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# Experiences of social fathers amongst Black undergraduate students at a university in Johannesburg

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**2022**

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# Experiences of Social Fathers amongst Black undergraduate students at a university in Johannesburg

**A research thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**

**Masters of Arts in Social and Psychological Research**

**at the**

**University of the Witwatersrand**

**Ngokwana Claudit Rachamose**

**Supervisor:**

**Leonie Human**

**2022**

**DECLARATION**

I, Ngokwana Claudit Rachamose, declare that “Experiences of Social Fathers amongst Black undergraduate students at a university in Johannesburg” is my unaided work and all the sources cited have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references. The academic work is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Social and Psychological Research at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other university.

_____

Ngokwana Claudit Rachamose

March 2022

Ethics protocol number: MASPR/21/09

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

It was a long and difficult journey. One filled with many tempting times to quit. I could not have completed this without the amount of support I have received from a community of people surrounding me, especially my supervisor, my coordinator, my mother, grandmother, my partner and most importantly my participants.

Ms Leonie Human, thank you for your persistent support, not only are you teaching me academic writing, you go beyond your means to ensure that this project becomes a success. Your efforts encouraged me to keep pushing even in difficult times. Outside the research project, you always made time to address whatever issue I needed assistance on, which I believe contributed to my overall development as an academia in progress.

This year was full of trials, but I am grateful to my mother and grandmother for their constant support, especially looking after my baby who was born during my exam period. You made the transition to motherhood easy for me.

My partner Malesela, thank you for always cheering for me and making me believe I can do anything I put my mind to.

To my baby Refilwe Bonolo, thank you for teaching me resilience, bringing you to life encouraged me to never give up.

“Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion”…Phil 1:6.

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Father:** the term denotes a male parent or someone responsible for the protection, care, and nurturing of a child.

**Fatherhood:** the term is commonly understood as the social role that men assume to care for their children.

**Biological father**: the term is mostly used to identify male individuals who have biologically contributed to the conception of a child.

**Social father:** the term in this study is used to refer to an adult man within the family such as maternal and paternal grandfathers, uncles, older brothers, and any other man in the mother's life or in the community who can provide paternal roles and guidance; and sometimes socioemotional or practical support.

**Father absence**: refers to the physical, emotional, and financial absence of a father. However, in this study, it is used to refer to the absence of a social father.

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**ABSTRACT**

The majority of South African children are raised by non-biological fathers. Further, many children are also linked to other men across families and communities such as stepfathers, uncles, grandfathers, brothers, male role models and so on, who accept the responsibilities and role of becoming a father to their child/ren. This qualitative study aimed to explore Black students' subjective experiences of social fathers and social fatherhood. Semi-structured open-ended interviews were conducted with ten Black students from a university in Johannesburg, to explore their understanding and experiences of social fatherhood. Thematic content analysis was used to interpret data and guided the presentation of findings. The study found that social fathers are distinguished from other male figures by their commitment and presence in children's lives. The study also found that social fathers perform essential roles in the lives of Black children, such as caregiving, sense of inclusion and validation, social status and security, influence and transmission of cultural value. Finally, the study portrayed that Black students perceived and understood social fatherhood as a decision by men to take on the responsibility to father non-biological children, and also a role of kin. In the conclusion of this study, key recommendations including direction for future research on social fatherhood in South Africa are presented.

Keywords*: Black children, Fatherhood, Social father, South Africa, University students.*

# CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

## 1.1. Introduction

Father absence, that is, biological fathers who are physically, economically and psychosocially absent from their children (The State of South Africa's Father, 2021); and biological paternal absence in the household is a global problem and a global trend in communities (Freeks, 2017). International research on fatherhood indicates that father absence was identified as the most observed serious issue (Carstens, 2014). Globally, the number of single-mother families is increasing (Golombok, Zadeh, Smith, & Freeman, 2016), and in South Africa, the rate of father absence is high. In 2006, the percentage of paternal absence was assessed to be 56% for children living with mothers of childbearing age in South Africa. This was Africa's second-highest absent father rate (after Namibia, which was estimated at 57.8 percent for the same demographic) (Posel, & Devey, 2006, as cited in, Richter, Chikovore, & Makusha, 2010). South Africa also has exceptionally high proportions of biological fathers living apart from their children, with more than two-thirds of children living in families where their biological fathers are not present (Statistics South Africa, 2021). According to Statistics South Africa (2021), almost 70% of Black children are raised in the absence of their biological fathers at home. The statistics further revealed that the minority of Black children (31.7%) compared to the majority of White (80.2%), Indian (86.1%) and Coloured (51.3%) lived with their biological fathers. Furthermore, the survey found that 41 percent of South African children live with non-biological fathers.

Yi (2019) highlights that the problem of father absenteeism is not exclusive to South African Black families. In the United States, long-term repercussions of enslavement have impeded Black fathers ability to nurture for his family. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2020), of the 18.3 million children living in America, one in four is without a father at home.

These include a biological, step or adoptive father. Pleck and Masciadrelli (2004) indicate that equality and freedom are foundational principles of the United States resulting in a unique aspect of fathering. Parents are more likely to have equal responsibilities towards their children and few fathers are primary caregivers. Further, fathers who have financial resources are more likely to be involved in their children's lives than those who are under or unemployed.

The reasons behind father absenteeism are mostly unknown. However, in South Africa, father absenteeism is directly intricately linked to historical, cultural, social and economic contexts (Eddy, Thomson-de Boor, & Mphaka , 2013). The reasons for father absenteeism thus include but are not limited to father's inability to contribute financially for his family (Mkhize, 2006), reduction of marriages, increase of premarital sex, the extended family members increasingly playing important childrearing roles (Madhavan & Roy, 2012), divorce resulting in custody battles that often favour mothers (Khunou, 2006), denied or undisclosed paternity (Nduna & Jewkes, 2010). Because some men are uninterested in becoming fathers (Morell & Richter, 2006), and fathers are now more than ever likely to live apart from their children and father children outside of marriage, often, their partner's children (Bachrach & Sonenstein, 1998). Other factors include incarceration, illness and death (Holborn & Eddy, 2011).

In a study conducted by Ramphele (2002), it was found that father absenteeism has a significant impact on the lives of children. The research further showed that father absenteeism results in a sense of confusion and loss. According to Popenoe (1996), without fathers, children may lack discipline, resulting in poor psychological adjustments, impaired social and cognitive development, and self-control. For most African communities, a present father means the child can use the right surname, which is significant as it is believed to carry cultural personal identity. In South Africa, the father's surname is often associated with legitimate identity,

which means access to family lineage and ancestral protection, thus, one is free from bad luck or any negative repercussions associated with not knowing their father (Nduna, 2014).

While it is widely known that biological fathers are significant in father-child relations, it is also true that many South African children may never reside with their biological fathers (Nathane, 2018). However, that does not mean South African children are without fathers. In Africa, childcare is not a sole responsibility of a biological parent, but a collective responsibility (Malherbe, 2015). A paternal role is not necessarily that of a biological father, many people can take up this role, including extended family members, siblings, and friends. Mkhize (2006) points out that a child might have several men and women whom he or she refers to as his or her father and mother even while the biological parents of the child are alive and co-residents, a child may have multiple caregivers he or she considers mother or father. This manner of characterizing a family denotes kinship, security, and commitment across time (Mathambo & Gibbs, 2009). The practice of social fatherhood makes it impossible for any child to be rendered 'fatherless' (Bame Nsamenang, 2010).

A social father is defined as an individual who takes the fatherly role toward the child that is not biologically his. This could be any adult man within the family such as maternal and paternal grandfathers, uncles, older brothers, and any other man in the mother's life or in the community who can provide paternal roles and guidance (Van den Berg & Makusha, 2018). Marsiglio and Day (1997) describe social fatherhood as many ways in which an adult male can be connected to a child. The connections may be legal as well as emotional relationships between them.

The research conducted by Morrel, Jewkes and Lindegger (2012) found that fatherhood in South Africa highlights problematic father presence that is often associated with disciplinary roles and violent behaviours. Evidence from a few studies conducted in South Africa suggests

that young people who grew up without their biological fathers are treated differently (compared to other children who have involved fathers) in their maternal homes, or frequently suffer physical, sexual, and emotional abuse perpetrated by significant people in their lives (e.g., maternal uncles, aunts, and/or maternal grandparents) (Sikweyiya, Nduna, Khuzwayo, Mthombeni, & Mashamba-Thompson, 2016). In addition, Sikweyiya et al (2016) indicate that gender-based violence (GBV) and biological father absence are two epidemics that affect women and children in sub-Saharan Africa. Similarly, the study conducted by Nduna and Jewkes (2010) revealed that GBV may result in children growing up without their biological fathers. According to Jordan, Campbell, and Follingstad (2010), GBV has a detrimental influence on the victims' physical, mental, and sexual health, as well as the social and economic elements of their existence. While acknowledging the reality of aversive behaviours by fathers or father figures looking after and supporting children, this study focuses on the types of positive engagement by social fathers in the lives of Black South African children.

In South African communities, maternal uncles play vital roles in the lives of many children, especially those residing in female-headed households. Despite how they are negatively portrayed, they are significant where guidance, discipline, and protection are needed, and where biological fathers are non-resident or absent, maternal uncles are portrayed as nurturers, financial providers, links to family lineage and promoters of social fatherhood (Nathane, 2018). In Zimbabwe, there are traditional practices of raising children common to those in South Africa. The practices include what they call "*kugara nhaka*" (wife inheritance) and *"kumutsa mapfihwa"* (literally meaning restoring hearthstones). Although these are no longer feasible and common practices due to modernisation and HIV/AIDS epidemic, the idea was to ensure that when a parent dies, the children continue to have parents and are well taken care of (Drew, Foster, & Chitima, 1996). Similarly, In Malawi, childcare occurs in strong emotionally tied family systems that promote mutual and shared dependence. Children are

raised by their biological families and extended families which include grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, close friends, neighbours and related kin and clan members (Chirwa, 2002).

Given the dramatic rise in Black children living in households without biological fathers, and the evident role played by social fathers within the South African context in trying to deal with the long-term effects of fractured societal and familial structures, arguably, exacerbated by the migrant labour system, there is a need for research that thoroughly explores fatherhood in the South African context and positive fathering engagement. This research focuses on how African Black students experience or interact with these different kinds of social fathers, and how those experiences and interactions allow them to conceptualize or make meaning of social fatherhood in South Africa.

## 1.2. Rationale

Academic research on fatherhood has gained considerable global interest in the past 25 years. Internationally, there has been a rapid increase in research on fathering and fatherhood indicating the significance and unique contributions fathers provide for their children including but not limited to social, material and psychological provision (Richter & Morrell, 2006). In South Africa, it has risen at an exponential rate during the last 15 years. In 2003, the Human Science Research Council has launched a fatherhood project that was the first to bring the subject of fatherhood in South Africa into research. From 2003 to 2018, several noteworthy publications have ever since been published that positively represents fatherhood in African and South Africa including, *Baba: Men and fatherhood in South Africa, Teenage tata: Voices of young fathers in South Africa, Books and babies: Pregnancy and young parents in school, First steps to healing the South African family, Men's pathways to parenthood: Silence and heterosexual gendered norms, Young families: Gender, sexuality and care, and the state of South Africa's fathers* (Van den Berg & Makusha, 2018).

Montgomery, Hosegooda, Buszaa, & Timaeus (2006) convey that in both academic literature and public discourse, biological fathers are dominant subjects with emphasis on the nuclear family as important for child development. It seems that social fathers are overlooked (Clowes, Ratele, & Shefer, 2013). Ratele, Shefer, & Clowes (2012) highlight that there is increasing research on the important roles social fathers or father figures such as uncles grandfathers, neighbours and school principals fulfil in the lives of South African children. While the majority of the research on men as social fathers in the world focuses on step fatherhood and complex families, little emphasis has been paid to kinship social fatherhood, that is, a commitment by men to support children in the family (The State of South Africa's father, 2021). Further, while some research has focused on how fatherhood for some fathers is secured through the obligation to kinship, less is known about how males who serve as social fathers nurture children and maintain family relationships through their caring role (Moore, 2021). Clowes et al. (2013) argue that research on social fathers has been underdeveloped, as a result, should be further explored. Apart from the increased academic attention on fatherhood in South Africa, Makusha (2013) points out that organizations such as Sonke Gender Justice Network are actively involved in campaigns to promote positive fatherhood role modelling.

## 1.3.Aims and objectives

Research aim:

- To explore Black students' subjective experiences of social fathers.

Research objectives:

- To explore how Black undergraduate students in Johannesburg experience social fatherhood
- To explore Black students' understanding of social fatherhood

## 1.4.Structure of the report

This report has been divided into five chapters.

**Chapter 1**: The background and context of the study including the research aims and objectives.

**Chapter 2**: This chapter provides a detailed account of the literature on the topic of social fatherhood. The literature covers discussions on the conceptualization of fatherhood, family structure and history, the role of fathers in the lives of children and social fatherhood in the lives of South African children.

**Chapter 3:** This chapter provides a detailed explanation of the research methodology utilised in this study. This includes an overview of the research design and procedures utilised, as well as an account of the method of analysis and ethical considerations. This chapter also explains the researcher's reflections regarding the research process.

**Chapter 4**: This section provides a detailed description of the findings of the thematic analysis.

**Chapter 5:** This chapter discusses the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and conclusion.

# CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

## 2.1. Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature on social fatherhood in Africa, with a particular emphasis on South Africa. The chapter begins with important terminology, followed by a discussion on how fatherhood is understood and practised. Further, the chapter will also look at the South African context of father absence including family structure. Finally, the chapter will focus on some of the current research available on the role of fathers, including the role of social fathers. These will be discussed as an attempt to provide an understanding of how Black students experiences social fathers in their lives.

Children experience a variety of fathering types (Durnell, Dlamini, & McDougal, 2018), and in South Africa, most Black children are exposed to a wide spectrum of fathering relationships other than those with their biological father (Meyerkor, 2019). Black South African fatherhood is generally a collaborative process, with close friends and extended family members all contributing to the child's upbringing (Richter, 2006). Extended kin networks are the norm in many African societies, frequently incorporating loving grandfathers and elder brothers who function as essential father figures for children in the family (Richter, 2006). Furthermore, with increased rates of migratory labour, unstable relationships, and biological parents' death (Hosegood & Madhavan, 2010), the practice of social fatherhood has become a prevalent element of the lives of Black families (Hall, Richter, Mokomane, & Lake, 2018).

## 2.2. Definitions

### 2.2.1. Social father

The term social father was first mentioned by Malinowski (1913) in the early twentieth century in social science research to distinguish between the biological and non-biological father (that is, spouse to the child’s mother). However, the use of the term has slightly altered,

with the exception that current researchers no longer require marriage for a man to be recognised as a social father to their non-biological child. In fact, recent research uses the term stepfather as a replacement to the original term (Hendricks, 2016), with a social father now understood as a man who lives with the child's mother than a mother's husband (Bzostek, 2008). In recent years, social fathers are defined as a resident or non-resident stepfathers, mothers' romantic partners, grandfathers, uncles, and a wide range of other family members who exhibit parental behaviour and behave as fathers or father figures to a child (Letiecq & Koblinsky, 2004). Similarly, Van den Berg and Makusha (2018) define a social father as any adult man within the family such as maternal and paternal grandfathers, uncles, older brothers, and any other man in the mother's life or in the community who can provide paternal roles and guidance; and sometimes socioemotional or practical support (McDougal & George, 2016). This phenomenon of social fathering, a term used to encompass the wide variety of fathering relationships that occur outside that of the biological father (Richter, 2006), means that children in South Africa are frequently exposed to multiple men who are often considered and expected to be a father to the child as well (Hall et al., 2018). This research used the definitions by Letiecq and Koblinsky, and that of Van den Berg and Makusha as they are similar and accommodative of all the research participants in this study. This is important as participants in this study had different contexts where they experienced their social fathers.

### 2.2.2. Father

There are numerous ways in which the term father is understood; as such it is critical to define this concept (Richter, 2006). The term father originates from the Latin word *pater*, denoting a male parent or someone responsible for the protection, care and nurturing of a child (International Encyclopedia of Marriage and Family, 2003). In the western world, the term father is most often identified as individuals who have biologically contributed to the conception of a child (Van den Berg & Makusha, 2018). Simply put, a man who has

impregnated a woman (Morrell & Richter, 2004). This way of understanding a father, although true, is limited. This is because modern technology such as *in vitro* fertilisation makes it possible for a woman to get pregnant in the absence of a male, which is an indication that biology cannot be the sole determinant of being a father (Morrell, 2006)

The term father in Africa is more fluid and often denotes kinship than biological paternity, and in some instances is used to refer to marital status or assumption of the paternal role toward children in the household (Morrell, 2001). Further, Van den Berg and Makusha (2018) highlight that in South Africa, there is no one kind of a father, but many types of fathers and fatherhood, influenced by family type, ethnicity, age, gender, and class, among others. The types include biological, straight, social, old, young, and gay fathers, among others. In today's culture, the term "father" might refer to a man who provided genetic material (even if his child does not know him), a man who lives in the same family as a child but is biologically unrelated, or a man who is legally considered the father but does not live with the child (Lupton & Barclay, 1997). In exploring biological and social fathering, Moore (2021) found out that the majority of fathers (55%) thought that taking care of a child renders man a father, in comparison to one-third (32%) who had a belief that impregnating a woman makes a man a father irrespective of his roles towards his child. Few fathers (13%) thought that participating in certain cultural ceremonies (such as *inhlawulo*) rendered a man a father. These data suggest that there are differing perspectives on the importance of biology, tradition, and state legislation in deciding who is eligible to be a father. Given the complexities of how a father is defined in South Africa, this research focuses on social fathers as defined prior to this discussion.

### 2.2.3. Fatherhood

The way fatherhood is understood and used has evolved over time (Lamb, 2000). Fatherhood is not universal nor fixed, rather, it is fluid and dynamic (Mkhize, 2004). Fatherhood is a role that may be interpreted and practised in many ways (Richter, 2010). Different individuals, cultures and social groups define and express fatherhood in a variety of ways (Richter & Morrell, 2006). Fatherhood may be defined as a societal role that males play in their relationships with their children. Mkhize (2006) argues that fatherhood is strongly intertwined with a person's role and social standing. Hauari and Hollingworth (2009) argue that fatherhood is a role influenced by one's cultural background, while Day and Lamb (2000) argue that fatherhood is a role influenced by men's attributes and beliefs about being a father.

Fatherhood is a multifaceted concept and has gradually shifted from representing an emphasis on a father as a provider of moral guidance (Lamb, 2000) and a breadwinner (Richter & Morrell, 2006), to a sex-role model, especially to their sons (that is, how important paternal masculinity was to the social/ psychological well-being of boys in particular (Lamb, 1998) and a family nurturer (that is, actively involved fathers in their children's day-to-day care). As a result of these shifting paradigms, the level of father engagement has been assessed and measured in a variety of ways across time. Fatherhood is a social construct that refers to the larger social environment in which fathering takes place and the public meaning connected with being a father. Perhaps the best way to understand fatherhood is as a social construct in flux, which means that as societal expectations change, so do notions of fatherhood (Miller, 2011; Morman & Floyd, 2006).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, fatherhood is viewed as a community obligation that attempts to address the needs of children, in accordance with traditionally wide patterns of family

formation and kinship network (Hosegood & Madhavan, 2012). Children are exposed to multiple caregivers including men who may participate in childrearing to a certain extent (Mkhize, 2004; Chirwa, 2002). African family systems are a fundamental characteristic of fathering practices, with many children connected and dependent on not only the biological family of origin but also extended family which includes grandparents, uncles, relatives, close family friends and neighbours (Chirwa, 2002). Given that fatherhood needs to be understood according to the cultural contexts and family settings, fatherhood in this study will be used to refer to the social role that men undertake to care for their children (Richter, 2006). This involves father involvement and presence at either practical, emotional, physical, financial, or all or some levels in the upbringing of their child (ren).

### 2.2.4. Family structure

According to Hall and Mokomane (2018), family structure refers to family forms and living arrangements. Family structure is defined as “different family forms identified as blended families, single-parent families, married or cohabiting parent families, extended families, and child-headed families” (Voydanoff, 2001, as cited in Davids, Roman, & Leach, 2016, p.2). The term "family" refers to social groups that are blood-related or connected by marital or non-marital bonds, adoption, or some other association that continue over time and distance (Hall & Mokomane, 2018). Family can include varying degrees of kinship, emotional connection, and reliance and reciprocity relationships. Families are fluid, evolving through time as a result of births and deaths, marriage, divorce or separations, and, in the case of households, the entry and departure of members. Therefore, classifying the diversity of family forms in South Africa is complex. Families are not always the same, nor do they always have fixed boundaries: they can exist across geographic regions and degrees of kinship, can vary in composition and structure, can be multigenerational and porous, shifting rather than being

static, and there may be overlaps and duplications as kinship ties may interconnect multiple families in complex ways, so people may belong to more than one household (South African Child Gauge, 2018).

There are different types and forms of family structures that influence fatherhood practices in South Africa (Shulman & Collins, 1993). According to Statistics South Africa (2017), four types of family structures were evident in the General Household Survey (GHS), which included extended families (making up 36% of all households), single-person families (making up 22% of all households), nuclear families (making up less than one-fifth of all households) and complex families. The survey further revealed that households' compositions are not static and there is always a shift. Many children in South Africa are distributed between the nuclear (a family structure that consists of spouse/couple with their children and no other members) and extended (a family structure that consists of related family members, often more than one generation) households. However, 66% of Black or African children were reported to live in extended households (Hall & Mokomane, 2018).

The South African family structure reflects socio-economic and historical-political factors informing the nature of extended family structures in South African households. The entrenched cyclical labour mobility in South Africa aggravated the issue of shifting family structures and responsibilities (Belsey, 2005). This entrenched movement may be traced back to a history of forced labour migration. However, it persists as a result of urban economic and educational prospects, urban housing constraints, and cultural and family links to rural residence (Knijn & Patel, 2018). However, not only are breadwinners migrating between families. The migration of children between houses and carers has long been recognized as a feature of South African families (Hall et al., 2018). Furthermore, many young people relocate from rural to urban in search of work, but instead of moving up the social ladder, they end up

in urban outskirts with little support from family (Hall et al., 2018), and frequently with children and new families of their own, who are then put at danger. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, there were more males in the households at 61% compared to the 48% of men who were living with children by the end of 2017 (Posel & Casale, 2020). The sudden change in children and male living arrangements demonstrate how quickly household arrangements may alter and impact on the children's ties with men in the extended household and their larger kinship network (Moore, 2021). Fatherhood is embedded within dynamic family structures and practices, economic realities, gendered and cultural expectations and historical developments. South Africa being a culturally varied culture has distinct family structures which eventually impact children's living arrangements throughout their lives (Amoateng, Heaton, & Kalule-Sabiti, 2007). Given the fluidity of family forms and childcare arrangements, this research will focus on social fatherhood as experienced in the extended family structure. This is important as social fatherhood within Black or African families mostly occurs in a context where childcare is a kinship responsibility (Hall, 2018).

Previous research found that children from single-parent households were more likely to experience negative outcomes such as delinquent behaviour than those from two-parent households (Nqweni, Pinderhughes, & Hurley, 2010). Similarly, Wasserman (2020) discovered that growing up outside of a home with two biological, married parents had particularly severe repercussions for boys, including reduced academic achievements and increased rates of criminal involvement. Children's well-being in single-parent homes may suffer as a result of reduced levels of parental supervision (Basson, 2013). In a study conducted by Davids et al. (2016), it was found that a two-parent family structure was found to indicate stronger satisfaction of fundamental psychological needs and pursuit of extrinsic objectives among teenagers than a one-parent family structure. Furthermore, as compared to typical, two-parent homes, complex families were found to result in higher internalizing issues for children

living with single parents, particularly females with non-full siblings, and those in stepfamilies (Mostafa, Gambaro, & Joshi, 2018). However, when children are exposed to persistent parental conflict inside the home, two-parent households may not do much better (Slep & O'Leary, 2005). The hostile surroundings have been demonstrated to be even worse than what children of single parents experience (Amato, 2005).

### 2.2.5. Father absence

According to Langa (2010), the concept of father absence is diverse and varies across different cultural contexts. Fathers can be absent physically, emotionally, and financially (Balcom, 1998). Culture may influence the way that a father is understood, which indirectly affects how an absent father is understood. For example, Bame Nsamenang (2010) asserted that in Africa and other countries where childcare is a collective responsibility, father absence does not exist or might be unknown due to the parental care expected and taken by multiple men in the community. Father absence is also used to refer to the absence of the biological father in the household as well as a lack of paternal engagement through inattention or preoccupation (McDougal, 2016).

Other constructs that describe absent fathers include non-residential fathers, unknown fathers, and undisclosed fathers (King & Sobolewski, 2006). The terms, absence or non-residence are sometimes considered to be markers of fathers' degrees of participation with their children, and this may be accurate for some fathers but an incorrect assumption for others (McDougal, 2016). This is partly due to the fact that the concept of absence frequently overlooks the involvement of non-resident fathers (Franklin, 2004). A father may be absent from his family, yet present in his children's lives to a varying degree (McDougal, 2016). Non-resident fathers, therefore, are socially, financially, and emotionally supportive of their children (King & Sobolewski, 2006). Non-resident fathers are fathers who live in a different household

than their biological children (King & Sobolewski, 2006). Unknown father denotes that a child has no idea who the father is (Nduna & Jewkes, 2011). In some cases, not only is the biological father unknown to the child, but he may also be unknown by the mother and family member or he may be known to the mother but rejects paternity (Nduna & Jewkes, 2011).

Not only are non-resident fathers overlooked, so are social fathers (McDougal, 2016). In Africa, social fathers are an acceptable form of fathering, rendering no African child fatherlessness (Bame Nsemanang, 2010). Therefore, father absence in this study will be used to refer to a lack of a social father. This understanding of father absence may provide a better understanding of a wide range of experiences Black children have with fathers (McDougal, 2016).

Father absence has been linked to negative outcomes such as juvenile delinquency, low academic performance, and school dropout (Wilhelm, 2014). A father has a huge impact on the early phases of a child's growth as well as the child's attitude. Furthermore, the values and personalities that students exhibit in school reflect the type of environment that they come from (Wilhelm, 2014). Teenagers from absent paternal families are thought to have fewer resources than those from two-parent homes. This is due to the solitary caregiver's inability to provide for the family financially on her own (Hall et al., 2018). Regardless of how self-motivated a female caregiver is, teenagers show dissatisfaction as long as the father is absent since they require a father role in their life (US Census Bureau, 2020). Teenagers from households with involved fathers are considered to perform better in most aspects of their lives than those from homes with absent fathers. This is because their wellbeing is nurtured appropriately, as compared to fatherless young adults (McLeod & Kaiser, 2004).

#### 2.2.5.1. The South African context of father absence

South Africa's racially discriminatory colonial and apartheid laws, policies, and practices have socially constructed black poverty and generated the necessity for family members to assist one another (Moore, 2021). The Apartheid regime implemented policies aimed at disrupting cultural and family practices whereby Black men were removed from the household through migratory labour practises (Mosoetsa, 2011). The physical removal of the father from his family and kin resulted in fatherhood being narrowed down to a non-resident breadwinner of his family (Rabe, 2018). The family disruptions meant that children did not have daily access to their biological fathers, resulting in the widespread absence of biological fathers and the need for other adult men in the household to offer support to children (Knijn & Patel, 2018). Moore (2021) argues that although apartheid policies disrupted family life, it has also raised the necessity for interdependence within families, including a higher and rising reliance on a spouse, siblings, or male family members who had salaries or wages or other means of survival. Similarly, Mosoetsa (2011) stated that the post-apartheid period has increased the need for family members to help one another, particularly in times of high poverty, unemployment, and inequality.

Morrell (2001) highlights that fatherhood in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries underwent a major shift from understanding fathers to be primarily material providers to including fathers as increasingly involved in childcare. According to the Department of Social Development (2021), child caregiving is used to refer to several aspects of caring for family members. This process includes ‘caring about’ which refers to paying attention to feelings of affection and concern about another, ‘caring for’ which refers to taking responsibility for the wellbeing of another, and ‘caregiving’ which refers to the competent engagement in physical

care work such as feeding or washing. Caregiving in this study refers to all three of these aspects of care (White Paper on Families 2021). Child caregiving also refers to providing emotional, mental, spiritual and physical care for all family members and particularly for children (Ooms, 1990). Research has shown that male kin undertook extensive fathering activities in providing care to children (Moore, 2021). Another recent research described how maternal uncles may help ill children, discipline them when they misbehave, protect them when necessary, and take the lead in planning their funerals if they die (Nathane, 2018). Ratele (2021) argues that father involvement in South Africa need to be carefully studied in order to understand the circumstances of the lives and actions of many men within their complex, dynamic context. Furthermore, she suggests that a thorough inquiry of the attitudes and behaviours of individual males who are not performing the caregiving roles that are expected of fathers is required.

### 2.3. The role of social fathers in the lives of South African children

Many fathers in South Africa may never live with their biological children (Mkhize, 2006). Research indicates that there is a growing number of biological fathers who either reluctantly or voluntarily disengage from the lives of their non-resident children, creating a need for social fathers to fill the gap (Furstenberg, 1995). Many men support children that are not theirs, either in the same house or in other households, such as his sisters' or brothers' children thereby providing non-biological children with different types of care and support such as human capital (that is, traits that promote achievements such as skills and knowledge), financial capital (income or money or any form of experience that can be purchased with money), and social capital (that is, any form of social interaction and community involvement that enhances children cognitive and social development) (Marsiglio & Day, 1997).

In a study conducted by Durnell et al. (2018) on the experience of being raised by Black social fathers, it was found that the reasons Black children recognized non-biological men as their social fathers were because they engaged with them in collective activities, they were consistently present, and they had a meaningful conversation with them. Further, participants pointed out that the most significant influences social fathers had on them were shaping their values and educating them about masculinity and relationships. In a South African study conducted by Louw (2018), it was found that social fathers were identified by participants as significant support systems, especially in the provision of cultural, educational and emotional development. Similarly, the study conducted by Moore and Seekings (2019) in unpacking fathers' experiences of intergenerational support within families in South Africa found that a social father within a wider kinship group engaged in a range of care activities, including financial, practical, and emotional support.

In terms of emotional support, the study conducted by Richter and Smith (2006) revealed that the majority of the relationships children had with their social fathers were characterised by affection and security. As a result, resilience improves, which aids in child development (Pleck, 2010; Ratele et al., 2012). Further, the study conducted by Bzostek (2008) highlighted that the involvement of the social father was beneficial for the child's well-being, especially when there was regular contact.

### 2.3.1. Maternal uncles as social fathers

In many Black South African communities, maternal uncles play important roles in extended families (Nathane, 2018). In a case study maternal uncles' (*bomalome*) significance in female-headed households with non-resident fathers, *bomalome* were found to be significant

as guardians, nurturers, links to family lineage, more than financial providers and promoters of social fatherhood.

In female-headed households where fathers were unknown, absent or non-resident, maternal uncles referred to as *bomalome* in (Sesotho) were found to play important roles in the lives of non-biological children. Maternal uncles also served protective and disciplinary roles in the lives of these children (Nathane, 2018). Where biological fathers were absent or non-resident, *bomalome* provided care and affection to the children by being presently involved in their lives. In cases where children were born out of wedlock or fathers were absent, *bomalome* provided a sense of belonging in line with the traditional African values of embracing and assimilating children born out of wedlock into extended families including legitimising those whose fathers had not paid lobola and those whose fathers are absent (Nzimande, 2007). For many African families, this means access to ancestral protection. *Bomalome* not only contributed financially to children whose fathers were absent, but they also provided emotional connections and significant presence to them. *Bomalome* were regarded as social fathers who shifted the understanding of fatherhood from being regarded and limited to only financial providers to individuals who represented other meaningful ways fathers can promote and value child-rearing work including child support and care (Nathane, 2018).

When Richardson (2009) researched the roles that uncles perform as social fathers in the lives of African American young boys, he discovered that they perform socially supportive roles, particularly when biological parents are absent. In certain circumstances, uncles may aid to nurture good development and guide Black adolescents into adulthood by offering effective and crucial support.

In a study conducted by Moore (2019), it was found that sons, brothers, and uncles, were found to contribute not only to children as people in need of care, but also as kin, and in this way promote their children's membership in the family. The three participating social fathers in the study (older brother, uncle and grandfather) reported supporting not only children but other dependents in a wider kinship group. They indicated providing financial support to the family through buying groceries, clothes, paying school and transport fees (The State of South Africa's Father, 2021). When biological fathers are unable to meet the needs of children, their fathers, brothers or maternal uncles step in and assist (Hosegood & Madhavan, 2010). Families in Africa represent concentric circles of an individual's social surroundings and are an important source of strength and support during times of need and crisis (Mathambo & Gibbs, 2009).

### 2.3.2. Grandfathers as social fathers

Skip-generation households in which children are cared for by grandparents are prevalent in South Africa (White Paper on family, 2021). According to the White paper on Family (2021), skip-generation households refer to a family type where grandparents raise their grandchildren without the grandchildren's parents present in the household. The research conducted by the South African Children Gauge (2018) found that nearly four million children are living with a grandparent or aunt. According to Statistics South Africa 2021, one fifth (21.3%) of children aged 17 and less do not live with their parents, children are not co-resident with their biological parents, consequently raised by their grandparents or other relatives, especially in rural areas. In South Africa, extended households are most common in households with a large number of children, that is, three children (57,9%), four children (74,7%) and more than four children (84,5%). Black grandparents in the contemporary family often play a pivotal role in raising their grandchildren, they are linked to providing supportive paternal roles,

primary sources of constructive advice, emotional, and functional support to their grandchildren, apart from the influential roles they play in their children (parents) lives toward parental competences (Mtshali, 2015). In a study conducted by Attar-Schwartz, Tan, & Buchanan (2009), grandfathers were viewed as integral members of the family network who promote a family legacy, encourage the continuation of family rituals and values, and also viewed as individuals who provide vital caregiving roles to their grandchildren, family, and society.

### 2.3.3. Men who are not kin as social fathers

In the essay written by Phaswadi Emmanuel titled *"I was raised by many fathers except mine"* as cited in The State of South Africa's Father 2021. Emanuel highlights "I have a father. Actually, I have more than one father. The postman that brings the letters every once a week – he is my father, the bus driver that takes me to school every day – he is my father, our neighbour, Mr Mudau, who always needs my help recharging his airtime voucher – he is my father, the security guard at our local supermarket – he is also my father. They have been there for me when I needed them the most. They showed me what being a father is and I can proudly say that I was raised by many fathers except for my own father" (p.51). In South Africa, like in many other countries, some non-co-resident fathers make substantial contributions to families and children, as well as to children who are not biologically their own, through remittances, social visits and telephone contact (Makusha, Richter, & Bhana., 2012). According to (Coney and Mackey (1997), men become social fathers for a variety of reasons, including a desire for the experience of caring for and raising children, opportunities to strengthen the bond with their romantic partner, prevention of loneliness or financial vulnerability in their later years, and a desire to feel more connected to extended family and friends. The study conducted by Hall et al. (2015) revealed that there are men who voluntarily

invest in the biological children of other men, despite having no legal or cultural obligation to do so.

## 2.4. Theoretical framework

This section gives a description of the theoretical framework used in this study. One of the most significant parts of the research process is the theoretical foundation (Osanloo & Grant, 2016). The theoretical framework is the basis upon which all knowledge for a research investigation is built. It provides support and structure for the justification for the study, the research topic, the objectives, the relevance, and the research questions. The theoretical framework serves as a foundation or anchor for the review of the literature, more crucially, the methodologies and data analysis (Lysaght, 2011). A theoretical framework is described by Eisenhart (1991) as a structure that leads the research by drawing on a conceptual framework developed utilizing an established, cohesive explanation of a relationship or specific phenomenon.

Therefore, the theoretical framework is made up of the chosen theory/theories that underpin thinking about how one understands and plans to investigate a phenomenon, as well as the ideas and definitions from that theory that are pertinent to a research topic (Osanloo & Grant, 2016). Lovitts (2005) specifies that when theory is applied in a research study, it must be relevant, properly interpreted, clearly understood, and appropriately aligned to the research question and topic. The following theoretical paradigms were adopted for the study as discussed below: family systems framework, phenomenology, and Interpretive theory/ Hermeneutics.

### 2.4.1. Family Systems Framework.

For the purpose of this study, the family systems framework was employed as a theoretical framework for the interpretation and discussion of findings of participants' experiences of social fatherhood in a broader social context. A family systems framework, according to Bowen (1978), is a transgenerational and multigenerational approach to understanding the family through the lens of its relational interdependence and interrelatedness. That is, family systems theory highlights the interdependence of family subsystems (Cox & Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1985), conceptualizing families as structured units (Cox & Paley, 2003), leading up to perceptions of families as hierarchically structured, with various family members and interactions (Schermerhorn & Cummings, 2008). Families can self-regulate and self-organize (Cox & Paley, 1997). According to Schermerhorn and Cummings (2008), self-regulation entails stabilising interaction patterns; for example, there may be abrupt shifts in family conflict followed by self-regulation back to the family's usual low levels of conflict. Self-reorganization refers to environmental adaptability. For example, an economic downturn may force a father to lose his work, causing the family to reorganise itself around new roles, such as the mother being the main source of income (Schermerhorn & Cummings, 2008).

According to family systems theory, the family is the fundamental interpersonal setting in which individual character traits and resulting behavioural patterns are learnt and reinforced (Johnson & Ray, 2016). Similarly, Bretherton (1985) emphasised linkages between children's internal representations of numerous family ties, and McHale and Fivaz-Depeursinge (1999) advocated for examining families as wholes rather than as a collection of people or dyads. Furthermore, they defined a family's personality as the family's proclivity for specific emotions and behaviours. For example, one family's personality may be warm and expressive, but another family's nature may be distant and disconnected. Thus, the concepts of families as

hierarchically organised wholes with their own personalities, as well as various paths of influence, are central to the understanding of transactional family dynamics.

### 2.4.2. Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a philosophy as well as a method for doing qualitative research (Gill, 2020). The term phenomenology means the study of a phenomenon, and the phenomenon is defined as everything that can be present in someone's subjective awareness (Moran, 2000). It is the study of human subjective experience (Sokolowski, 2000), and mind structures as experienced from a first-person perspective (Smith, 2008). According to Sokolowski, (2000), the philosophical movement of phenomenology emerged as a response to understanding the meaning of human experiences and the world. The importance of personal perspective and interpretation is emphasized in phenomenological approaches, which are based on a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity (Lester, 1999).

Rather than focusing on objectively accepted constructs, phenomenology focuses on extracting reality as it is experienced by individuals and explaining phenomena through emerging core themes (Vagle, 2018). Through research activities, the researcher analyses phenomena and extracts the meaning of lived experiences (Gill, 2020). There are no preconceived assumptions in phenomenological studies, allowing the researcher to be free from bias. Therefore, bracketing is essential in preventing personal, cultural, religious and socio-political presumptions about the experience (Alase, 2017). Bracketing means setting aside what we already know about a given phenomenon or abstaining from the use of personal knowledge (Husserl, 1970). Bracketing is a method used in qualitative research to mitigate the potentially deleterious effects of preconception that may taint the research process (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Alase (2017) asserted that bracketing is an attempt by the researcher to bracket themselves away from the issue being studied and put aside their own preconceived ideas,

assumptions and biases regarding the phenomenon being investigated, in order to allow for the accurate description of the participants' experiences and understandings. According to Creswell (2013), researchers should first describe their own personal experiences and own understanding of the phenomenon being investigated so as to ensure that these do not get in the way of accurately capturing participants' own experiences and understandings.

Phenomenology is a philosophy that does not accept all externally imposed research methods, research traditions, and dogmas. Due to this, phenomenology is especially well-suited for studies that focus on the uniqueness of an individual's experiences, how individuals make meaning of their experiences and how these meanings manifest themselves within the context of the person both as an individual and in their various roles (Vagle, 2018). As a result, subjective experience is the focus of this methodological framework, with an examination of participants' detailed lived experiences as a way of making sense of the world. The goal of a phenomenological study is to discover the meanings of lived experiences in everyday practice in such a manner that they are not destroyed, misunderstood, fragmented, or disregarded (Barrow, 2017).

Central to phenomenology is the interpretation of an individuals' life (Eatough & Smith, 2008). The approach is an iterative method that aims to comprehend the perspective of the participants. The interpretation of results in phenomenology may be descriptive and empathetic to allow rich understanding and context of each participant's lived experience (Vagle, 2018). Interpretation may also entail a critical evaluation of how participants were not able to or reluctant to open up about certain information (Barrow, 2017).

A phenomenological approach is applicable for this study because it aligns with the aims of this study which seeks to explore subjective experiences and gain insight into Black students' lived experiences with their social fathers and how those experiences shape their understanding of fatherhood. This approach aimed to understand the individual's lived experiences and what these experiences have for them (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). The purpose of phenomenology is to explore the complexities of the phenomenon being studied from the point of view of those who live it; including helping us comprehend the phenomenon at a deeper level of consciousness, transform individuals at a personal level and explore our own nature (Qutoshi, 2018).

Furthermore, the phenomenological approach to knowledge derivation is an essential component of transcendental phenomenology (Willig, 2008). Transcendental phenomenology is concerned with the world as it presents itself to us as humans (Husserl, 1970). The aim of transcendental phenomenology is to put aside or bracket what we (think) we already know about things in order to focus on how they actually look to us as perceivers (Willig, 2008). There are three stages of contemplation that make up the phenomenological approach to knowledge: epoché, phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994). According to (Hussler, 1970), *Epoché* necessitates the suspension of presuppositions and preconceptions, judgments, and interpretations, in order to become completely aware of what is truly before us. Phenomenological reduction refers to describing the phenomenon in its entirety, including the physical characteristics, as well as experiencing characteristics such as the thoughts and feelings that arise in our minds when we pay attention to the phenomena (Willig, 2008). An imaginative variation involves an attempt to access the structural components of the phenomenon, that is, how experience is made possible (Husserl, 1970).

### 2.4.3. Interpretive theory/ Hermeneutics

Interpretive theory constitutes an "umbrella term for an array of different perspectives" (Hultgren, 1994, p. 12). Furthermore, Arnett (2007) refers to interpretative theory as a communication philosophy. As a research approach, interpretative theory aims to comprehend a text within the context of the respondents and their surroundings.

According to Remenyi and Pather (2004), an interpretative theory study is also known as qualitative research, interpretivism or phenomenological research. The social world is recognized to be a human production with many features that cannot be quantitatively seen and quantified, therefore access to reality is only through social constructs such as language, awareness, and shared meanings, according to interpretivism (Remenyi & Pather, 2004; Boland, 2004). The philosophy of hermeneutics originated from the qualitative need for interpreting texts depending on social context. Hermeneutics literally means "interpretation" (Byrne, 1998; Smith, 2010). Hermeneutics, according to Agrey (2014), is based on the utilization of a whole-part interaction, which provides the entry question through which researchers access the hermeneutic circle. This theory posits that all human understanding is gained through completing the cycle between the interconnected meanings of pieces and the total that they make (Klein & Myers, 1999).

The goal of hermeneutics is to examine textual material created by individuals (Smith, 2007). Hermeneutics recognizes researcher bias and incorporates it into the text, as well as the perspective of the participants, to produce a new meaning (Arnett, 2007). Hermeneutics is important in qualitative research, according to researchers, since it attempts to uncover hidden meanings (Byrne, 1998). Researchers can use hermeneutics to conduct research in a way that a participant understands. Through the use of appropriate language and techniques, this

theoretical approach aims to extract meaning from the spoken or written content. This approach focuses on the language utilized, how language creates knowledge, and the ways through which the researcher obtains understanding. Hermeneutics is suited for this subject since it challenges the idea of objective reality by showing a variety of alternative interpretations (Smith, 2010). Further, the interpretative layers of hermeneutics are a dual interpretative engagement, meaning that according to hermeneutics, knowledge and meaning is co-constructed (Eatough & Smith, 2006).

## 2.5. Research Questions

- What are Black students' subjective experiences with social fathers?
- How do Black students understand and make meaning of social fatherhood?

# CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

## 3.1. Introduction

This chapter outlines the theoretical underpinnings of the research design and methodology used in this study. The section examines the research design, taking into account the principles and theories that underpin the design. Furthermore, the techniques of recruiting participants, data collection and analysis are explored. Then, ethical considerations are provided, followed by the researcher's reflexivity.

## 3.2. Research design

This study was conducted using a qualitative research design. Qualitative research is defined as an investigation of the essence of a phenomenon, including its qualities, various representations, and the context wherein it exists (Busetto, Wick, & Gumbinger, 2020). A more practical rule of thumb can be added to this formal definition: qualitative research entails gathering, organizing, describing, and interpreting verbal, written, or visual data in a systematic manner (Hammarberg, Kirkman, & de Lacey, 2020). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) define qualitative research as a study that occurs in a natural setting, where phenomena are studied and interpreted from people's own experiences and meanings. Qualitative research is made up of a series of interpretative and material acts that make the world visible; case studies, personal experiences, introspection, life stories, interviews, artifacts, cultural texts, and productions, including historical, observational, interactional, and visual texts to explore everyday life and challenging events and meanings in people's lives. These diverse interrelated practices are deployed as an attempt to better understand the subject investigated (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

The purpose of qualitative research is to provide answers to questions regarding individuals' perspectives, experiences, meaning, relationships, contexts, and social processes

from the participant's point of view (Haradhan, 2018). Further, it aims to provide depth of understanding instead of merely describing quantities (Henning, Van Rensburg, & Smit, 2004). Qualitative research makes use of group discussions to examine social norms such as beliefs and attitudes.; semi-structured interviews when there is a need for views on a specific topic or need for a perspective from particular individuals with specific characteristics; in-depth interviews to obtain personal perspective to understand experiences, events, or conditions; and texts or documents analysis to understand private or public knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

A qualitative research design was adopted in this study because it is exploratory and is able to make us understand why and how a certain social phenomenon occurs as it does in a particular context (Polkinghorne, 2005). In this particular context, what are the experiences of Black children with their social fathers and how do they make meaning of those experiences. Qualitative research was also used due to its potential to investigate relatively unknown areas of the research problem and possibly provide new insights into the phenomena (Terre Blanche, Durrheim, & Painter, 2002). In this study, Black students' perspectives on social fatherhood within the context of South Africa are explored. Further, the researcher seeks to develop a high level of detail in the actual experiences (Creswell, 2009).

In qualitative research, objectivity is not relevant, the researcher serves as the instrument, and subjects are participants who can help understand and analyse the data (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). The quality of qualitative research is assessed by the following evaluation criteria: credibility, applicability, and consistency (Busetto et al., 2020) (to be discussed later in this chapter).

## 3.3. Research paradigm

A research paradigm is a collection of fundamental assumptions and beliefs as to how the world is perceived which then serves as a thinking framework that guides the behaviour of the researcher (Jonker & Pennink 2010). A research paradigm substantially influences how one undertakes a social study from the way of framing and understanding social phenomena (Neuman, 2011). Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was adopted as a paradigm that informed this study. IPA was specifically developed by Jonathan Smith to allow for the exploration of subjective, lived experiences of research participants as well as the meanings ascribed to particular events or phenomena (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). According to Smith and Osborn (2007), IPA involves an in-depth examination of how participants make sense of their social and personal world. Moreover, Shinebourne and Smith (2009) asserted that IPA relies on the assumption that people perceive and experience events differently, therefore, rather than focusing on a specific philosophical idea and producing an objective statement, IPA is concerned with individuals' perceptions and accounts events.

IPA aims to describe participants' experiences and perceptions as accurately as possible, refraining from any preconceived framework by remaining true to the facts of the experience. Similarly, Alase (2017) described IPA as an approach that is concerned with the detailed examination of lived experiences to allow readers to get a sense of, and a full understanding of the experience being examined in its own terms than according to a predefined category system. Therefore, IPA has been recognised as the most participant-oriented qualitative research method, with its main focus on individuals' perceptions and experiences (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008).

IPA view human beings as sense-making creatures that can make sense of their surroundings and provide a comprehensive description of a phenomenon or event, and those

descriptions are worth exploring. However, according to Smith and Osborn (2007), the capturing of these personal descriptions and accessing the participants' world view is also dependent on researchers' conceptions which are required to make sense of the participants' world or their thinking process. Therefore, IPA is not merely a description of experiences; it is also an interpretive process in which the researcher is attempting to make sense of the participants' world as accurately as possible using the researcher's interpretive resources (Smith & Osborn, 2007). According to Shinebourne and Smith (2009), a researcher plays an active role in the analyses process and draws from everyday human resources to make sense of the participants' world. Thus, this approach is appropriate for this study as it aims to explore the lived experiences of participants with their social father without the assumptions of how those experiences should be. Participants are the main characters in their experiences, and their perspectives are accepted as the reality of their interaction with their social fathers, and how they make meaning of those interactions.

## 3.4. Sample

The target population for this study was Black South African Undergraduate students from a university in Johannesburg. The sample consisted of ten participants, seven females and three males. The age of participants ranged between 19 and 28 years. Six were raised in the extended family structure, three in a single women-headed household and one in an adopted family. Eight participants grew up in rural areas, one in a township and another one in a semi-urban area. All the research participants had social fathers mainly from the extended family and a few from the community.

### 3.4.1. Research participants and process of selection

The study adopted a non-probability purposive sampling, also relying on snowball sampling. The term sample denotes a part or portion of a population (Tailor, 2005). A

population refers to all people or objects the researcher targets to study (Tongco, 2007). Nonprobability sampling is a sampling strategy in which samples are collected in a manner that does not provide all participants with an equal probability of inclusion. When selecting a sample from a population of interest, randomisation is not necessary for non-probability sampling. Subjective approaches are employed instead to determine which characteristics to include in the sample (Etikanet, Alkassim, & Abubakar, 2016). Non-probability sampling approaches enable researchers to subjectively identify units that reflect the population under investigation (Etikan et al., 2017).

Purposive sampling also called judgement sampling is defined as a deliberate choice of a sample based on the qualities they possess (Tongco, 2007). It is a non-random approach that does not require underlying hypotheses or a specified number of participants. In simple terms, the researcher determines what is to be studied and looks for individuals with knowledge or experience in a phenomenon who were willing to share in accordance with specific selection criteria (Bernard, 2002). Purposive sampling is usually used in qualitative research as a means to explore and identify participants who can provide in-depth data (Patton, 2002). This entails identifying and selecting participants or people who are knowledgeable and skilled about a topic of interest. In addition, one must be willing and available for participation, including being able to clearly express opinions and experiences in a reflective manner. The goal underpinning purposive sampling is to focus on individuals with specific qualities who will be better equipped to contribute to the particular relevant study (Bernard, 2002).

Snowball sampling strategy also known as chain referral sampling is a non-probability sampling technique used by the researcher when the target sample is difficult to access. The researcher looks for participants who are still relevant to the study through referral. That is, existing participants serve as links to accessing more participants. For example, in a linear

snowball sampling, the researcher recruits a participant who also recruits another participant and so on until the target is reached (Etikan et al., 2016). The snowball sampling approach not only saves time, but also helps the researcher to interact more easily with the samples since they are familiar with the first sample, and the first sample is connected to the researcher (Polit-O'Hara & Beck, 2006).

For this study, the researcher requested permission to access or recruit participants at the University of the Witwatersrand. Permission was granted and undergraduate students in the faculty of humanities were notified and invited to participate in the study through student emails. Interested students were instructed to contact the researcher via email so that their identities are protected. Of the participants who indicated interest, only Black participants' who experienced men who fulfilled the role of social fathers in their lives, were explored. Individuals who did not meet the above criteria were excluded, including those below the age of 18 due to ethical concerns surrounding consent.

When the targeted sample was not easily accessible, the researcher requested an alternative way of getting participants. In this case, the researcher requested permission to readvertise the study through google forms as a screening process. The individuals who participated in the screening study and met the sampling criteria were contacted to confirm their interest to participate in the main study. Those who consented to further proceed with the study were scheduled for a 30-45 minutes online semi-structured interview with the researcher. In addition to the readvertisement, existing study participants were requested to inform other potential participants with similar traits of interest as purposive sampling did not yield the required sample size, as such snowball sampling was used. This was an efficient way of reaching the targeted sample.

### 3.5. Instruments of data collection

In compliance with Covid-19 regulations, data was collected through one-to-one online audio semi-structured interviews using Microsoft Teams. The researcher conducted the interviews, and these interviews were conducted in English. The researcher also transcribed the data.

Qualitative interviews have long been recognized as an important research technique (Oltmann, 2016). The interview has been described as the principal approach utilized in qualitative research and the most direct, research-focused engagement between the research and the participant (Kvale, 1983). In the qualitative paradigm, interviews are frequently considered one of the greatest ways to get into the other person's perspective (Patton, 2002). Qualitative interviews are defined as interviews in which the goal is to gain descriptions of the interviewee's worldview in order to make sense of the phenomena in question (Kvale, 1983).

Qualitative interviews allow researchers to gather information about participants' experiences, beliefs and views regarding a phenomenon of interest or specific research question (Lambert & Loiselle, 2007). Qualitative interviews are a useful and flexible way of especially gaining an understanding of participants' personal experiences and meanings of a given phenomenon (Ryan, Coughlan, & Cronin, 2009). In addition, Kvale (1994) convey that qualitative research interviews have the potential to advance scientific knowledge by methodically developing a new and systematic understanding of a phenomenon. However, Kvale (1994) points out that qualitative research interviews may be critiqued for being unscientific, unobjective, untrustworthy, unreliable, inconsistent, invalid, not representative, not quantifiable, and not producing knowledge.

Further, one danger of qualitative interviews is that by attempting to investigate the social environment, one risks developing information that is prevalent in society and so does

not represent the individual's perspectives. Therefore, researchers must pay much attention to how they interact with their participants since this impacts how the participants respond or behave (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004). The researcher must be aware of these interactions in order to take an active role in encouraging the participant to be open and engaged (Potter & Hepburn, 2005). In addition, Oltmann (2016) argues that while online or telephonic interviews are critiqued for compromising the quality of reporting data in that there is no face to face interactions to observe nonverbal cues, she points out that online interviews have their unique merits. She indicates that many of the characteristics that identify effective qualitative interviews do not need the interviewer and responder to be visible to each other, therefore what is important, is for the researcher to ensure that the interview style corresponds with the aims, objectives and research questions of the study. The researcher adhered to this by consulting with the supervisor on developing an interview guide which assisted in directing the focus of the study.

For this study, a structured phenomenological interview was used. Semi-structured interviews include a series of important questions that assist to outline the topics to be examined while also allowing the interviewer or interviewee to digress in order to investigate a subject or an answer in greater depth (Gill, Stewart, & Treasure, 2008). Semi-structured were used as they give the researcher the flexibility to revaluate important information previously missed or not thought of (Gill et al., 2008).

A phenomenological interview is a method that focuses on the accurate description and thematising experience in a systematic way (Bevan, 2014). A phenomenological interview is also defined as an approach that seeks to apprehend the phenomenon from people living it (Guerrero-Castaneda, Menezes, & Ojeda-Vargas, 2017). Phenomenological interviews employ themes such as contextualizing experience, comprehending the phenomena, and clarifying the

phenomenon (Bevan, 2014). When it comes to questioning, it is necessary to make use of both descriptive and structural questions including creativity to capture sufficient descriptions. That is, questions should be open-ended and broad to allow the participant a chance to accurately represent their perspective (Giorgi, 1997).

A phenomenological interview offers an open structure that allows a researcher to investigate a person's experience both actively and systematically. The structure helps the researcher manage the questioning process. However, the structure does not dictate what the researcher should ask, but a researcher is free to design the interview in such a way that a thorough investigation of a phenomenon is obtained.

Seidman (2006) provides a detailed description of the phenomenological interview method, which is based on Schutz's (1967) interpretation of Husserl's (1960) phenomenology. He proposes three interviews per participant, the first interview focusing on life history that provides context, followed by an interview aiming at reconstructing experience linked with a relevant framework, lastly an interview allowing the participants to reflect on the significance of their experiences. Seidman purposefully designed context to convey meaning, allowing the behaviour to be contextualized. He also suggested using open-ended questions derived from the context-building process, and that if a guide is utilized, it should be handled flexibly and cautiously. This method is used to investigate phenomena using a structured interview approach (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

In this study, Bevan's (2014) structure for phenomenological interviewing was adopted. The structure consists of three main domains which are contextualization, which involves the researcher gaining insight into where the participants gain their meaning of experience from (contextual questioning); apprehending the phenomenon, which focuses on the experiences the researcher is interested in (descriptive and structural questioning); and clarifying the

phenomenon, which focuses on exploring the phenomenon itself using experience as a whole. Using this type of interview allows accurate description and thematising of experience in a systematic way and further enables the researcher to maintain methodological consistency and increase trustworthiness (Bevan, 2014).

### 3.6.Data analysis

Data collected were analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis (TA) is defined as a technique that allows a researcher to systematically identify, organise, and offer meaning into patterns of the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is the first qualitative approach that should be learnt since it gives essential abilities that will be valuable for undertaking many other analytical techniques. Thematic analysis is a unique qualitative analytical technique in that it provides a method free of a theoretical framework; because of this, it is the most adaptable technique (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

The thematic analysis provides simple and rigorous ways for creating codes and themes from qualitative data. Codes are the smallest analytic units that incorporate significant properties of the data that are (possibly) relevant to the research problem. Codes serve as the foundation for themes, which are (bigger) patterns of meaning supported by a fundamental core concept. Themes serve as a framework for arranging and summarizing the researcher's analytic findings. The goal of thematic analysis is not only to summarize the data content but to identify and interpret essential elements of the data, driven by the research question. The focus is on delivering thorough, high-quality analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Thematic analysis is used because of its theoretical flexibility and adaptability in accordance with the research questions, sampling constituency, methods of data collection and methods to meaning formation. Thematic analysis is a common and accessible approach to

qualitative data analysis that allows the researcher to investigate phenomena in-depth (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Further, thematic analysis can be used to discover and make sense of collective or shared meanings, perspectives, experiences, practices, and behaviours by focusing on meaning across a dataset in order to understand what participants think, feel, and do (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The thematic analysis enables the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences by focusing on meaning across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The focus is on what is common on the topic discussed and making sense of those commonalities, however, these patterns must be relevant to the research question. According to King (2004), thematic analysis is a valuable tool for exploring the viewpoints of several study participants, showing patterns and variations, and yielding unexpected findings. Thematic analysis is especially beneficial for summarizing significant elements of a huge data set since it compels the researcher to handle data in a well-structured manner, resulting in a clear and organized report (King, 2004). Thematic Analysis is thought to be the best choice for any study that attempts to explore through interpretations. It adds a methodical component to data analysis. It enables the researcher to correlate an analysis of the frequency of a topic with one of the entire contents, conferring authenticity and complexity and improving the overall meaning of the research (Alhojailan, 2012). Thematic Analysis gives an opportunity to understand the potential of any issue more widely (Marks & Yardley 2004). Thematic Analysis provides complex, rich, and detailed data that is compatible with Braun & Clarke's (2006) vision.

The major disadvantage of this framework is the lack of substantial literature on thematic analysis, which may result in researchers being unsure of how to conduct rigorous thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

There are several approaches to theme analysis (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). In this study, Braun & Clarke's (2006) 6-step framework was adopted. This is because the 6-step framework is argued to be the most influential method of analysis in social sciences because it provides such a clear and practical framework for doing thematic analysis (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Braun and Clarke (2006) identify two types of themes: semantic and latent. The sematic theme mainly focuses on what was said or written by the participant and the latent theme focus on the interpretation of themes. Thus, Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that the goal of thematic analysis is to shift from merely describing but examining, explaining and interpreting themes.

The first phase is called familiarizing. In this step the researcher fully immerses themselves in the data by actively, critically, and analytically reading and re-reading the textual data, listening and re-listening to audio data and reading transcripts while making notes. This phase allows the researcher to question and understand how participants made sense of their experiences and assumptions in interpreting their experiences, their world in terms of the accounts they give, and most importantly what is relevant to the research questions. After every interview, the researcher made rough notes and jotted down impressions on what they thought about the interview and the contents the participant shared.

Phase two is called coding. In this step, data is organised in a meaningful and systematic way. Coding breaks down large amounts of data into little significant parts. There are several methods for coding, and the approach used depends on the researcher's perspective and research topics. In this study, theoretical thematic analysis was used since the study was concerned with addressing the research question. The researcher did not code every text but identified potentially subjects relevant to the research question and coded them.

Phase three is called generating themes. In this phase, the analysis starts to shape as the researcher moves from codes to themes. Themes represent a patterned response, which means reviewing coded data to identify areas of similarity and overlap between codes. The codes are organized into bigger themes that seem to express anything unique about the research topic or research questions.

Phase four involves reviewing the themes. In this phase developed themes are reviewed in relation to the coded data and the entire dataset to ensure the quality of data. That is, during this step, the researcher revisits, revises, and expands on the preliminary themes found in phase three. In this phase, all relevant and useful data to the theme is brought together. This is to ensure that themes are consistent and different from each other.

Phase five is called defining and naming themes. In this phase, the researcher clearly states what is unique and specific about each theme. The phase entails deep analysis which involves selecting which extracts to analyse and using each theme to set out a story around those extracts. The aim of this phase is to get a clear picture of what the themes are about, that is, what meanings are those themes depicting and if there are subthemes, how they relate to the main theme. Finally, how themes relate to each other.

In the final phase called writing up, the researcher produces a report that makes an argument about the research question or the research topic. The analysis is transformed into an interpretable report by employing vivid and captivating extract examples that link to the research topic, research question, and literature. The report must present the outcomes of the research in a way that persuades the reader of the significance and validity of the research conducted. It must go beyond a simple summary of the themes and include an analysis backed up by actual data that answer the research questions.

## 3.7.Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the ethical committee of the Faculty of Humanities from the University of Witwatersrand. The relevant ethical considerations for this study included voluntary participation and informed consent; promotion of confidentiality; and non-maleficent.

Voluntary interested individuals were informed about the requirements of participating in the study *(Appendix A-Participant information letter)*. In addition, participants were also informed about their rights, including the right to withdraw from participating in the study at any given time without any explanation or pressure, and the right to only disclose what feels comfortable to them during the interviews. Information about the aims of the study and requirements for participation was provided in a participant information letter *(Appendix A)* and written informed consent was obtained before data collection. Participants were also encouraged to ask questions or raise concerns when they had any so that the researcher may address those (Shahnazarian, Hagemann, Aburto, & Rose, 2017).

The information obtained from participants during the study remained confidential. Since the study required that participants be audio recorded, consent was requested and obtained from participants before the interview. *Appendix D* (attached) outlines this. In addition, participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities. The information obtained during the study was password protected on the researcher's laptop. No folder within the laptop contained anything that linked the study to any participant. The information remained in the laptop and will remain with the researcher until the process of marking ends. After marking, it will be destroyed. Should the information be used for publication, it will be in such a way that the identities of individuals are protected, and no harm will be done should the participants find out (Shahnazarian et al., 2017).

To ensure that participants were not deliberately harmed by the researcher or the study, trust and openness were established through obtaining written informed consent from the research participants. Participants were also constantly reminded of their rights and responsibilities of the researcher in protecting their rights and integrity. The researcher also constantly reflected on her objectivity and what perspective they might have brought in the study (Jelsma & Clow, 2005). Regular debriefing sessions were scheduled to allow the researcher to identify any signs of distress. If any, the participants were to be advised with information on how to obtain professional assistance, including reminding them of their right to withdraw from the study before or during the interview. It is important to note that English was used as the language of communication throughout this research study.

### 3.8. Researcher Reflexivity

Reflexivity is an important part of qualitative research (Palaganas, Sanchez, Molintas, & Caricativo, 2017). Hesse-Biber (2007) defines reflexivity as precise ways in which our personal agenda at all phases of the research process affects the research. Parahoo (2006) as cited in Palaganas et.al (2017) defines reflexivity as the process in which a researcher continuously reflects on his or her subjective beliefs and behaviours, and those of participants to determine how those can affect the interpretation of responses. Reflexivity is useful in understanding the researcher's role and the phenomenon being studied (Jootum, McGhee, & Marland, 2009). It is important to acknowledge that the researcher cannot exist outside his or her study topic. Therefore, self-awareness, introspection, and a certain level of consciousness are necessary (Palaganas et.al, 2017). The authors further highlight the importance of being aware of one's lived experiences and construction of meanings throughout the research process, including examining and recognising how ones identity, background, location, and knowledge might affect their research practice (Hesse-Biber, 2007). The key to reflexivity is to explicitly

explain the relationship and influence between the researchers and the participants (Jootun et al., 2009).

In their writing, qualitative researchers must establish their own identity (Creswell, 2013). A qualitative research study requires the researcher to be aware of the biases, values, and experiences that they bring to the table. One distinguishing characteristic of successful qualitative research is when the position of the researcher is clearly stated (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). The researcher begins by discussing his or her own experiences with the phenomena under investigation. This entails retelling previous experiences from job, school, family interactions, and so on. The second part is discussing how previous experiences impact the researcher's understanding of the phenomena, which is core to reflexivity as it is critical that the researcher not only describe their experiences with the phenomena, but also aware of how these experiences may have influenced the study's results, interpretations, and conclusions (Creswell, 2013).

I am a Black female who grew up in the rural villages of Limpopo. I was raised in the same setting I am investigating, that is, in an extended family without the presence or involvement of a biological father. Like my participants in the study, I was raised by a social father who played an important role in my understanding and conceptualization of fatherhood. As a result of my position as a relatable researcher to my research topic and participants, I was cognisant of the following advantages and disadvantages of my direct involvement in the study: the advantages were that I shared similar experiences with my participant which helped diminish distance, as it is often easy to engage with someone in a familiar situation. It also meant I was better equipped with insights and the ability to understand implied content and to be more sensitive to issues that emerged during data collection as I am familiar with triggers in Black communities, especially with this kind of a research topic.

The disadvantages were that the nature of the relationship between the participants and I might have affected how much information participants were willing to share. As such the setting might create either a comfort or safe space for therapy-like setting due to the nature of the research topic. It is also possible that I might have connected more to other participants due to similarities than others, resulting in exaggerating their perceptions and experiences, and underestimated those whose experiences were different from mine. To incorporate reflexivity in the research process, I made use of the reflexive journal to keep track of my thoughts, reflections and decision making regarding the data. Also, supervision was another measure of reflection and repositioning for myself toward the data. Further, I used measures of triangulation with other studies. In addition, I separated the sessions to decrease the emotions or attachments that might occur from conducting the interviews. Further, I acknowledged that while extended families are dominant types of family structures that exist in the villages, there are differences in family composition and roles, therefore, different experiences of social fatherhood. Thus, allowing me an opportunity to learn and not use my assumptions and preconceived ideas and expectations of what the participants should share. While complete objectivity in research analysis findings may not be guaranteed, my subjective and active role assisted in obtaining in-depth quality data.

### 3.9. Research rigour and credibility of findings

Validity in qualitative research is a challenging concept on many levels, and that is because many authors have conceptualized different classifications of validity. However, there is an agreement that qualitative researchers must show the credibility of their studies. Many authors have identified common validity procedures that researchers use to report the results of their studies (Creswell & Miller, 2000). For example, Lincoln and Guba (1989) developed validity criteria that have been used to assess qualitative research which consists of

trustworthiness and authenticity. The trustworthiness criteria is made up of three components which are credibility, transferability and dependability. Credibility refers to research findings being believable and trustworthy, which fully depends on the richness of the data and only participants of the study can decide if the results reflect the phenomena being studied. According to Morrow (2005), prolonged interactions with participants, constant observation, and audit trails can help to boost the credibility of a qualitative. The audit trail, according to Bowen (2009), is established to explain the procedures and record the decisions in the process of transitioning from raw material to finished product ultimate interpretation of the results such that the theory creation process is both transparent and understandable verifiable. This chapter gives a comprehensive description of the research design procedures. The audit trail also improves the study's dependability. Dependability refers to the consistency of the results when the study is repeated (Morrow, 2005). Dependability was further enhanced by the inclusion of detailed information on data collecting and analysis procedures.

Lastly, the criterion of transferability refers to the degree to which the findings of the research can be applied to similar settings, situations, or populations, which is often understood as generalizability (Connelly, 2016). A thorough and detailed summary of the research environment and interviewees was provided to support the study's transferability.

Authenticity criteria mean fair representation of the sample, helping the participants have an understanding of their social world and appreciate the contributions of others. Moreover, authenticity means the research empowers people to take action (Bryman, 2012). Silverman (2000) indicates that in qualitative research, validity is concerned with the truth that is, the attempts made by the researcher to deal with contrary cases. Furthermore, the researcher needs to convince the audience that the findings are genuinely based on a critical investigation of all their data and not only on a few well-chosen findings. Creswell and Miller (2000) argue

that the selection of a validity technique is determined by two standpoints: the researcher's paradigm framework and the lens through which the researchers assess their studies. In a qualitative study, a lens is established through the perspectives of the researchers, the participants, and those who review or evaluate the study. Concerning the researcher, Patton (2002) convey that one way the researcher can determine the credibility of their study is to assess when data is robust to develop good themes. In addition, Creswell and Miller (2000) highlight the importance of accurately interpreting and representing participants' accounts. Bryman (2012) suggests that the researcher should find ways to overcome the temptation to jump to conclusions regarding the data. Further, he notes that, while it is not completely possible, efforts to achieve objectivity within the participant's subjectivity must be made.

There are various commonly used validity procedures in qualitative research, and in this study, only two relevant procedures are discussed. These include research reflexivity and thick rich description (Creswell & Miller, 2001). According to (Moustakas, 1994), reflexivity means the researcher needs to acknowledge their preconceptions, views and prejudices that may influence their study. These need to be done in the early phase of the research so that the researcher can position themselves before the study progresses. Researchers need to reflect on the historical, cultural, and social circumstances that influence their perspective. For this study, the researcher wrote a section on researcher's reflexivity as a way to acknowledge her positionality in the current study.

A thick rich description means the researcher adequately explain the study setting, participants, and the research topic. Denzin (1998) defines thick descriptions as deep, rich, and thorough narratives. The aim is to make readers relate to the experiences expressed in the study. The researcher ensured to provide as many details as possible; including what may seem as minor interaction. The researcher also ensured that the context is well defined, and any

unexpected change is documented to allow those who want to replicate the study to have sufficient information regarding the reliability of the study. Rich description increases the applicability of findings in similar contexts (Creswell & Miller, 2001).

## 3.10. Summative sample description

Table 1: Summative Profile of in-depth interview participants

| **Participant** | **Gender** | **Age** | **Family structure** | | **Social father/s** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Female | 28 | Single headed | | Stepfather & Uncle |
| 2 | Female | 23 | Extended family | | Grandfather & Uncles |
| 3 | Female | 23 | Extended family | | Friends' fathers, uncle, and brother |
| 4 | Female | 22 | Extended family | | Aunt's husband |
| 5 | Male | 23 | Single headed | | Friends' fathers, uncle, and brother |
| 6 | Female | 19 | Extended family | | Stepdad and grandfather |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 7 | Male | 20 | Extended family | | Uncles and stepdad |
| 8 | Female | 22 | Extended family | | Uncles |
| 9 | Male | 20 | Single headed | | Uncle |
| 10 | Female | 19 | Nuclear adoptive | | Adoptive father |

The study consisted of ten participants who took part in the semi-structured interviews. Seven participants were women and three were males between the ages of 19 and 28. Six participants were raised in the extended family structures, three in single female-headed family structure and one in an adoptive nuclear family. All participants identified someone as their social father or a male figure who provide fatherly roles in the absence of their biological fathers.

# CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

## 4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the current study. Several themes and subthemes were identified utilizing the thematic analysis technique developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The main themes incorporated multiple subthemes that provide greater detail to support the analysis. Quotations were utilized from the participants' actual interviews to support the themes found during the analysis. By carefully incorporating quotes from participants in the final report enables the researcher to provide participants with a distinctive voice in the outcomes while also enhancing the research's credibility and transparency (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). The following main themes were identified:

## 4.2. Themes

The main themes identified from the interview data are as follow: 1) The identity of the social father, 2) The subjective roles of the social father, 3) The meaning of social fatherhood as understood by participants. Despite the fact that certain themes may appear to overlap, they are all significant to the study topic.

### 4.2.1. The identity of the social father

The importance of distinguishing the social father from any other man in the participants' lives was reflected in the significance of their relationship characterised by presence and commitment. The participants identified men in their lives as social fathers when they were consistently present, available, and actively involved in providing fatherly roles such as a sense of acceptance as one’s child, caregiving roles, taking responsibility towards them, and support. For example, in response to questions about why the father figures in their lives were significant, some participants responded as follows:

"*My dad, he was always at home looking after us, he would give us advices, he provided that figure father role….I see his commitment in my life"* (Participant 1).

*"Growing up I was always cared for and assured…. I never felt the lack of a mother or a father, they were my parents, I don't even remember having parents' issues, I knew them as my primary caregivers or primary parents"* (Participant 2).

*"…the only father figure that would remain would be my aunt's husband… he took care of me making sure I get best education, clothing, food..."* (Participant 4).

*"...they were treating me like… even though I was a friend to their children; they treated me like their son"* (Participant 5).

"*Then the first uncle, I would say, he was fond of me, at some point I even stayed with him during my primary school years*" (Participant 9).

Additional to factors responsible for participants identifying certain men as their social fathers, it appears that the participants desired social fathers who are consistently presence and committed due to inconsistent, or non-existent relationships with their biological fathers. In contrast, social fathers may have identified consistently present and committed as traits that participants were in particular need of. This view is expressed below:

"*My uncle, my buddy, he is always there, everything, very available and accessible, he is very approachable… I can confide in him*" (Participant 7).

*"...the fact that my biological father is alive and I can go even two years or more and it doesn't bother him, but my stepdad, maybe I can go for like a week and I will get a message like are you okay? Is everything okay? He would pass by……he is the person I would go to if I need assistance…if I need advice with something, he was honestly quite involved… I could*

*message him whenever I need something, he would call me home and we would talk, so I feel like it's a father-daughter relationship"* (Participant 1).

*"…some of the things he used to do with us was watching soccer and teaching us how to swim …during the weekends he would take us to cinema…*" (Participant 4)

"*I look at my grandfather, more like my father, more than my own father… even if I'm in a dark space, my grandfather is the first person I think of*" (Participant 6).

### 4.2.2 The subjective roles of social fathers in the lives of the participants

The participants in this study experienced varying levels of social father involvement in their lives through different roles such as caregiving, sense of inclusion and validation, social status and security, influence, and transmission of cultural value. For most participants, social fathers are a cultural component of African extended family practice or tradition in the context of socio-economic and historical-political circumstances. Many participants depicted the role of the social father as a family role and an indication of a strong kinship bond. Additionally, the role of social fathers is expressed by participants to centre around provision and connection, suggesting that social fathers may be a source of stability.

#### 4.2.2.1. Child caregivers

Most participants in this study described their social fathers as childcare providers. According to the participants, childcare was demonstrated by their social fathers through practical support, childrearing practices, and financial, emotional, and psychological provisions. All of the participants explained to have received some form of childcare role from their social fathers. Examples of the views of the participants on this role are as follows:

*"he always played his role as a dad …he was the one who would look after me... he is the person I would go to if I need assistance with things like homework... he was quite involved in our studies and as much as he was unemployed when it came to paying our fees, you know, he would always make a plan"* (Participant 1).

*"He used to help my grandmother a lot especially on caring for us, when my grandmother is not around, he would cook, clean, teach us how to cook… Sometimes he would take us to our family farm so that we learn about farming and livestock*" (Participant 2).

*"…if we wanted money, we would call him, if we needed transport, we would call him… This is a man that I would tell my phone cracked the screen, he would just send money or drop a new phone*…" (Participant 3).

*"His role was to make sure we are disciplined, take care of us like we have a father figure, get us food, pay bills, drive us to school* …" (Participant 4).

*"but with my stepdad, we are more financially connected… he is more like a financial provider"* (Participant 6).

*"…my uncle, I can talk to him about anything and I mean anything, literally anything… I feel very comfortable to tell him anything as is, without filtering"* (Participant 7).

*"…so he took me in, payed my school fees and transport"* (Participant 9).

#### 4.2.2.2. Sense of inclusion and validation

Other roles participants in this study pointed to their social fathers was that of providing them with a sense of feeling like they wanted them to be part of their lives. Further,

social fathers were described as having provided the participants with the sense of being valued, accepted, understood and supported. Participants had this to say about this perception:

*"…so when I walk into his house, he gives me the biggest hug and the biggest kiss on my cheek as if I am his child... This is the person who includes me, who I would have conversations with every day, he asks for my opinion about things, like current affairs…I have another father…when I go to his home I can see he believes in me, both of them actually, they believe in my potential …and he wants to do as much as he can to lift me up, help me achieve my dreams"* (Participant 3).

*"…when I got to know him, I used to call him uncle, but he was like no no no call me papa (meaning father), that filled that gap or void because I felt like I have a father, I felt like other kids who have fathers even though I knew he wasn't my biological father"* (Participant 4).

*"Okay I will talk about Andile, his father had a mini taxi, every time he comes back from work, he would call both of us to wash the taxi, his father would also take me with them and teach me how to drive and teach me a lot about being a man and growing up, they would teach a lot of things such as responsibility*" (Participant 5).

#### 4.2.2.3. Social status and security

For many participants, a lack of a biological father or father figure meant they are not secured, protected, represented, provided for and the family had no leadership or authority as participant 5 depicts "*I would say…our family lacked leadership of a man…we lacked leadership… someone who would lead the family you know someone who would protect and provide for us, someone who would represent us".* Social fathers in participants' lives were acknowledged as filling those gaps. They provided the participants with a sense of dignity and protection. Participants had this to say:

*"the extra effort he always puts in ensuring that we feel secured.…he provided that figure father role I feel like it made a difference because sometimes I would compare my family with the other families that lacked a father figure, I don't know, but there is something about a father that gives a family like… I don't know how to say it in English, but isithunzi (meaning dignity)"* (Participant 1).

*"…because most people feared him. Nobody would provoke us at school…in a way we were protected because of him"* (Participant 2).

"*…because my brother's role is just that of security, if someone beats me on the street ( no one did, (laughs), I'm just making an example) we would call him … his part being the protector played a much bigger role in larger things because of the fact that we were raised by women"* (Participant 3).

*"…and my step dad, is like..uhmm I don't know how to put this, but like lion protecting the cub, how the lion protects the cub, he is more like he is more like that person you go to for fighting, not physically fighting, but standing up for you, I know he got my back no matter what, he has my back."* (Participant 6).

"*…otherwise they are all my uncles, they are cool, they bring that balance in the family, so even though my father wasn't around, they kinda filled that gap in their own way.(Participant 9).*

#### 4.2.2.4. Influence

Social fathers in the participants' lives were described as individuals who played influential roles. Participants expressed how these men were able to influence their beliefs, shape or challenge how they perceived themselves, their world, and their perception

about fatherhood and fathers. Some of the views expressed by the participants on this view are as follows:

*"…so there are two other fathers in inverted commas... They offered me an outlook of what a father and a man look like. They have added a drop of positivity to what a man is…they have taught me that a father can be loving*.." (Participant 3).

*"They had a positive impact in my life looking at Andile and Ndimande's father, so looking at how they live, I would compare that to the kind of a father I want to become, because when I am with them, I always take notes"* (Participant 5).

*"I would say there are parts they had influence on…there are still beliefs that are old school that I grew into, so most of the core beliefs I have, are mainly from them, so the beliefs I have, I feel like I share most of the beliefs with them, how they see the world, even though I have changed in the most parts, but there is still a foundation of how they saw the world"* (Participant 6).

*"With my stepdad, he taught me that you do not have to be related to someone by blood to care for them and to be committed to them or their lives… That blood doesn't really create bonds, it's possible for a stranger*" (Participant 1).

#### 4.2.2.5. Transmission of cultural value.

For many of the participants in this study, the role of a father was the value of the cultural transmission. Social fathers shared cultural traditions with the participants through storytelling, important cultural lessons and sometimes practically such as when there is a need for a father to fulfil certain cultural duties associated with a certain event such as marriage or death. For example, some of the views of the participants who expressed this understanding are as follows:

*"But with their role, I only saw it at a later stage in my life, you know during the lobola negotiations where I needed someone to represent the family…uhmm my stepdad couldn't participate, my biological couldn't because he didn't pay the damages towards me so he wasn't allowed to…so I could see how they participated, going an extra mile to ensure everything goes well you know"* (Participant 1).

*"sometimes he would just teach us about ancient stories, but behind them, a lot of significant cultural and traditional lessons. I remember how he used to take us outside to explain to us what the types of moons, sun and weather signify in our culture"* (Participant 2).

*"…there is my uncle and one of my brothers I have mentioned. My brother is very important because he knows a lot of things when it comes to the Xhosa culture, my mother is Xhosa, so my brother knows a lot of those, so he would take me through a lot of them. Things like amasiko (cultural tradition)… same with my uncle, he grew up with my mother, so he is able to pass those lessons, like how xhosa people live and behave in a society…"* (Participant 5).

### 4.2.3. The meaning of social fatherhood as understood by participants

This theme explored how participants in this study socially constructed and subjectively informed perceptions of fatherhood and social fatherhood. This is understood as to how participants describe and interpret their lived experiences of fatherhood and social fatherhood while taking into account the important discourses identified as influencing their meaning-making. Participants in this study had various ways they had experienced and understood social fatherhood. The common understanding or meaning of social fatherhood shared amongst participants included: the role of kin and choice. Each of these patterned responses is discussed in detail below.

#### 4.2.3.1. Social fatherhood as the role of kin

For many participants in this study, fatherhood and social fatherhood were experienced and understood as the role of kin. Many participants who had this way of constructing and conceptualising fatherhood have been raised in the extended family structure where childcare was the inherent responsibility of kin. The participant explained how some male figures in their family stepped into those roles when there was a need.

According to participant 2, social fatherhood was a common practice in her community. A role assumed by family in the absence of biological parents. This perception is evident in the following excerpts: *"I was raised by my grandparents and to me they were my mother and father…For us in the community it was a norm to live without our parents, like our biological parents. Everyone in the community used to call their grandparents mom and dad…*". A similar experience was shared by participant 4 whose biological parent's death resulted in her residing with her aunt and her husband who became her social father. *"I don't know how to put this but my father's sister took me and my sister in… after my mom passed… so the family in Bendor also raised us* (Participant 4).

#### 4.2.3.2. Social fatherhood as Choice

Social fatherhood was experienced and perceived by participants in this study to mean choice. That is, a decision to become a father or play a fatherly role for a child. This was reflected mostly in participants whose social fathers were non-kin such as stepfathers and father figures in the community. According to participant 4, his experience and understanding of a social father were seen in his friends' father who chose to father him. According to him, a social father is a man or father who chose to become a father and take responsibility towards his children. This is what he said about his social father, *"he was there as a father, taking responsibility to such an extent that he would make everyone's needs met, he could have ran*

*like my father who chose to leave my mother and I, but he choose to be a father, even to me".* A similar experience is shared by participant 1 who believed that social fatherhood denotes choice and not a biological relation. She had this to say*, "it's possible for a stranger to choose to father someone's child and make them feel their own.*

Despite the experiences and important roles, father figures play in the participants' lives, other participants felt that not all father figures in the family had a positive impact or important roles to play in their lives. Some of these father figures included uncles whom participants considered troublesome and irresponsible and had nothing positive to contribute to the family. This perception is evident in the following excerpt:

*"He was a heavy drinker, always causing problems at home…they were both irresponsible, manipulative and always used the blackmail tactics on their mother…often times the oldest one would spend his money on alcohol and when it's time to go back home, he has nothing and has to wait for the mother to get social grant…" (*Participant 8).

*"I think they (grandfather) are only important to me because of ancestral connections….I think he would only be important because his blood runs through my blood and we are ancestral people, so when it comes to ceremonies, he might be the person who is supposed to give me a gift or whatever…he was very abusive"* (Participant 3).

*"My uncle was quite problematic when I grew up, honestly, I didn't even like him, I never even thought that one day we would be in a good space. He used to drink a lot and every time he is drunk, he would just create problems for everyone, he would get involved in fights, steal, bother my grandparents and get arrested almost every month, so I just wanted him to remain in jail because he would come back very quickly and start more problems. Often times he would just sleep in jail over the weekend and come back Monday and I would be so bored. I remember how angry he used to make me feel every time he gets arrested*

*because I felt like he was a disappointment and constantly embarrassed my grandparents. There was a point he got arrested and sentenced for 7 years and I was so happy because it kinda felt like a relief, but he got a parole and got back after 3 years. By then he had changed but, in my heart, I just couldn't accept him. 10 years later I still have some issues with him" (*Participant 2*).*

# CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

## 5.1. Introduction

This study revealed a number of interesting findings in relation to the aim of the study. This chapter discusses the findings of the study as presented in chapter 4. This discussion will be based on the findings of the themes, and literature is also used to substantiate these findings. The chapter will also provide a conclusion based on the findings of the study. Finally, the limitations of the study will be discussed, followed by recommendations for future research on social fatherhood in South Africa. This study aimed at understanding Black students' subjective experiences of social fathers and their perception of social fatherhood.

## 5.2. Discussion of thematic findings

This dissertation explored three main themes that emerged from the study on the experiences of social fathers among Black undergraduate students at a university in Johannesburg: the identity of a social father (1), the subjective roles of social fathers in the lives of the participants (2), and the meaning of social fatherhood as understood by participants (3).

### 5.2.1. The identity of a social father

The participants in this study identified several men in their lives whom they considered their social fathers. These men included kin and non-kin members such as grandfathers, uncles, brothers, stepfathers, and father figures in the community who are connected to the child through family or friendship. These identified men appeared to be the dominant social fathers in social fatherhood literature. For example, in a study conducted by Durnell et al. (2018) on the experiences of being raised by Black social fathers, out of the twenty-four participants in the study, eight identified their stepfathers as their social fathers, six were participants' grandfathers, four were family associates (neighbour, family friend and

pastor), three were uncles, another three were their mothers' romantic partners and one was a participant' older brother. Similarly, the study conducted by Moore (2021) consisted of the following father figures who took on the role of a social father: an older brother, paternal uncle, grandfather and biological father in one family and a social father in another family. In a study conducted by Deane (2016) on exploring social fatherhood, the participating social fathers were asked to give a description of how they related to the children they are fathering, 53% described themselves as stepfathers, 21% as family friends, 15% as siblings, 5% as uncles, and another 5% as a grandparent. These findings suggest that while biological father absence is a norm, Black children have father figures in the family and in the community or wider social networks who are involved in providing fathering roles to non-biological children (Nathane & Khunou, 2018).

It has been found that South African males identified several adult men with whom they have no biological link as having played a significant part in their development (Clowes et al., 2013). The study conducted by Ratele et al. (2012) found that not only biological fathers may engage with their sons; social fathers, important male role models or father figures may be present for their sons at various points of their lives in the absence of their biological fathers for any given circumstances.

Evidence from South Africa's historical record also challenges the current negative conception of fathers, highlighting how African men engaged in a variety of nurturing acts, behaviours that highlight the existence of alternative forms of social fathering by men, including non-biological fathers (Ratele, 2010). South African research has begun challenging the one-dimensional and blame narratives on fathers, particularly Black South African fathers, by showing the various forms in which fathers and father figures care for and play active roles in the lives of young people (Langa, 2010). There are male figures who provide children with

positive masculinity (White, 2006), and fathers or father figures who engage in positive parenting, thus shifting prevailing forms of masculinity while contributing towards a more nurturing and caring experience (Ratele et al., 2012).

According to Coley (2003), social fathers may be able to establish more warm relationships with their children. This was the case for the participants in this study who considered men they had identified as social fathers due to their commitment and presence in their lives. Commitment as experienced by participants meant that the social fathers accepted them as their children and took responsibility towards their lives by providing support and what they considered fatherly roles. Presence, as experienced by participants, meant social fathers are available, accessible and actively playing their roles in their lives. This is consistent with findings by Durnell et al. (2018) who found out that the reason children identified with certain men as social fathers were because they were consistently present which made them feel prioritised, they engaged with them in different actives that allowed them to bond and form father to child relationships, and they had conversations that were nurturing and provided them with valuable life lessons. This finding suggests that not all father figures are social fathers, but only those who exhibit parental behaviour and act as fathers. The findings also suggest that social fatherhood is not just being there, it also entails being interactive, accessible, and responsible (Day, 1998). According to Gadsden, Fagan, Ray, and Davis (2004), a father's presence and availability, care-giving and nurturing roles, active engagement with children to develop their social competence and academic achievement, supportive and cooperative parenting with other caregivers, providing a role model through healthy living, and providing material and financial support to children are all examples of the significance and active participation of a father.

From the family systems framework, this can be seen as the nature of the extended family structure in South Africa. An interconnected system which has an effect on the other and contributes to the growth (or damage) of the other (Bowen, 1978). That is, the dependence of families on each other and the family unit to foster cooperation among families for basic needs such as shelter, food and childcare (Schermerhorn & Cummings, 2008). The prevalence of various social fathers in response to the widespread absence of the biological father in the household aligns with the premise of the theory which suggests that the family is always evolving, self-organizing, and adjusting to its members and its surroundings (Schermerhorn & Cummings, 2008). That is, in terms of abrupt shifts, for example, the loss of a family member or income, the family is able to reorganise into new roles (such as those taken up by the social fathers in the study) to stabilise the family interactions patterns.

### 5.2.2. The subjective roles of social fathers in the lives of the participants

In African communities, social fathers have always played essential roles in the lives of children (Makusha, 2013). According to South African fatherhood research, fathers are becoming more active in childcare. (Morell, 2001). Fathers are increasingly offering direct childcare, spending more quality time with their children, attending their children's school activities, and support financially for their children and families. (South African Child Gauge, 2020). This was also true for the participants in this study who revealed that the social fathers fulfilled important roles in their lives. Participants in this study indicated that their social fathers are their caregivers, that is, they are their source of financial, emotional, psychological and practical support. These findings are consistent with existing literature on the caregiving role of social fathers. For example, a study conducted by Nathane and Khunou (2018) showed that male kin was important in giving care to children in their capacity as maternal uncles. The study further highlighted that the role of social fathers went beyond financial support; they also

provided important emotional connections and a substantial presence in their lives. Maternal uncles as social fathers were regarded as individuals who cared for and showed affection towards the children they fathered.

These findings were also reflected in the findings of the State of South Africa's Fathers (2021) study which showed that more than half of participating social fathers contributed towards their children's educational expenses such as school tuition and transport. Moreover, three-quarters of the fathers paid for meals, groceries, and clothing. Only a small percentage (3%) of fathers did not provide in some manner (Moore, 2021). In a study conducted by Berger, Carlson, Bzostek, & Osborne (2008), it was found that social fathers (overall) engage in higher levels of cooperation in parenting. The study further showed some statistically significant evidence that suggests that social fathers who are mothers' partners are more involved with their children and share greater parental responsibilities.

In addition, the participants indicated that social fathers in their lives provided them with a sense of inclusion and validation. These results are consistent with the findings of the study conducted by Ritchter et al. (2010) which revealed that affection and assurance characterised the majority of relationships children had with their social fathers. In addition, this study finding aligns with the study conducted by McDougal and George (2016), who found that social fathers chose to take on the fatherly role because they identified the need for male figures in children's lives. They saw themselves being able to fill the void by providing positive male involvement such as support, love, and attention. Further, the study conducted by Durnell et al. (2018) found that when social fathers play active and engaged roles, children warm up to them, find them reliable and can open up to them. The researchers theorised that meaningful conversation and consistent engagement may lead to an emotional attachment between the social father and the child fathered. Social fathers are frequently a substantial and valuable

resource in the lives of their children, and the social or emotional relationship to their children is more important to their children's well-being (Day, 1998).

Historically, the position of a father in the community determined his social status and that of his family in the community (Mkhize, 2004). According to Marsiglio and Cohan (1999), social fathers get involved in children's lives because they are proud to reap the benefits of social status connected to their involvement. This was evident in this study where social fathers were also acknowledged for their roles in improving children's position in society by offering them status, security and protection. These findings align with a study conducted by Marsiglio and Day (1997), which highlighted that beyond financial provision, social fathers are also linked to power and status, value, and connection to the wider community. The simple fact that a child has a father who identifies and lives with him or her as their own may confer social value on the child (Budlender, 1998).

Children in many communities may have social value conferred upon them by being recognised and supported by their father, allowing them to join extended family and community circles (Richter et al., 2012). Townsend (2002) found from ethnographic research in Botswana that children are not inherently affected by biological father absence, but they are affected when they belong to a family without access to work, financial support, and social status that is provided by men. Further, the study conducted by Nathane and Khunou (2018) revealed that uncles as social fathers were described by participants in the study as role models, caregivers, and defenders where protection is needed in the community. Similarly, Van den Berg & Makusha (2018) emphasise that in the absence of biological fathers, the extended family and the wider kin network takes on the role of protecting and supporting children. In addition, there is evidence suggesting that children residing with their fathers or their mothers'

male partners are more likely to receive protection than children who live with a single mother (Dubowitz, Black, Kerr, Starr, & Harrington, 2000).

Another role that participants in this study pointed out to their social fathers was that of influence. Participants in this study explained that the social fathers in their lives had an impact on their beliefs, which influenced their way of thinking and life decisions. This is consistent with the findings by Durnell et al. (2018) who found that social fathers were identified by participants as individuals who influenced their values, relationships and adulthood. Further, the study showed that participants whose social fathers influenced their values reported having had those experiences shaping some parts of their adult lives. Florsheim, Tolan, & Gorman-Smith (1998) argue that the influence the social father has on children depends on the type of social father he is. For example, a relative social father may be more influential than a mother's romantic partner due to the consistency and longevity of the relationship between the child and the male relative. These findings confirm the results of this study as all participants had long term relationships with their social fathers. While most participants who pointed out influence as the role of their social fathers were those raised by non-kin social fathers, it was evident that they had been in their lives since they were young, thus indicating their level of bonding (Amato & Sobolewski, 2004; Bzostek, 2008).

Finally, the participants described the role of their social father as value transmission. That is, participants found their social fathers resourceful where cultural knowledge, traditions and practices are concerned. These findings are consistent with the results of the State of South Africa's Fathers (2021) which found that some of the ways fathers engage in the growth and personal development of their children is through value and belief transmission. Similarly, the study conducted by Richter et al. (2004) revealed that children appreciated the traditional role of cultural and moral guidance played by their father figures. The study by Nathane and

Khunou (2018) found that within the extended family setting, maternal uncles hold a position of authority where cultural practices such as death and marriage are concerned. Maternal uncles are responsible for performing cleansing ceremonies for children in the extended family when their parents die and are also responsible for marriage negotiations in the absence of a married biological father. Nobles (2006) argue that because children are often close to their grandparents, Black grandfathers make important contributions in providing guidance and insight into the family heritage and family history.

Further, recent research which has been conducted in South Africa suggests that the cultural role of the father as an authority figure and moral guide persists. In a study conducted with young Black and Coloured fathers in Cape Town and Durban, it was found that they identified the father's role as being that of advising and guiding children (Swartz & Bhana, 2009). Similarly, young fathers from low-income communities in Cape Town positioned fathers as protectors, guides and role models in the lives of their children (Enderstein & Boonzaier, 2013). Black adolescent boys in a township in Johannesburg constructed the father's role as that of disciplinarian and role model (Langa, 2010). A study conducted with employees of a government department found that both men and women positioned the father as an authority in the family, who was responsible for the construction of rules and regulations (Maqubela, 2013). Similarly, male youth in rural KwaZulu-Natal reported the role of the father as the head of the household (Sathiparsad, Taylor, & Dlamini, 2008).

These study findings suggest that social fathers may suffice as an alternative to biological fathering. Perhaps it is the important roles that social fathers assume that may make children be content with any father/s in their lives. Therefore, it is imperative that social fathers fully engage in the lives of children.

### 5.2.3. The meaning of social fatherhood

There are two ways participants in this study conceptualised social fatherhood: social fatherhood as a choice and social fatherhood as the role of kin. The participants who experienced and understood social fatherhood as a choice explained that fathers decide to take on fatherly roles and responsibilities. These findings are consistent with existing literature. For example, social fatherhood as a choice was evident in the study by McDougal and George (2016) who explored why Black men chose to be social fathers. It was found that Black social fathers decide to be involved in children's lives because they identified the need for role models, the absence of biological fathers and because a mother and a child were perceived as one package. Further, the study conducted by Malherbe (2015) found that participants constructed fatherhood as roles and behaviours that men consciously make such as active or inactive fathering, whether or not to provide, and being a good or bad father.

Participants who experienced and perceived social fatherhood as the role of kin explained that they understood social fatherhood as a default role assumed by male figures in the family, often by grandfathers and maternal uncles who may assume childcare responsibilities. This finding aligns with the African contextual understanding of fatherhood which is conceptualised as the collective childrearing responsibility of the extended family (Langa, 2010). According to Statistics South Africa (2021), the majority of Black children are raised in the extended family structure, which means a greater chance that the extended family is playing an active role in looking after children. Children in extended family households, which include males, are exposed to several adult figures that may assist in childrearing to varying degrees (Chirwa, 2002). The strong emotional links that connect individuals and foster sharing and mutual dependency are argued to be a basic feature of African family structures (Verhoef, 2005). The emotional links not only include the biological family of origin but may include the extended family which may consist of the grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins,

relatives, close acquaintances, and neighbours. The extended family, especially grandparents perform the role of custodian grandparenting (assumed child-care without a parent in the household), and co-parenting grandparents (assisting parents in child-care by housing them and providing other principal support) (Dunifon, 2013; Jennings, Farrell, & Kobayashi, 2021; Mtshali, 2015). This understanding of the nature of the family structure and family dynamics suggest why participants in this study conceptualised social fatherhood in this manner.

### 5.2.4. The negative impact of father involvement

During data analysis, it was found that not all participants experienced positive father involvement. Some participants expressed how the only father figures at their disposal portrayed what they perceived as destructive behaviours such as violence, substance abuse and financial mismanagement that often made some participants not desire such male figures in their lives. Fatherhood research in South Africa highlights that the male's presence in the family is frequently related to violent behaviours (Gibbs, Dunkle, & Jewkes, 2018). Fathers struggling with alcohol abuse, unemployment, post-traumatic stress disorder and depression are more prone to commit intimate partner violence because of their inability to provide for their families (Makusha & Ratele, 2021). The majority of children who have been exposed to father-perpetrated violence live with their fathers or remain in contact with them (Thompson-Walsh, Scott, Lishak, & Dyson, 2021). Intimate partner violence has negative child outcomes, and abusive fathers were found to be less active in childcare and prone to being violent towards children (Drysdale, Slemming, Makusha, & Richter, 2021). These findings suggest that positive father involvement and experiences are more important to children than a mere presence of a father figure. That is to say, children may be safe or benefit from not having a father or a father figure in their lives instead of experiencing a negative father relationship.

In addition, Zuckerman and Pedersen (2015) point out that a man who assumes over the roles of the biological father is frequently regarded as a valuable addition to a family. This is because children of single mothers, particularly males, require a man in the house to serve as a role model. Some studies, however, suggest that children who live with their social fathers are more vulnerable to abuse, maltreatment, and neglect than those residing with their biological fathers or no father figure at all (US Census Bureau, 2020).

On contrary, in South Africa, homicides were shown as the second greatest determinant of child mortality with a rate of 5.5 per 100,000, which was higher than the global rate at four per 100,000. Neglect and child abuse were linked to over half of all child killings, with approximately one-third of these deaths occurring in the home and involving children under the age (Van Niekerk & Mathews, 2019). According to the Birth to Twenty research, caregivers, most likely women perpetrated the majority of violence against children, which might have been due to the fact that the majority of the children are living in single female-headed households, where there are no fathers (Richter, Mathews, Kagura, & Nonterah, 2018). Further, previous studies show that children who grow up in single female-headed families compared to those in two parents families generally have fewer resources, including less time and money to devote to parenting (Zuckerman & Pedersen (2015). Single mothers frequently experience increased stress, which may lead to frustration, neglect, and the use of physical control (Zuckerman & Pedersen, 2015).

### 5.3. Summative overview

The study findings revealed that while most Black children experience biological father absence, many of them have father figures in the form of social fathers. Biological father absence does not always imply that African men are not nurturing, loving, or caring for children in their lives (Nathane & Khunou, 2021). Due to a variety of circumstances, including cultural

customs that encourage collective engagement of the extended family in childcare, most men live with non-biological children (Hosegood & Madhavan, 2012), because they have identified biological father absence and are therefore able to provide fatherly roles (McDougal & George, 2016).

Research findings also indicate that social fatherhood is a common acceptable practice that has long existed within Black South African families. Nathane and Khunou (2021) depicted a strong differentiation between maternal and paternal uncles in African society and families. Paternal uncles are commonly referred to as *rangwane* (in Sesotho) or *bab'omncane* (in isiZulu), which means junior father. *Ramogolo* (in Sesotho) or *bab'uMkhulu* (in isiZulu) which means older father, signifying that they are senior to the child's biological father (Makusha, 2013). These interpretations suggest that these people are regarded as the child's father.

The current study revealed that not all male figures in the children's lives are considered social fathers. That is because a social father has distinguishing characters from other male figures. He is consistently present, actively engaged in activities with his children, and creates time for valuable interactions (Durnell., 2018). The current research also pointed out that children rely heavily on social fathers in their homes or families for assistance or support. The majority of social fathers help children, mothers, and families financially, practically, materially, and emotionally (State of South Africa Fathers, 2021). Research also shows that social fatherhood establishes lasting relationships with non-biological children in the absence of their biological fathers, thus making children significant links to family lineage and the community (Nathane & Khunuo, 2021).

This research pointed out that social fatherhood, like any type of fatherhood, is a social construct in flux (Miller, 2011); therefore, the conceptualisation of social fatherhood by the

participants was influenced by their individual experiences with their social fathers, different family structures and dynamics of their families.

## 5.4. Limitations of the study

One advantage of performing qualitative research and analysis with limited sample size is the thorough data it provides (Durrheim, 2006). The disadvantage of this strategy, however, is its limitation in generalising findings. Since the study only included ten participants from a specified sample population, that is, Black students from the University in Johannesburg, the findings should not be interpreted as a generalization of the experience of all Black students in South Africa with social fathers. However, Carminati (2018) asserts that smaller samples are characteristic of qualitative inquiry and the purpose of qualitative research is to provide in-depth explanations of subjective experiences and meanings rather than generalising findings.

Furthermore, recruiting participants proved to be an unanticipated issue; for example, several individuals who had initially agreed to take part in the research withdrew a few minutes before the interview**.** Some later explained that they had school commitments and could not participate; some had network issues as they were participating from rural areas due to online learning. One participant who had started with the interview could not continue due to how triggering the interview questions were for him. This may be considered to be a possible finding, one that poses critical issues regarding why some people were willing to participate in the research while others were not.

The use of audio recordings is another limitation that is frequently faced in qualitative research. Participants may feel anxious because they may believe their experiences will be recorded permanently, limiting their ability to fully express their feelings. Even though the researcher attempted to alleviate any nervousness by developing trust with participants and

emphasizing confidentiality and safe record-keeping, it must be noted that this awareness may have hindered some participants from being openly expressive.

Further, the use of semi-structured interviews, spontaneous questioning, and varied language by the researcher during the interview may have compromised the consistency of the findings across interviews. Also, participants may have provided confusing answers as a result of the use of open-ended questions.

Furthermore, the participants' interpretations of the researcher's questions may not have been uniform. The researcher's subjectivity is another limitation of qualitative research. The researcher took measures to ensure the research's credibility and authenticity in this aspect by recognizing and accepting subjectivity, but also limiting the effect of subjective opinions and personal discourse making use of reflective writings. Revisiting the transcribed data several times, including recognizing and being receptive to constructs that contradicted her own aided in limiting the researcher's subjective perspectives throughout the analytical phase of the research. Regardless of the measures in place, the presentation and arrangement of the study results cannot be considered empirically definitive. Therefore, the discussion is regarded as providing one of several possible interpretations.

### 5.5. Recommendations for future research

To better understand social fatherhood in South Africa, more research is required. An increasing body of research is being conducted on the role of non-biological fathers including social fathers located and immersed in larger family systems and care practices; however, more research could be done on non-kinship social fatherhood. Furthermore, social fatherhood in this study emphasized the significance of social relationships and choice, therefore studies need to further explore why men chose to become social fathers, especially non-kin members. It was also evident from this study that most social fathers are connected to children through

provision; it would be interesting to explore the role of unemployed social fathers. The majority of social fathers are uncles from the maternal family. Further research should explore social fatherhood in the paternal family, including considering social fatherhood as a parental role than a gendered role.

More interesting study could also be conducted on children's experiences with social mothers, the role of the grandfather as a social father in children's lives, and the paternal role of friends for young men.

It is also critical that intervention designers and policymakers develop parenting interventions that are explicitly aimed towards encouraging social fathers who live with or near children to become more active in childcare. Therefore, in both research and policy, priority should be placed on the social father's role.

Furthermore, South African research on social fatherhood must consider the intricacies of fatherhood as it unfolds in Black extended households. Finally, to broaden the understanding of social fatherhood in South Africa, it would be beneficial to consider social fathers in different household structures, in different cultural practices and different economic realities, as well as with different father figures that are non-kin members, including voluntary fatherhood.

## 5.6. Conclusion

Father absence is a concern that affects many Black children in South Africa. However, many men within the family network and in the broader community take on the responsibility of providing parental roles to non-biological children. While this is the case, social fatherhood takes place within various family contexts in Black families, thus influencing the type of a social father and the experiences children may interact with. The majority of Black children in this study recognised some non-biological male figures as their fathers. Those were male figures in the family, mostly the extended family and in the community connected to the

participant or the participant's family. Since the study's initial goal was to investigate Black students' understanding of social fatherhood, it was evident that social fatherhood was understood by participants to mean presence, choice, connection, commitment, provision and responsibility to kin and others. The findings of this study are in agreement with the results of other studies, indicating that social fatherhood is a social and cultural role that has long been commonly practised in Black communities. The findings of the current research contribute towards the broader understanding of fatherhood in South Africa, especially in complex family structures and extended family structures where the family and everyone connected to the child are collectively responsible for childrearing. Further, this research encourages alternative forms of fathering that promotes childcare regardless of who assumes the role. Overall, the study highlights the importance of positive father involvement in children's lives, that fathers or father figures are necessary for the wellbeing of children. As such, male figures surrounding children should be encouraged to participate in the upbringing of non-biological children.

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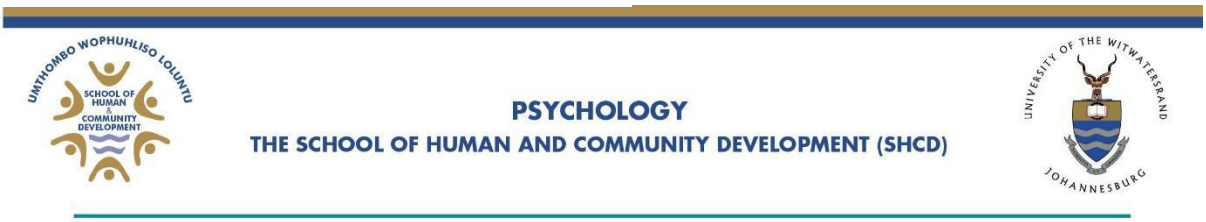
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# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A: Participant information letter




**Participation Information Letter**

Good day,

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you would like to participate or not.

I am Ngokwana Rachamose and I will be conduction research on experiences of Social Fathers amongst Black undergraduate students at a university in Johannesburg. The aim of this study is to explore South African black's students' understanding and subjective experiences of social fatherhood. The study will consider subjective meaning and value of social fathers in Black communities, family structure, and shared understanding. This research is undertaken as a requirement for my master's in social and psychological research by coursework and research report studies.

I am inviting young black people in their undergraduate studies who were not raised by their biological father, however having had someone who played a fatherly role or influenced the way they construct fatherhood, and I am hoping to have 10 participants to take part.

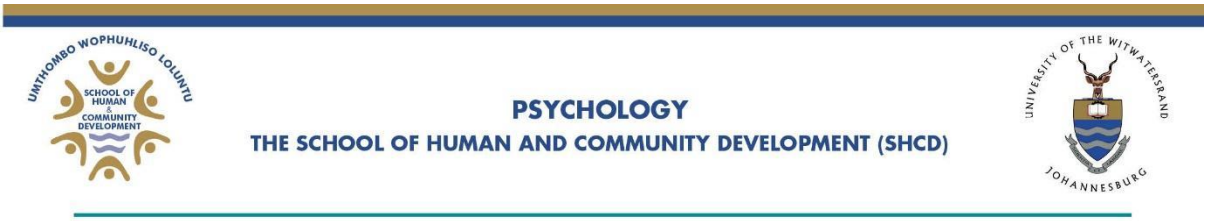
It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw from the research at any time and without giving a reason. If you are happy to take part and are satisfied with the explanations from the research team, you will be asked to confirm you agree to take part in the study (a consent form).

Any complaint about the way you have been dealt with during the study or any possible harm you might suffer will be addressed. If you have a concern about any part of this study, you should ask to speak with the researchers who will do their best to answer your questions (see the contact details below) and make sure that you have the contact details of someone who will be able to help you further.

I hope that you will enjoy talking to me. Your contribution is going to help others. This study will help us understand how fatherhood is understood in different and contested ways, and further allow us to embrace the value and significance of social fatherhood in black communities.

Please ask if there is anything you do not understand or if you would like more information. You can contact me on 076 296 5746 or email at 1910964@students.wits.ac.za, and my supervisor on 082 820 8044 or email her at leonie.human@wits.ac.za

APPENDIX B: Consent to voluntary participation




**Consent Form for Participation in Study**

I, _____ herby agree to participate in Ngokwana Rachamose's research study on experiences of Social Fathers amongst Black undergraduate students at a university in Johannesburg.

.

- Participation in this study is voluntary.
- Refusal to participate will not involve any penalty.
- I have the right to refuse to answer any questions.
- I may withdraw from the study at any time without giving reasons why.
- The information I provide will not be traced backed to me and my identity will not be disclosed in any report, presentation, or other forms of distribution.
- I understand that fake names will be used to protect my identity.
- No information that may identify me will be used in the research report. While direct speech from the interview will be included in the researcher's research, the researcher will keep all responses as nameless as possible.

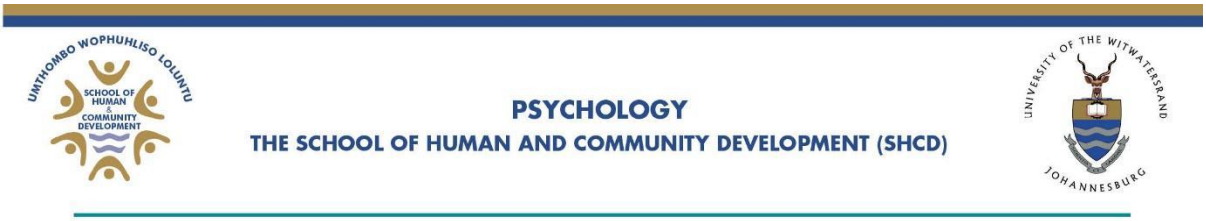
I understand that there will be no direct benefit for me in participating in this study and that there are no potential risks involved. I have read and I understand the provided information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form.

I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet. My questions about participation in this study have been answered satisfactorily. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

_____ _____

Participant Date

APPENDIX C: Consent for interviewing




**Consent Form for Interview**

I, _____, hereby consent to being interviewed by Ngokwana Rachamose for her study on experiences of Social Fathers amongst Black undergraduate students at a university in Johannesburg.

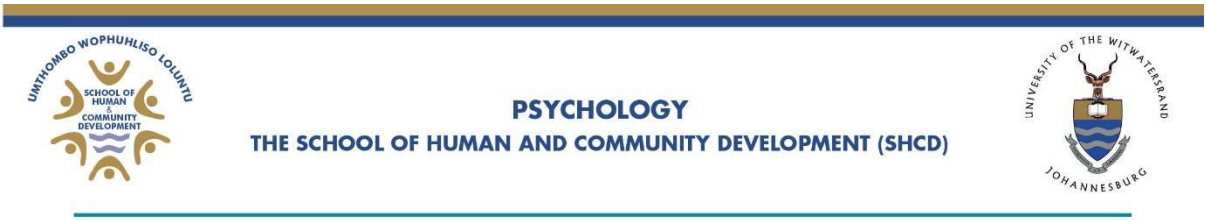
I understand that:

- Participation in this interview is voluntary.
- That I may refuse to answer any questions I would prefer not to.
- I may withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty.
- No information that may identify me will be in the research report, and my responses will remain confidential.
- There are no individual risks and benefits.
- My direct quotes could be used in the written report.

_____ _____

Participant Date

APPENDIX D: Consent for audio and /or videotaping of interview




**Consent Form for Audio Recording**

I, _____, hereby give consent for the interview (described in the information sheet attached) by Ngokwana Rachamose to be audio-recorded, with the full understanding that:

- The audio recording will be heard by no other than the researcher, and the supervisor.
- All audio recordings will be destroyed as soon as they have been fully transcribed.
- Transcripts will be destroyed after the completion of the research and after the qualification has been obtained.
- The recordings will be securely stored by a password protected laptop by the researcher.
- No identifying information will be used in the transcripts or the research report.
- Pseudonyms/false names will be used to identify different participants to maintain privacy.
- I further give consent to the researcher, Ngokwana Rachamose, to use direct speech that will not have any identifying information.

_____ _____

Participant Date

## APPENDIX D E: Interview schedule

### SECTION 1. BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

- What is your age
- Where do you live (or where did you grow up?)

### SECTION 2.

1. What interested or motivated you to participate in this research?
2. Who lived in the same household as you when you grew up?
3. Who raised you?
4. Could you tell me about your family structure? (or who lived in the same household as you and your caregiver)
5. Who were important people in your life when you were younger?
6. Could you tell me about them and why they are important to you?
7. What role did they play in your life?
8. What did you do with them?
9. How do you feel they had an influence in your life? (development)
10. Are there any men in your mother's family who are important to you? Could you tell me about them?
11. Are there any men in your father's family who are important to you? Could you tell me about them?
12. What thoughts or feelings come up for you as you think about the information you have shared?
13. Thank you for all that valuable information, is there anything else you would like to add before we end?

## APPENDIX F: Ethical clearance certificate (Protocol number: MASPR/21/09)

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

**SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ETHICS COMMITTEE**
**CONSTITUTED UNDER THE UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)**

| | |
|---|---|
| **CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE:** | **PROTOCOL NUMBER: MASPR/21/09** |
| **PROJECT TITLE:** | Experiences of Social Fathers amongst Black undergraduate students at a university in Johannesburg. |
| **INVESTIGATOR** | Rachamose Ngokwana (1910964) |
| **SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT OF INVESTIGATOR** | SHCD/Psychology |
| **DATE CONSIDERED** | 10 June 2021 |
| **DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE** | Approved unconditionally |
| **RISK LEVEL** | Low Risk |
| **EXPIRY DATE** | 31 December 2023 |

**ISSUE DATE OF CERTIFICATE** 28 July 2021 **CHAIRPERSON** (Dr Sahba Besharati)

cc: Ms Leonie Human (Supervisor)

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**DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR**

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Chairperson of the School/Department ethics committee.

I fully understand the conditions under which I am are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee.

**Signature** **Date** 29/ 07 /21