buy a child 'something to eat', whereas P8's flexible father 'asks' so that he may develop some kind of emotional connection with children. It may be argued that within pedifocal relations, men combine their resources to fulfil more traditional, pragmatic fathering duties that are associated with providing and protecting (see Hatch & Posel, 2018), whereby pedifocal relations see men perform the intangible, affective facets of fathering that are associated with the intimacy facilitated by one-on-one social intercourse.

While four of the participants constructed social fathering as constituting men in the community who offer resources, advice and mediation – in a variety of forms – to children, another three constructed these fathers as assisting in community projects. These projects included the construction of football fields, churches and youth centres, all of which were said to benefit children in the community. Such men do not engage directly with children

as the fathers of P5's and P8's accounts do, however they are nonetheless understood as participating in the social fathering enterprise.

- P3: This church, it was built by fathers for youth ... It was built for meetings for youth. So this photo shows that that father cares for their children. So this church tells me that some fathers care for their community. This church was built by poor fathers. Some fathers in {Name of community} didn't want this church, they were beating children and they are abusive.
- Researcher: Is that a father's job, to look after children that aren't theirs?
- P3: Yes, I think so.

By building a church, the men described by P3 are constructed as protecting children and therefore 'care for their community'. However, such an account is perhaps not necessarily a description of social fathers *per se*, but of male leaders in the community. Indeed, in many impoverished South African communities, men work together to promote leadership, resilience and familial care (Madhavan & Roy, 2012).

It seems notable that P3 highlights that the church in the photograph 'was built by poor fathers'. Here, a discursive admiration of sorts is ascribed to social fathers who are 'poor' yet take the time to protect children and build something that facilitates 'meetings for youth'. In a manner similar to how pedifocal relations are described by P5, the 'poor fathers' depicted by P3 are constructed as combining their resources so that they are able to provide something material. In this sense, the church represents the ability of these men to provide for and protect children living in the community. Following this, the visual discourse on which P3 draws (see Figure 3) centralizes the position of this church, and in this way the materiality of effective social fathering is emphasized (see Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). In other words, this physical structure comes to signify in the visual discourse the pragmatic kind of paternal care associated with the social father.



Figure 3. P3's photograph of a church which was built by fathers in the community.

P3's account concludes that the church that the men have built 'tells me that some fathers care for their community'. It is perhaps appropriate then that because the social father does not parent in a conventional manner, he does not fit into the nuclear family mould. The men described by P3 are admired further when they are compared to fathers in the community who 'didn't want this church, they were beating children and they are abusive'. By contrasting 'poor' social fathers against prototypical 'bad dads' who are 'abusive', the social father emerges as even more virtuous. An understanding of and empathizing with the low financial status of social fathers is advanced here. Yet, just like biological fathers (see Helman et al., 2019), social fathers are held to traditional expectations concerning paternal provision.

Participants constructed social fathers as having the ability to channel their collective energies into community concerns, thereby enacting a particular kind of community-oriented care. However, such energy, although constructed as paternal, was just as likely to have been attributed to men who take on leadership roles in the community. Participants constructed the social father as occupying an omnipresent paternal space, whereby he need not engage with children directly, or even embrace conventional parental roles. Yet, it would seem that more research examining the kinds of expectations that young people place on social fathers – particularly in relation to romantic partner or male relative fathers – is required. Additionally, social fathers perhaps do not have the same kinds of practical responsibilities and obligations as romantic partner or male relative fathers. This is an important point of reflection for family intervention programmes concerned with effective forms of paternal care.

Conclusion

Save for some studies (e.g. Helman et al., 2019; Richter & Smith, 2006; Spjeldnaes et al., 2011), parenting and developmental research in South Africa has, for the most part, ignored the voices of children. It is unclear how young people in the country experience and understand the father as well as fatherhood. Drawing on CDP as a theoretical framework (see Burman, 2008), the present study explores, in a contextually-sensitive fashion, the kinds of fathering discourses on which young South Africans draw. It is hoped that this study has highlighted the rich and important insights that children are able to offer in this regard, further emphasizing their status as engaged social actors. We argue that, in addition to other family members, the voices of young people must be considered within parenting programmes if these programmes are to be developed in meaningful, relevant and effective ways.

In this study, participants constructed the social father as resembling the kinds of fathering processes that have been observed by Madhavan and Roy (2012) and described by Nsamenang (2010). It seems important to conceptualize, advocate and examine further how social fathering can serve as a catalyst for improving the perceived parental status of these men, especially those who have no blood relation to the children for whom they care. Although participants were discerning with regards to their evaluation of social fathering, in general, they appeared to valorize biological fathers and the nuclear family arrangement to a greater extent. This may be due to a host of reasons, including participants seeking out the benefits of dual parenting through heteronormative family forms; their reproducing dominant discourses on the nuclear family which

remain idealized under patriarchal capitalism; their finding comfort in the seemingly less precarious biological father relation; and/or their yearning for a sense of belonging through a biological connection – an especially poignant notion given South Africa’s turbulent socio-historic context (see Helman et al., 2019; Nduna, 2014; Richter & Smith, 2006).

In South Africa, most child healthcare and parental programmes rely on heteronormative nuclear family forms. Within these programmes, such familial formations are typically conceptualized in an acontextual manner that emphasizes mother–child relations, with little-to-no attention afforded to fathering (see Van den Berg & Makusha, 2018). Accordingly, we argue that such programmes should strive to accommodate numerous parenting forms; recognize the parental efforts of biological and social fathers, and work to address unequal gendered relations in and beyond families. A spectrum of parenting modalities might then be articulated, all while acknowledging the psychosocial implications of father absenteeism. It is important that the meaning and consequences of paternal involvement are understood by family members as well as the broader community, with non-residence not necessarily indicating absenteeism (see Hatch & Posel, 2018).

Additionally, contributing to a neglected area in developmental theory, this study presents how young people engage and make sense of familial arrangements that do not correspond to heteronormative expectations. For example, P14’s assessment of social fathering through traditional gendered parental binaries (‘he plays the role of the father and the mother’) suggests her grappling with a reality that does not cohere with internalized familial normativity. Therefore, the study points to the importance of working with young people to engage and challenge the rigid familial standards that are set by a patriarchal social ordering. It is also in this sense that children should be considered agentic subjects who reproduce, respond to and recode various discourses that are in circulation. By understanding children in this manner, developmental theory and family intervention programmes can attempt to harness young people’s multifaceted discursive capabilities in meaningful ways.

This study seeks to highlight the importance of young people’s voices in sufficiently recognizing the complex discursive space of fatherhood in South Africa. It has begun an inquisition into the kinds of fathering that are valued by children living in a particular South African community. It is hoped that future studies will examine further the social father and consider this father as important with respect to developing fatherhood programmes, legislative policy and positive father–child relations.

Limitations

By utilizing purposive sampling, this study’s participants were selected by their teacher on the basis on their liveliness, willingness to participate, overall level of engagement and academic competence. It is thus acknowledged that this small sample will have produced data of a particular kind, which made for an exploratory sort of micro-analysis. Although generalizability is not a central aim of discursive research, it remains unclear whether the two discourses identified in this study are drawn upon in other South African communities. Future research should explore the transferability of these findings with regard to a range of other communities.

A contradiction within this study is noted with respect to the manner by which participants were engaged as subjects rather than as the agents envisioned by Photovoice methodology (see Suffla et al., 2012; Wang, 2006). Although participants did arguably possess a greater degree of ownership in the study's knowledge-making processes than is typical in fatherhood research (such as that which ignores the voices of children or makes use of structured interviews), the coding and analysis processes were performed by us as researchers in isolation from the participants. In this way, we were ultimately positioned as 'experts' rather than as facilitators. Researcher-participant collaboration, a core principle of Photovoice, was in this sense only partially achieved. Added to this, the coding process was conducted by the two of us who are English-speaking, 'white' and middle-class researchers, and are ultimately outsiders to this community. Despite having participated in a sustained engagement with the community, we were effectively removed from the daily life of the participants. This socioeconomic and cultural distance undoubtedly affected how we interpreted the data. Relatedly, the two discourses examined in this study may have been partially, and unintentionally, influenced by the coding schema which we identified in the fathering research literature.

Considering the above, it is crucial that future studies work to integrate participants into the coding and analysis processes, all while allowing data to emerge as organically as possible. In order to partially destabilize research-participant power differentials, as well as produce more rigorous analyses, we call for future youth-centred participatory fatherhood research studies to involve and make visible participants throughout the research process. In doing so, participants' and researchers' positionalities may begin to emerge within the data analysis, thus allowing for a more reflexive analytical engagement.

Note

1. Under apartheid's Population Registration Act of 1950 (repealed in 1991), everyone living in South Africa was categorized as either 'Black', 'White', or 'Coloured'. Later, 'Indian' was included as a fourth category. The use of racial categories in this article denotes this process of racialization undertaken by the racist apartheid State. Therefore, while we acknowledge the socially constructed and oppressive functionality of 'race', it is nonetheless necessary to use racial categories insofar as they demonstrate the deep structural divisions and inequalities that exist in South Africa today.

Acknowledgements

The assistance and photographic training provided by Brittany Everitt-Penhale and Professor Kopano Ratele made for invaluable contributions to this project. Professor Shahnaaz Suffla also provided assistance at various stages of the study, as did Dr Samed Bulbulia. We wish to acknowledge all the young people who participated in this study, as well as the Institute for Social and Health Sciences, University of South Africa and the South African Medical Research Council-University of South Africa Violence, Injury and Peace Research Unit, which helped facilitate the research process.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work is based on research supported in part by the National Research Foundation of South Africa (IFR2011040100041). The funder had no involvement in the study design, the collection, analysis and interpretation of data, the writing of the report, or the decision to submit the article for publication.

ORCID

Nick Malherbe  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4968-4058>

Debbie Kaminer  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6097-6211>

References

- Adams, P. L., Milner, J. R., & Schrepf, N. A. (1984). *Fatherless children*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Adams, W. C. (2015). Conducting semi-structured interviews. In K. E. Newcomer, H. P. Hatry, & J. S. Wholey (Eds.), *Handbook of practical programme evaluation* (pp. 492–505). John Wiley & Sons.
- Anderson, K. G., Kaplan, H., Lam, D., & Lancaster, J. (1999). Paternal care by genetic fathers and stepfathers II: Reports by Xhosa high school students. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 20(6), 433–451. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1090-5138\(99\)00022-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1090-5138(99)00022-7)
- Burman, E. (2008). *Deconstructing developmental psychology*. Routledge.
- Carlson, E. D., Engbretson, J., & Chamberlain, R. M. (2006). Photovoice as a social process of critical consciousness. *Qualitative Health Research*, 16(6), 836–852. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732306287525>
- Clowes, L., Ratele, K., & Shefer, T. (2013). Who needs a father? South African men reflect on being fathered. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 22(3), 255–267. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2012.708823>
- Croghan, R., Griffin, G., Hunter, J., & Phoenix, A. (2008). Young people's constructions of self: Notes on the use and analysis of the photo-elicitation methods. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 11(4), 345–356. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570701605707>
- Dermott, E. (2008). *Intimate fatherhood*. Sage.
- Edwards, D., & Potter, J. (1992). *Discursive psychology*. Sage.
- Gant, L. M., Shimshock, K., Allen-Meares, P., Smith, L., Miller, P., Hollingsworth, L. A., & Shanks, T. (2009). Effects of Photovoice: Civic engagement among older youth in urban communities. *Journal of Community Practice*, 17(4), 358–376. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10705420903300074>
- Hatch, M., & Posel, D. (2018). Who cares for children? A quantitative study of childcare in South Africa. *Development Southern Africa*, 35(2), 267–282. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0376835X.2018.1452716>
- Helman, R., Malherbe, N., & Kaminer, D. (2019). Young people's reproductions of the 'father as provider' discourse: Intersections of race, class, culture and gender within a liberal democracy. *Community, Work & Family*, 22(2), 146–166. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2018.1433636>
- Jayakody, R., & Kalil, A. (2002). Social fathering in low-income, African American families with preschool children. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 64(2), 504–516. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2002.00504.x>
- Kress, G., & Van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. Routledge.
- Lamb, M. E. (2010). How do fathers influence children's development? Let me count the ways. In M. E. Lamb (Ed.), *The role of the father in child development* (pp. 1–26). John Wiley & Sons.
- Madhavan, S., & Roy, K. (2012). Securing fatherhood through kin work: A comparison of black low-income fathers and families in South Africa and the United States. *Journal of Family Issues*, 33(6), 801–822. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X11426699>

- Madhavan, S., Townsend, N. W., & Garey, A. I. (2008). 'Absent breadwinners': Father-child connections and paternal support in rural South Africa. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 34(3), 647–663. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070802259902>
- Morrell, R. (2006). Fathers, fatherhood and masculinity. In L. Richter & R. Morrell (Eds.), *Baba: Men and fatherhood in South Africa* (pp. 13–25). HSRC Press.
- Morrell, R., Dunkle, K., Ibragimov, U., & Jewkes, R. (2016). Fathers who care and those that don't: Men and childcare in South Africa. *South African Review of Sociology*, 47(4), 80–105. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21528586.2016.1204240>
- Morrell, R., & Richter, L. (2004). The fatherhood project: Confronting issues of masculinity and sexuality. *Agenda*, 18(62), 36–44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2004.9676199>
- Nduna, M. (2014). Growing up without a father and a pursuit for the right surname. *The Open Family Studies Journal*, 6(1), 31–38. <https://doi.org/10.2174/1874922401406010031>
- Nsamenang, A. B. (2010). Fathers, families and children's well-being in Africa. In M. E. Lamb (Ed.), *The role of the father in child development* (pp. 388–412). John Wiley & Sons.
- Pleck, J. H. (2007). Why could father involvement benefit children? Theoretical perspectives. *Applied Development Science*, 11(4), 196–202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888690701762068>
- Pleck, J. H. (2010). Fatherhood and masculinity. In M. E. Lamb (Ed.), *The role of the father in child development* (pp. 27–57). John Wiley & Sons.
- Popenoe, D. (1996). *Life without father: Compelling new evidence that fatherhood and marriage are indispensable for the good of children and society*. Free Press.
- Potter, J., & Hepburn, A. (2007). Discursive psychology: Mind and reality in practice. In A. Weatherall, B. M. Watson, & C. Gallois (Eds.), *Language, discourse and social psychology* (pp. 160–184). Palgrave MacMillan.
- Potter, J., & Wetherell, M. (1987). *Discourse and social psychology: Beyond attitudes and behaviour*. Sage.
- Ratele, K., Shefer, T., & Clowes, L. (2012). Talking South African fathers: A critical examination of men's constructions and experiences of fatherhood and fatherlessness. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 42(4), 553–563. <https://doi.org/10.1177/008124631204200409>
- Richter, L., Chikovore, J., & Makusha, T. (2010). The status of fatherhood and fathering in South Africa. *Childhood Education*, 86(6), 360–365. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2010.10523170>
- Richter, L., & Morrell, R. (Eds.). (2006). *Baba: Men and fatherhood in South Africa*. HSRC Press.
- Richter, L., & Smith, W. (2006). Children's views on fathers. In L. Richter & R. Morrell (Eds.), *Baba: Men and fatherhood in South Africa* (pp. 155–172). HSRC Press.
- Roy, K. (2008). A life course perspective on fatherhood and family policies in the United States and South Africa. *Fathering*, 6(2), 92–112. <https://doi.org/10.3149/fth.0602.92>
- Spjeldnaes, I. O., Moland, K. O., Harris, J., & Sam, D. L. (2011). "Being man enough": Fatherhood experiences and expectations among teenage boys in South Africa. *Fathering: A Journal of Theory, Research, and Practice About Men as Fathers*, 9(1), 3–21. <https://doi.org/10.3149/fth.0901.3>
- Statistics South Africa. (2011). *2011 census suburb profiles*. Government of South Africa.
- Statistics South Africa. (2017). *General household survey 2016*. Government of South Africa.
- Statistics South Africa. (2019). *Quarterly labour force survey*. Government of South Africa.
- Suffla, S., Kaminer, D., & Bawa, U. (2012). Photovoice as community engaged research: The interplay between knowledge creation and agency in a South African study on safety promotion. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 22(4), 517–526. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2012.10820563>
- Swartz, S., & Arvin, B. (2009). *Teenage tata: Voices of young fathers in South Africa*. HSRC Press.
- Van den Berg, W., & Makusha, T. (Eds.). (2018). *State of South Africa's fathers 2018*. Sonke Gender Justice & Human Sciences Research Council.
- Wang, C. C. (2006). Youth participation in Photovoice as a strategy for community change. *Journal of Community Practice*, 14(1–2), 147–161. https://doi.org/10.1300/J125v14n01_09
- Wang, C. C., & Burris, M. A. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health Education & Behavior*, 24(3), 369–387. <https://doi.org/10.1177/109019819702400309>
- Worden, N. (2011). *The making of modern South Africa: Conquest, apartheid, democracy*. Wiley-Blackwell.