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Article

'It's quite scary being a father in South Africa': An exploration of defensive victimhood among non-involved Black South African fathers

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Abstract

A position of victimised masculinity has emerged as economic and social barriers, along with difficulties navigating changing masculinities, have been implicated in non-involved fatherhood in South Africa. This study uses Benjamin's (2004; 2016) intersubjective recognition theory to explore positions of victimised masculinity within the narratives of non-involved Black South African fathers. The participant narratives constructed fathers as powerless due to unattainable financial and cultural expectations and a lack of control over decision-making in respect to access to children. While this reflects the reality of a society that is unsupportive of unmarried fathers, the assumption of a victim role appeared to occur alongside a defensive position of passive-aggression, indifference and withdrawal in response to feelings of shame and rejection in relationships. Non-involved father identities appeared intertwined with the dynamics of rejection. Having been children of non-

involved fathers themselves, these identities support the theory of the intergenerational continuity of fathering.

While the gender literature has begun exploring White masculine positions of vulnerability and victimhood as expressions of aggrieved entitlement to lost positions of power amid the identity confusion of changing social roles (Ging, 2019; Kelly, 2018), the literature has not explored positions of victimhood in relation to Black masculinity. This may be for fear that situating Black victimhood as defensive or strategic (conscious or unconscious) may be perceived as dismissive of real structural disadvantage and injustice. This study holds the position that historical injustices and the contextual challenges of Black fatherhood in South Africa undeniably play a role in the high levels of non-involved fatherhood. However, this study aims to understand how, in this context, non-involved Black South African fathers are intrapsychically negotiating economically and culturally disrupted male privilege, historical racial oppression, and their personal histories, while positioning themselves in relation to discourses of fatherhood. While it is assumed that fatherhood identities, like masculinities, are constructed and performed, multiple and fluid (Butler, 2013; Connell, 2016; Frosh et al., 2017), this paper focuses on a particular psychic and emotional investment in a victim subject position that emerged in the narratives of a group of non-involved South African fathers. Of particular interest is the tension inherent in the assumption of a victim identity when, especially within the arena of masculinity, core assumptions of hegemonic masculine ideals and identity are threatened by the concept of victimhood (Heru, 2001). This paper attempts to understand why some men challenge stereotypes of absent Black fathers and construct more positive father identities, while others do not. Psychoanalytic thinking enables the exploration of how these subject positions are constructed through defensive intrapsychic processes, such as splitting and projection, which are employed to manage anxiety (Frosh et al., 2002). In particular, Benjamin's (2004) notion of 'doer and done to' and

intersubjective recognition theory (Benjamin, 2016; 2017) are drawn upon to understand how these positions are sustained and how they may be relinquished.

Non-involved fatherhood in South Africa

Involved fatherhood has been associated with increased cognitive skills, improved emotional regulation, higher self-esteem and greater resilience in their children as adults (Feldman, 2023). However, this was not the case in situations that involved paternal rigidity, abuse or absence. Studies on non-involved fatherhood have found universal indicators across nine countries associating perceived paternal rejection with various social ills (Freeman, 2008; Putnick et al., 2015). There is much research on absentee fatherhood, however, this focus on 'absent fathers' has also, to some extent, served to pathologise forms of fathering that do not fit the largely Western-derived nuclear family model (Rabe & Naidoo, 2015; Ratele et al., 2012). The term 'absentee fatherhood' has proven inadequate in relation to capturing the various, nuanced forms of fatherhood that exist in South Africa, where the father may be involved in the child's life in some ways but not others, including residing with the child or not (Morrell, 2006; Hall & Posel, 2019; Hatch & Posel, 2018; Padi et al., 2014). Absentee fatherhood needs to be distinguished from non-resident but involved fatherhood and may be more usefully captured by terms such as non-involvement (van den Berg & Makusha, 2018).

Implicated in the non-involvement of Black South African fathers are a number of historical, structural, economic and social barriers to assuming father roles, such as migrant labour patterns, urbanisation and the intergenerational sequelae of Apartheid's undermining of Black families (Hall & Posel, 2019; Hunter, 2006; Khunou, 2006; Lesejane, 2006; Madhavan et al., 2015; Ratele et al., 2012; Salami & Okeke, 2018). Many Black men have become more distant 'providers', as evidenced by recent

studies where it is revealed that only 11-12% of South African children received caregiving from a father (Van den Berg & Makusha, 2018). Currently, it is common in South Africa for men to father children with more than one woman, resulting in their not residing with some of their children (Van den Berg & Makusha, 2018). Marriage rates have dropped due to struggles to pay '*ilobolo*[5]' and fulfil the provider role that is expected – likely linked to the steady rise of the unemployment rate to its current 40% nationally (Krugel, 2021). Employed men are seven times more likely than unemployed men to move from low to high involvement in their children's lives (Gadsden et al., 2003). Class differences between the father and the maternal family have also been found to play a role in the possibility of a father's involvement in a child's upbringing, despite his willingness to play a father role (Langa, 2010; Mkhize, 2006). Employment status appears to influence 'worthiness' to father, and extended family in African families seem to wield some power in making decisions regarding child access. In some instances where fathers are deemed to be of a lower class or unable to provide financially, maternal families do not allow the child to take-up the father's surname or clan name, and rituals related to paternal cultural identity are not performed, which can be considered a rejection of the father by the mother or the mother's family (Nduna, 2014; Smith et al., 2014).

The importance of fathers' presence to ensure moral authority, uphold family customs and principles and show leadership appears to have faded (Langa, 2010; Lesejane, 2006). While much of this can be traced to intergenerational economic disadvantage (Makusha & Richter, 2014), the effect of unresolved historical racial trauma on contemporary Black male identities has also been highlighted (Govender & Cartwright,

[5] *Ilobolo* is 'the custom involving the provision of marriage payments, in cattle or cash, from the groom's family to the parents of the bride [and] is widely practiced in southern Africa' (Posel & Rudwick, 2014, p. 52).

2021). South Africa's violent and repressive past 'continues to have cumulative impacts on the black male psyche… these past traumas, together with contemporary representations of black masculinity, have led to a deep sense of unresolved shame' (Govender & Cartwright, 2021, p. 54).

Formative experiences with fathers have also been demonstrated to have significant influence on paternal roles and attitudes in men (Shears et al., 2006). The intergenerational transmission or continuity of non-involved fatherhood, found to be particularly notable within disadvantaged communities, has been an area of interest for researchers in the past decade (Pougnet et al., 2012). Two trends have been identified regarding how men manage the influence of non-involved fathering across generations: fathers either attempt to compensate for their own father's lack of involvement and are more present for their children, or they model their own father's lack of involvement (Shears et al., 2006).

A lack of readiness for fatherhood has also been implicated in high levels of paternal non-involvement; being young when the first child is born, and having low levels of education and income appear to contribute to this (Devault et al., 2008). Lemay et al. (2010) found that most young fathers do not live with their children and are less involved in their lives. Young fathers have a higher chance of having faced challenging circumstances in their families of origin and have had to confront numerous difficulties, such as identity crises, intimacy, and generativity simultaneously (Devault et al., 2008; Fursteenberg & Weiss, 2000). However, there is critique of the literature that tends to stereotype all young fathers as problematic and disinterested (Enderstein & Boonzaier, 2015). Fatherhood has been recognised as a site where dominant masculinities can be challenged and alternative masculinities developed (Enderstein & Boonzaier, 2015). Stereotypes of young fathers as irresponsible have been challenged, revealing that despite initial fear, some men actively renegotiate their identities and commit to taking

responsibility for their children (Enderstein & Boonzaier, 2015; Mukuna, 2020). In these instances, negative experiences with their own fathers have been found to provide strong motivation for these fathers to give their children a positive experience of fatherhood (Enderstein & Boonzaier, 2015; Lemay et al. 2010, Wilkes et al. 2012).

Masculinity and fatherhood

Hegemonic masculinities are considered practices that subordinate women and regulate men's behaviour to maintain patriarchy. These practices are constantly changing, context-dependent (intersecting with age, class and ethnicity/culture) and, incorporate a multitude of variations (Anderson, 2009; Connell, 2016; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Phoenix & Frosh, 2001). When aligned to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, men should be in control, invulnerable, autonomous, strong, rational, logical, dispassionate (except for anger and rage), and knowledgeable (Cheryan et al., 2015; Morrell et al., 2012). Hegemonic masculinity is useful as a concept when theorising gendered power dynamics and when trying to understand how masculinities respond to social change (Morrell et al., 2012; Govender & Cartwright, 2021). However, when acknowledging the complexity of gender construction, attention should also be paid to the paradoxes and shifts within constructions of masculine identity (Enderstein & Boonzaier, 2015; Offer & Kaplan, 2021).

How men understand and perform their masculine identities influences how they practice fatherhood (Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 2003; Pleck, 2010). Changing masculinities have been implicated in non-involved fatherhood, and advances in the liberation of women have challenged notions surrounding men as the head of the family, as women have begun to gain more economic power. Lesejane (2006) believes that the esteemed father patriarch is a notion that no longer holds significance;

fathers, as once respected men with wisdom, good judgement, and care in African cultures, have become objects of suspicion in the present day. The discourse of 'bad men' is highly prevalent in South Africa, with toxic masculinity linked to high levels of gender-based violence (Enderstein et al., 2015). Threats to male dominance have resulted in many men aligning themselves more strongly with aggressive, toxic forms of masculinity, at times exerting aggression and violence as a means to display dominance (Lange & Young, 2019; Nanda et al., 2014). However, dominant discourses that depict Black fatherhood as authoritarian and controlling are being challenged, and masculinities are being revised through shifts in portrayals of Black fatherhood that also include 'alternative more nurturing and consultative versions of being a father' (Clowes et al., 2013, p. 255; Shefer et al., 2010; Tyrell & Masten, 2022).

Psychoanalytic theory has been critiqued for its tendency to rigidify the domains of male (paternal) and female (maternal) (Thrul, 2023). Freud's (1913; 1923) depiction of the father as law and order – the external authority critical to the development of the superego – is less open to complexity and has been critiqued for negating paternal intimacy in father-infant relationships (Freeman, 2008). The 'tension between the symbolic presence and substantive absence of fathers is built into the heart of orthodox psychoanalytic theory, being enshrined in Freud's foundational concept of the Oedipus complex' (Freeman, 2008, p. 113). This construction of fathers implies a need to disidentify from the maternal and femininity (Thrul, 2023). In the current climate, where gender and gender roles have been challenged and there is now more choice in the expression of masculinity and femininity, alternative masculinities have arisen. However, in the loosening of gender constructs, constructions of fathers have also broadened. Stereotypical images of Black fathers as emotionally distant from their children are being challenged through increased acceptance of hands-on caregiving as part of the paternal role which is construed as a display of positive

masculinity (Langa, 2010; Leopeng & Langa, 2017; Nduna et al, 2011; Ratele et al., 2012). The 'need to formulate novel theories to accommodate the 'involved dad'' has been identified (Feldman, 2023, p. 2 402). In his 2017 paper, Diamond contends that 'both the symbolic and the actual, flesh-and-blood father are necessary to optimize his child's development' (p. 297). Diamond (2017) highlights the paternal function's operations in a triadic matrix and how a 'third' is necessary for the opening up of symbolic space. Diamond (2017) writes about the importance of the father in psychic development:

> The father is understood to signify a complex interaction between his actual presence, symbolic functioning, and internal representation in the child's mind as well as in the mother's…The nature and strength of both the internal father representation and symbolic functioning appreciably depend on the psychic maturation of the actual, involved father in his relationship to the mother and child— specifically, the extent to which he has attained a genital masculinity that integrates healthy phallicism with his relational needs…This paternal achievement entails a well-developed capacity for responsibility for the other…In this respect, the active and penetrating qualities of the father's parenting—as well as the receptive and caregiving ones—become a foundation for his child's healthy gender identity and an important determinant of his child's psychic development (p. 313).

With links to the depressive position, the third position of the father has been implicated in the development of capacities for thinking, self-observation and mental freedom (Britton, 1998).

Victimhood

Victimhood is a common position in contemporary discourse and the associated rhetoric powerfully authenticates victims' experiences of suffering (Al-Ghazzi, 2021; van Roekel, 2018). The victim has become 'a culturally and politically respectable figure' (van Roekel, 2018, p. 537). Victimhood as a position, however, is complex. Studies on the politics of victimhood have examined the varied reasons that individuals or groups may seek to be recognised as victims (Jeffery & Candea, 2006). It is argued that victimhood can create space or a point of departure for discussion and action, and that recognition as being 'victimised' can encourage external support, compassion, and empathy (Jeffery & Candea, 2006; Rosland, 2009). However, while victimhood allows for the expression of suffering and change, it can also inspire disdain and disregard, thereby perpetuating further victimisation (Heru, 2001).

As a form of social change, a narrative of victimhood, when collectively produced, can become a 'political truth' through which voices may be heard (Heru, 2001; Rosland, 2009). However, invoking of victimhood is also associated with the assumption of a position of moral superiority, which can create 'us' and 'them' dynamics (Jeffery & Candea, 2006; Rosland, 2009). Victim-perpetrator dynamics are necessarily intertwined and feeling victimised can often be used as justification for perpetrations, leading to further victimisation (Brand, 2008). This often occurs through shame-rage cycles through which victims become perpetrators (Retzinger, 1991). Thus, invoking victimhood can also be understood as psychologically defensive, serving as a way to manage humiliation, as it allows for a reconsolidation of power in an imagined future where injustices are righted (Al-Ghazzi, 2021; Govender & Cartwright, 2021). It is vital, however, to acknowledge the situatedness of various representations of victimhood; these need to be viewed in their historical and socio-cultural contexts (Jeffery & Candea, 2006; Rosland, 2009; Soedirgo & Glas, 2020).

Benjamin (2004) has written about the subjective experience and intrapsychic processes of victimhood, noting that the 'actual psychic experience, which all too often is that of the one-way street—in which we feel as if one person is the doer, the other done to' (p. 6). She notes the power of this dynamic to compromise the capacity to see both parties as subjects – as both 'doers and done-to's' (Benjamin, 2004). Even from the vantage point of the 'third', with common knowledge that perpetrators have often historically been victims, it is difficult to manage the ambiguity of the notion 'victim as a victimizer'; when we sympathise with the perpetrator, it becomes harder to hold them responsible and accountable (Enns, 2015). This difficult-to-achieve position of the 'third' can be conceptualised as a:

> … space or position that holds opposites in tension, that transcends the binaries of good and bad, victim and perpetrator, that are based on psychological splitting…as a space of dialogue in which clashing views of reality, antagonistic claims and aims can be negotiated (Benjamin, 2016, p. 72).

The capacity for this position is a developmental process originating from having experienced primary thirdness (attunement and collaboration) in the early caregiving relationship, from which a differentiating third evolves (Benjamin, 2004). In other words, the capacity for mutual recognition. Mutual recognition involves a capacity to hold another's perspective, and remain aware of multiple realities or self-states (Benjamin, 2016). From this develops the moral third, which:

> … denotes a position that recognizes the equal value and dignity of the other, the meaning of the golden rule, the validity of the other's viewpoint, the possibility of dialogue. It is the position that transcends the duality of doer and done-to…moving out of the alternatives Doer and Done-To means giving up the contest for who can best legitimate their actions by claiming victim

> status and instead recognize the suffering on all sides as deserving recognition (Benjamin, 2016, p. 73).

The position of the moral third involves Tronick's (2007) notion of rupture and repair, which denotes the process of the recognition of breakdowns and consequent restoration. This 'fosters connection between self and other; and likewise it is a condition for a sense of agency' (Benjamin, 2016, p. 73). When the position of the moral third cannot be assumed, despair, denial, and dissociation pervade, and the positions of doer and done to remain fixed.

Methodology

Semi-structured psychoanalytic narrative interviews were conducted by the first author with five Black South African men who volunteered to participate in the study. The aim was to identify processes and patterns in the way this group of non-involved fathers position themselves in their narratives of fatherhood, rather than to make claims about all non-involved fathers. All participants had at least one child with whom they have no contact. For the purposes of this study, non-involvement was defined as the father being aware of paternity but being fully absent from his child's life. Participants were sourced using convenience sampling through adverts on social media inviting participation. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 40 years. They were from varying cultural and language groups. All participants reported that their relationships with their fathers were either non-existent or remain distant to this day. Some reported physical separation from their fathers while growing up, while others described their fathers as being emotionally unavailable or rejecting. Participants were asked to tell their 'stories' of fatherhood.

A psychoanalytic narrative analysis was conducted alongside a thematic analysis from a social constructionist lens. This allowed for the

identification of common discourses drawn upon by the participants (Clarke et al., 2015; Joffe, 2012), in addition to the identification of defensive processes, underlying motivations and intrapsychic conflicts present in the narratives through ambivalence, hesitations, and contradictions (Cartwright, 2004). This dual framework allowed attention to be paid to the intrapsychic processes involved in each participant's account of his fatherhood experience, whilst bearing in mind that fatherhood is also a social, historical, moral, relational and political process (Mavungu, 2013; Mavungu et al., 2013; Mkhize, 2006). Particular attention was paid to how fathers positioned themselves in relation to others and to the discourses upon which they drew in their narratives. Although psychodynamic approaches to research have proven useful in qualitative studies on masculinity (Govender & Cartwright, 2021; Langa, 2016), little research on this topic has been conducted using a psychoanalytic framework.

Within the minefield of gender research, it is essential to acknowledge that little in these areas is 'morally neutral' and that researcher reflexivity is key (Jeffery & Candea, 2006; Rosland, 2009; Soedirgo & Glas, 2020). The researchers' roles in the data collection, analysis and interpretation of the data was considered throughout and the results are considered a co-construction between the participants and the researchers. While both authors are mothers, the first author is a Black South African woman who grew up with an absent father, while the second author is a White South African woman who grew up with a present father. Discussion between the researchers around emotional responses to the data proved crucial and the process of analysis involved interrogation of our respective personal and culturally-embedded experiences and expectations of fathers. The consideration of researcher oscillations between empathy and anger towards participants as reflective of the researchers' various positions as women, children of fathers, and as mothers in relation to fathers, helped identify trends in the data. Ethics clearance for the study

was obtained through the Human Subjects Ethics Committee of the University of the Witwatersrand.

Positions of victimhood in the narratives of non-involved South African fathers

Unprepared, tricked and forced

All of the fathers in this study felt unprepared for fatherhood, both emotionally and financially. Finding out about their partner's pregnancy was a frightening and overwhelming experience.

> Sipho: *It was quite scary because it wasn't planned and everything…*

Part of this overwhelm appeared linked to the discourse of 'father as provider'.

> Themba: *I was not working…it was not good...Your friends there…mothers and fathers are supporting him. Me, no one support me…*
> *She said 'I'm pregnant'.*
> *I said 'don't tell me lies'.*
> *Yoh!…I couldn't believe. I was shaking and breaking a glass of water…I pray outside at the gate…I was scared and stressed…*

Most fathers in this study reported little support from their own families. Interestingly, however, as demonstrated in the excerpt from Themba above, the thought of becoming a father and needing to support his child evoked awareness of his own 'unsupported child' status in relation to his parents. In this instance the 'father as unsupported child' position was used to explain not feeling ready for fatherhood.

A position of powerlessness with regards to contraception also emerged in relation to unplanned pregnancies. These men took up positions of helplessness, placing all responsibility for contraception onto mothers.

> Jabu: '*You must know that I'm pregnant'…*
> *I said, 'Now why this, because I spoke to you several times that please don't forget the tablets that you were telling me'.*

Positions of victimhood regarding unplanned pregnancies even went so far as to include a sense of feeling forced or 'tricked' into fatherhood.

> Sipho: *Unplanned pregnancies…because maybe poverty or I think some of our, our Black sisters might be pregnant to trap us guys…people are selfish…*

These responses have been noted previously in studies that have linked unplanned pregnancy to negative affect in fathers (Leathers & Kelley, 2000). Perceptions of women as untrustworthy and 'mercenary by nature' have also been found to be pervasive amongst low-income fathers in the United States (Augustine et al., 2009, p. 108).

Feeling forced into the role of a father that they had not chosen was also used to justify decisions for non-involvement with their children.

> Sipho: *…women falling pregnant to trap the guy. You cannot force him to father the child.*

> Themba: *…I said 'me I don't want to be a father…I don't have a father, so why [am] I supposed to be with someone with my child?'*

Again, the theme of being a 'fatherless child' himself emerged in Themba's narrative.

All the narratives revealed difficulties adjusting to unplanned pregnancies, mixed feelings around the financial responsibilities and the loss of freedom associated with becoming a parent. Fathers were positioned as anxious and overwhelmed, and, in extreme cases, as victims of careless or manipulative women.

Financially disempowered

The five participants' ideas about fatherhood were closely linked to notions of masculinity, and the role of a father was constructed as a responsible caretaker and provider. This is a common construction of fatherhood within the South African populations (Khunou, 2006; Langa & Leopeng, 2017). However, involved fatherhood was constructed as a 'difficult' or even 'impossible' responsibility and for which 'you need to be man enough'.

> Thato: *...to take responsibility… you need to be man enough and use your capacity in each and everything that you are doing. And be responsible for each and everything.*

> Tshepo: *...even though sometimes it's impossible. But you have to work hard to give [your children] what they want or need… it's very difficult…eish, well every man…can die for their kids, I mean it's hard work.*

Societal pressure on these fathers to provide appeared exacerbated by the judgments of others.

> Themba: *The people are gonna ask 'You are the father?'... You said you are the father, you, mara [but] you didn't bring the food…for your children.*

Being seen to be an 'inadequate' father in the eyes of the community was constructed as a source of shame, and participants expressed anger toward the strong emphasis on material provision within African culture. They were of the opinion that fatherhood was constructed differently within Black communities, believing that non-Black fathers are afforded more value in the child's life beyond financial provision than Black fathers.

> Tshepo: *I mean okay, looking at the Whites, it's even if they break up and whatever, it doesn't involve their children. You know, even if it is the very first time when she's giving birth, the first person she thinks of is the father. Come see his daughter or son. But with Blacks we have these things [payment of* ilobolo *or 'damages'] that are damaging us…*

Economic and social class influences on identity in fatherhood are closely tied to race within the South African context (Leopeng & Langa, 2017). In the narratives, financial constraints were often linked to race, previous disadvantage and cultural expectations. Black South African men were understood to be economically disadvantaged and this made the prospect of being financially responsible for a child anxiety-provoking.

> Jabu: *South African men we don't have enough money to look after the needs of our kids…it affects them because whatever she wants, by then sometimes you don't afford to buy it…*

> Sipho: *It's a bit difficult here in South Africa to survive without education, or means of putting food on the table, so you're not educated, or you're not business-oriented or you're not an entrepreneur…it's quite scary being a father in South Africa.*

> Themba: *The White, Indian, Coloured, if their child – they're coming to be born – already that child they have the account. So you, you don't have an account, Black people. So the child of the White people, the Coloured, the Indian has an account there, 'cause when they are saving the money…but they are earn[ing] more. You see, most of the time, the Hindus, his father, maybe the grand grandfather, there's a company…they are taking the company to the house…If he passed away, this one gets it…Even the White people they are doing that…But if we had that power… no one's gonna suffer.*

These excerpts position Black men as being unfairly expected to provide, given historic deprivation and lack of access to education and social capital. The phrase '*if we had that power…no-one's gonna suffer*' suggests an acute feeling of disempowerment and perhaps even envy. Despite this, there was mention in the narratives that they were not entirely without agency and that their financial situations were not completely out of their control. One participant stated that in some instances the inability or unwillingness to provide for children was because '*…they're irresponsible' (Thato)*. One other participant acknowledged choosing not to support his child financially due to restricted access to the child.

Acknowledgement of choosing not to take financial responsibility for their children was not present in all narratives, however, and did not feature strongly in the interviews where it arose. Rather, disempowerment pervaded the narratives, which focused on explaining the impossibility of the financial responsibilities of fatherhood. These constructions of fatherhood revealed it as a role that is perhaps ambivalently held in the minds of these men. While it is seen as an idealised state of caretaking that carries respect, it is also portrayed as one of 'terrible' responsibility that can leave a father feeling resentful or ashamed if he is unable to provide.

Culturally disempowered

Varying degrees of dissatisfaction around cultural practices such as damages and *ilobola* were expressed. While some felt that the practice of *ilobola* was useful, although perhaps too expensive, others felt that the practice prevents father involvement. This sentiment has previously been found (Hunter, 2006). Most participants considered the practice of the payment of 'damages'[6] as 'trading for love' thus hindering a romantic relationship with the mother of their child. It also appeared that, at times, these practices were experienced as fathers being 'punished' or 'blamed'.

> Sipho: *And at that time you genuinely love your family but you have no means to trade in terms of payments for those so called damages. As if maybe when you were sleeping together it was a one way road… I believe* lobola *is something that makes it hard for people that love each other to be together. That's why you find a lot of Black sisters are not married because of such methodologies …I believe it's just a African dumb practice, it makes things difficult.*

Participants felt that practices like *ilobolo* and 'damages' had lost their original cultural meaning and had become a means for maternal families to make money as well as an excuse to deny father-child contact.

> Thato: *You find out to say those two people they're in love. But now why they have to say a guy have to pay a damage?... So a damage is very useless for me…The only thing they can say it's* lobola*. And* lobola *is not a thing whereby they say they have to sell their child.* Lobola *is to say that those two people fall in love in a correct way, and then they tell the ancestors you see things*

[6] Money to be paid to the maternal family for pregnancy out of wedlock.

> *are like this . Not to say this child we need R40 000. We need R50 000. You are selling that person.*

It was also felt that these practices did not guarantee access to their children and thus seemed pointless.

> Tshepo: *...but after damages, chances of me not seeing my daughter again, they're very high. I mean if they don't like me anymore, they'll take her away from me. Paying it or not paying it, is still the same. But because it's what they believe in, we just have to do it.*

Participants' talk about cultural practices again positioned fathers as victims of unfair, outdated expectations.

Legal disempowerment

In all the narratives mothers were positioned as having the legal system on their side and immense frustration was experienced in this regard.

> Sipho: *...there's certain laws that are really biased…against fathers……when a parent hides their kid away from the other parent it's wrong. It should be… remediated immediately you know, it takes time here in South Africa… It could take a year for the order to be made you know.*

One participant expressed a sense of desperation after trying to gain access to his child through the proper channels to no avail, which led him to take matters into his own hands.

> Themba: *I pass maybe there in the street I saw my child he's there. I take them…They calling the police…so we gonna arrest*

> *you for taking a child without telling his mother and his grandmother…I told the police 'you can take me ne, as you want to take me and beat me if you want to , mara [but] this is my child. If I want to see him they stopping me to see my child. Take yourself and place yourself in my shoes and feel how it feels not to be with your child when you wish to be with your child'. That's when they saw that okay, we need to go make a statement. They taking me and his mother's statement. I wrote I want to see my child from Friday until Sunday. His mother said 'okay'. Since, once, twice then they stopped.*

The excerpt above captures a sense of unsuccessfully trying to enlist the law to aid in access to his child. Fathers are positioned as helpless captives within a 'biased' legal system.

Rejected

The context in which fatherhood occurs includes the often complex relationships that the father has with the mother, the maternal family, and their families of origin. Many of the fathers in this study appeared to feel rejected by their children's mothers and maternal families. For some, the birth of the child marked the onset of distance in their intimate relationships.

> Sipho: *Before the child was born it was great, we were still young, ambitious, adventurous, you know, newly lovers. And when the child was born…all hell broke loose. (laughs)*

Feelings of displacement and loss are commonly reported by new fathers (Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009). Similarly, these fathers reported significant negative shifts in their relationship with their child's mother. While this was sometimes as a result of their inability to provide

financially, at other times, it was felt that customary payments were made deliberately unattainable by the maternal family because of broader disapproval of the potential 'son-in-law'. Mothers and maternal families were experienced as gatekeepers, either facilitating father-child relationships or preventing them (Easterbrooks et al., 2007; Makusha & Richter, 2016).

> Tshepo: *The problem I think it was her mother. You know when you have a daughter who's successful you look at other people down…what's he gonna do to my daughter? What's he gonna provide? …The problem is the family…they're still cross because my mom told them that I am not working. If the parents doesn't like the guy, it will be difficult…for that guy to have a relationship with his children.*

Participants described painful incidences of exclusion, where maternal families denied contact with the infant until money was paid.

> Themba: *In our culture, when a girl have a baby, you don't carry his baby when he's going home…I said I want to carry my baby, it's the first day….I want to carry my boy.*
> *'No way, no ways'… The grandmother…said 'no ways, leave this child. You gonna touch this child after you pay the damages'.*

Later in Themba's narrative, it emerged that he had begun trying to pay the 'damages', but was then told that the maternal family did not want money and would prefer him to remain uninvolved.

> Themba: *I go to [the bank] because they say I'm supposed to pay the damage. [At the bank] I borrow the R4000. Just a half. They said to me when my grandmother can go. They tell my grandmother we need the R8000, not a R4000… I said my*

> *grandmother, take this R4000 and we come back and we pay another R4000. They said we don't need your money. Take your money and go.*

After breakups in relationships, mothers were constructed as holding all the power concerning children, determining whether the father could have access to his child or not. In most instances, the men described having become non-involved fathers after the relationship with the child's mother ended. Mothers were constructed as 'to blame' for their non-involvement.

> Jabu: *I respected the mother's decision...I will respect your decisions by not disclosing to the kid that I'm the father….*
>
> Thato: *I did live with the child. The child disappear when she was two years old… It seems like she's [the child's mother] pushing me away.*
>
> Tshepo: *So she didn't want me to…bring the baby anything, okay fine, we just left it…I tried to even go see her from day one but they didn't want…She doesn't want me to be part of my daughter's life. She said it straight to me.*
>
> Sipho: *It's totally heart breaking…it just brings a lot of emotions like why would a mother do this to their own child? Why?...it makes me fantasise about moments with my kid that I didn't have… Quite disturbing…I'm absent because of someone else not because I want to be.*

Rejection from the child's mother emerged from the narratives as a key determinant in father involvement. While their non-involvement was sometimes constructed as *'respect[ing] the mother's decision'*, more often it was constructed as involuntary and due to maternal withholding.

These feelings of rejection appeared exacerbated by being 'replaced' by a stepfather. While some of the participants did not agree with children having stepfathers as replacements for their biological fathers, they still gave up their children when their relationships with their children's mothers ended, explaining this as a 'cultural norm'. However, this 'norm' was not clear, often contradicted within and between narratives, suggesting some possible defensive use of culture.

> Jabu: *You find the lady is staying with another man. So, it would be disrespectful to go and see your kid in somebody's house. Because as an African we believe in, when you're marrying somebody with two or three kids those are your kids. You don't even want to see the…biological father coming to your house and seeing his biological kid…if your ex-love has got another relationship…then they'll tell you that please stop visiting those kids because you are causing a problem to their current marriage. So, it's a difficult thing…It would be good if those things weren't there. It would be good for us to access our kids.*
>
> Themba: *The father, they must ask the mothers, okay, I'll never come back to you, I'll come back to the son or the child only. It's that thing they're supposed to understand…the children they need their father. It's not right to raise with another father, [but] now people they said it's okay.*

The father-mother rapport has been found to be significant in the transition to fatherhood, and support and facilitation from the mother are key for fathers (Bryan, 2013; Dienhart, 2001; Easterbrooks et al., 2007). In fact, alongside finances, the most significant predictor of father involvement is the strength of the relationship between the parents (Enderstein & Boonzaier, 2015; Futris & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2007). Some of the participants experienced maternal gatekeeping as punishment for

how relationships had ended. Mothers who denied fathers contact with their children were often constructed as vindictive:

> Sipho: *Ah well, the mother is bitter…is trying to hurt my feelings obviously…I'm sure it's a selfish move in the mother's side.*

Fathers were positioned as at the mercy of withholding, 'perpetrator' mothers, whom it was not possible to please.

> Themba: *…is the mother of my child…when I go to buy my child maybe some toys, I want to see him. [S]he don't want me to see my child…[s]he said 'send your things only. Send the money, send the clothes, food only'… When they are starting fighting with his father of the child, they say 'don't come back here'… So I call the mother, the mother must give, 'hello can I talk with [child's name]'…'Eh let me check, he's sleeping'…*

While mothers were frequently positioned as 'perpetrators' who were responsible for the fathers' non-involvement, most of the participants struggled to acknowledge any 'perpetrating' by fathers. Firmly positioned as victims, many found it difficult to acknowledge other potential reasons for the mothers' reactions or their own contributions to the mothers' behaviour. Reflecting on their potential roles in communication breakdowns was not easy during the interviews. There was minimisation of domestic violence and infidelity.

> Sipho: *And we didn't break up in a sense of infidelity or her catching me with another woman in bed. No, it was purely a sense of misunderstanding each other, which caused, which led to domestic violence, which is an everyday thing. It escalated in a way, you know what, its best for us to separate. We now disrespecting each other…So she thought no, I did something to her and she didn't entertain my story…*

> Thato: *'Cause I tell her…meanwhile you still have that mind to say all those years, you are talking about past tense. Me I'm talking about the present tense. So, you are talking about past tenses so let's leave it…So the grudge, it won't work...*

The minimisation of father responsibility in relationship breakdown is evident in Sipho's referral to domestic violence as *'an everyday thing'* and in Thato's dismissal of the mother's feelings, when he expresses a wish for his ex-partner to leave the past in the past. In both excerpts, the fathers construct themselves as victims of mothers who *'disrespect'*, *'misunderstand'*, *'don't entertain [their] stories [perspectives]'* and hold *'grudges'*. Denial of contact with their children by vindictive or grudge-holding ex-partners was also cited as a reason for non-involvement in Jordan (2014) and Lesch and Kelapile's (2016) studies. It was noted in the latter that participants' descriptions of vindictive mothers seemed somewhat biased or exaggerated. It is possible that the rejection and anger from the mothers of their children turned these mothers into powerful 'villains' in the minds of some fathers, against whom they have no agency. The mothers became the 'doers' and the fathers were the 'done to' (Benjamin, 2004).

However, this position was not held by all participants, and some were able to hold some space for the mothers' subjectivity, reflecting on the possible experiences of mothers and acknowledging the role they may have played in the breakdown of the relationship and subsequent separation from their children. Some were able to acknowledge their capacity to 'do to', retaining some agency and responsibility. There were instances where there was an awareness of choice and their role in their non-involvement:

> Themba: *Okay, I'm gonna blame the fathers, maybe the mothers, they saw them, they're cheating. That is why they told him don't come back here, yes. Maybe the other one this month he didn't*

> *come with the grocery of the child, so the mother told him don't come back here.*
>
> Jabu: *God gave us a choice. God is just looking at us and saying, 'Oh it's up to you if you take this route…You must take your own right direction'. God gave us everything, mind to think, everything, but you end up misusing them…then you decide your own fate.*

Sadly, despite some insight into the reciprocal nature of the relationship breakdowns, little reference was made to ways in which they could become more involved fathers. While some acknowledgment of their actions in the loss of contact was noted by two of the five participants, a sense of helplessness to change anything remained evident.

> Tshepo: *She blocked me, and then I lost my phone, I lost her numbers, I lost her mother's numbers, I lost the baby, I lost everything… I don't know how to get back….*

For the most part, reflections on their own contributions to the breakdown of relationships were fleeting, and narratives returned to themes of disempowerment, being treated unfairly, and having no agency or control. Participants felt that they had no ability to change their situations, which, in some cases, appeared to absolve them in their minds of any responsibility regarding their non-involvement in their children's lives. The positioning of mothers and maternal families as holding all the decision-making power seemed to shift the responsibility onto mothers for the quality of the father-child relationship.

> Tshepo: *Cause today she doesn't want anything to do with me which amazes me. Why? Cause I didn't do anything to anyone. If, yes, they wanted me to pay damages, they could've said it straight. It's not my side or my decision to make. …it's their duty*

> *to come to my house, introduce the daughter, and take it from there…So…maybe my daughter will one day ask what happened, I'll tell her everything…I blame the mother of my daughter…they are not taking initiative or maybe they don't even want to know how it feels to have a father. I blame women, I blame all the mothers that don't do anything about their children not having good communication with their fathers. I totally blame them.*

The mothers of their children were positioned as *'not wanting anything to do with [them]', 'not taking initiative'*, and *'not having good communication'*, leaving the fathers blameless and the mothers 'to blame'. Fathers who are victims of rejection and an unfair system were positioned as having no choice but to remain uninvolved.

> Sipho: *Others do try and eventually give up, find another wife, find other kids you know…They say 'ha, this father neglected us', and look the father wanted to connect with the kids and gave up because it was really…he felt…argh, you know what, this woman is just something else.*

To manage feelings of rejection and loss, some of the participants appeared to actively suppress feelings and thoughts about their children. Thato was able to acknowledge his choice not to pay towards his child but justified this through anger at being denied contact with his child.

> Thato: *So, so I find that so difficult 'cause now I was thinking that although I can't have those contact, speaking to my child, it will be nice, but at the very same time I won't see him. So, at the very same time it's useless…it's just because it makes my heart sore you know. It like you've got a flower somewhere, they've got a pipe from that side, you have to always pour water, but you don't know that flower it grows or it dies, you see. So, if I'm going to put something every month for something I don't even*

> *see, it's very useless on my side…Me honestly, I'm not there for my child…in everything. I don't even put in a cent. I don't even think about my child. You know even if I've got money, I won't even think to buy airtime and phone my kid.*

What begins as a victimised position in Thato's narrative quickly moves into anger and a position of indifference and retaliatory withholding – a clear shift toward realignment with the ideals of 'tough' hegemonic masculinity. Thato was able to reflect on this later in his narrative.

> Thato: *We don't care. We don't care most of the time you see. We do things whereby we regret at the end of the day. 'Cause we telling ourselves that we are a man. No-one can tell us. So actually we are the ones making women to suffer you see. But we don't see it 'cause we are the one who doing it.*

Alongside the position of victimhood, where he feels powerless and rejected by the mother of his child and the maternal family and heartsore at the lack of contact with his child, Thato acknowledges his role in making his partner '*suffer*' and identifies an alternative position of powerful masculinity, in which '*no-one can tell us'* because *'we are a man'*. His explanation of his indifference toward his child - '*I don't even think about my child'* - has a defensive quality that is typical of the shame-anger cycle (Retzinger, 1991). It could also be described as defensive dissociation, wherein the subjectivity of both his ex-partner and child is lost (Benjamin, 2016). His shame and helplessness are converted into rage, which he acts out through a seeming vengeful withdrawal of interest. This successfully shifts him back into a position of power, distanced from threatening feelings of vulnerability and aligned with hegemonic masculine ideals.

Intergenerational transmission of the trauma of rejection

Sensitivity to rejection and feelings of shame, linked to concerns about their adequacy as men, may stem from earlier experiences of rejection by their own fathers. Some of the participants related their current non-involved fatherhood to childhood experiences where their own fathers questioned paternity. In some cases, the questioning of paternity was intergenerationally repeated. Tshepo made links between his own experience of being rejected by his father and rejecting his own child.

> Tshepo: *He [his father] just told me that 'hey bra, it's impossible, you're not my child'…and I… because I was angry, I even said [upon finding out that his partner was pregnant] 'this child is not mine'. She [the mother of his child] reminded me immediately after giving birth that 'you said that this is not your child'.*

In most cases, the narratives revealed patterns of paternal rejection.

> Tshepo: *There wasn't a connection…The only thing that he [his father] knows is my name. I don't think he knows what colour I love, everything. So he was never there…Never called maybe just to take me out you know, have fun, all of those things. So I don't have a relationship with him. I don't even think I'll ever have it with him…I tried, when, last year I went to him and was like I don't want your money…I just want you to spend time with me. You know take me out. Ask me who am I? What do I do? What's happening in my life? But he was like 'hey bra, not me'.*

When talking about their own non-involved fathers, some of the participants were clearly identified with the position of 'rejected/abandoned child'. It appeared difficult for some of the participants to understand the reasons for their fathers' rejection of them.

> Themba: *And the one thing I'm gonna ask him, why he didn't come all this time to see me, only. I want that answer ne? I know he's gonna blame my mother because [s]he's passed away, but me I don't care. I want to know why. So sometimes you see the boy, they are playing their soccer there in the street, so you see his father is watching [him]. So me, who's gonna watch me?*

The desire to be different to their own non-involved fathers was strong.

> Themba: *I told my girlfriend, I said, 'you know what I don't have a father. I don't want my son to grow up with not having a father…I feel so terrible. Terrible because sometimes I want to take my child to the park, to the zoo… Take my child to everywhere that my father didn't want to take me….'.*

In the above extracts, Tshepo and Themba speak with child-like longing for an involved, caring father, and the pain of having a non-involved father is clear. Interestingly constructions of a father as someone 'present' and 'interested' were noted, which echoes the concept of 'talking fathers' found in Ratele et al.'s (2012) study, where father figures were depicted as nurturing and caring, as opposed to more traditional depictions of authoritarian, controlling fathers. However, Tshepo and Themba do not make the connection in their narratives that their children likely feel similarly to how they felt as children. Reflections on the experiences of their children were significant in their absence in the narratives. It is possible that the lack of present, mentalising fathers in the childhoods of the participants has compromised these fathers' capacity to take up a third position (Diamond, 2017). This position entails bearing the position of observer to a dyadic relationship between mother and child, as well as being able to reflect on one's own experience of this position (Britton, 1998; Coelho Junior, 2016). Many of the participants reported that after the child was conceived or born, their relationship with the mother of their child

deteriorated. Perhaps without an internal representation of a present, caring father to draw upon, the ordinary struggles of transitioning into a father role – such as feeling temporarily sidelined and suddenly needing to be responsible for another – appeared to overwhelm these men. Instead the third position collapses into the twoness of 'doer and done to' where they feel persecuted and unable to hold space for self-reflection or mentalising the experience of the other (Benjamin, 2004). Interestingly, there was also no mention in their narratives of their own fathers as victims. While they may have wondered whether their own mothers kept them from their fathers, rather than their fathers choosing not to be involved, this was neither stated nor implied. Instead, they positioned themselves as victims of rejecting and abandoning fathers. The rejection that the fathers in this study experienced from their fathers seems to have been painfully re-experienced in their relationships with the mothers of their children and the maternal families, activating necessary intrapsychic defences. The desire to be different from their own non-involved fathers was strong, but appeared to remain only a wish and not a reality.

To become a father is seen as progression into manhood and is idealised around the globe (Hendricks et al., 2010; Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2019). This idealisation of fatherhood was present in this study, however, feelings of ambivalence about fatherhood also featured throughout the narratives. Ambivalence about fatherhood was also noted in studies on non-involved fatherhood by Swartz and Bhana (2009) and Sathiparsad (2010). Findings indicated that, despite seeing themselves as capable of being good fathers, ambivalence about this was also evident, particularly from financial and social perspectives. While the participants in the current study expressed a desire to have relationships with their children, their lack of action to make these relationships possible points to mixed feelings suggestive of a possible unresolved identity crisis. While there is longing for a paternal bond with their children, the fact that these fathers cannot be fathers in the idealised sense that they wish they could

be may prevent them from seeking other ways to be fathers to their children. Fantasied, idealised self-representations of wanting to become 'different' fathers as compared to their own fathers have been noted in other fatherhood studies (Enderstein & Boonzaier, 2015; Lemay et al., 2010). In this study, this manifested as an imagined, idealised fantasy of themselves as present, involved fathers: 'if only' – if only they lived with their child, if only the mother had not rejected them, if only they had the financial means. The impossibility of these fantasies and the pain of the absence of a father-child relationship is then experienced as a threat to this idealised 'if only' self-representation and is defensively split off, along with their children, resulting in trauma being repeated intergenerationally (Gentile, 2014; Layton, 2019).

> Thato: *I can wish to say you know my child, he can be here. Cause I'm not like running away from responsibility. If my child was here, I should stand with my two feet and do each and every thing he needs. But now 'cause he's not around me, I don't care… I don't even think to say I have to take care for someone who's not around.*

Against a history of feeling rejected by their own fathers and ambivalent about their capacities to take on the role of provider and responsible father, when faced with rejection from the mothers of their children and/or maternal families and feelings of powerlessness to change their circumstances, the participants in this study verbalise their anger. Harder for the participants to verbalise, but implicit in their stories of rejection are feelings of inadequacy and shame. To cope with these feelings of anger and shame, the participants appeared to assume two seemingly paradoxical positions – that of a strong, indifferent Black man/father and that of a victimised Black man/father. While some oscillated between the two, others assumed more firm positions of victimhood.

Conclusion

In describing their experiences as non-involved fathers, this group of men's narratives predominantly focused on constructions of themselves as victims. A common theme was the sense that the non-involved father status had 'happened' to them and that the circumstances through which they had become uninvolved fathers were beyond their control. Feelings of anger, sadness, and loss at being denied contact with their children were reported. Acknowledgement of fault or responsibility for their non-involved fatherhood status was rare. Mothers, maternal families, legal systems, cultural practices of damages and *lobola*, and financial disempowerment were positioned as responsible for their non-involvement. As demonstrated in recent studies, these factors undoubtedly contribute to non-involved fatherhood: unplanned pregnancies, a lack of readiness for fatherhood, socio-economic disadvantages constructed along racial lines, a biased legal system, classist discrimination from maternal families, and changing gender roles have all been implicated (Khunou, 2006; Madhavan et al., 2015; Mavungu et al., 2013; Morrell, 2006; Salami & Okeke, 2018). Given this, a victimised position among Black fathers is warranted. However, other studies have found that some men, including those raised without fathers, find ways to negotiate these challenges, resolving tensions around gender ideals and acting as caregivers to their children (Enderstein & Boonzaier, 2015; Shefer et al., 2010). The question that emerges, then, is why some men, facing similar challenges, can feel agentic and renegotiate their identities to become involved fathers, while others do not, instead assuming positions of victimhood. The answer to this question seems to lie in a complex set of intersecting circumstances, both social and developmental.

The participants in this study were acutely aware of their Black racial identities and associated this with several disadvantages. They felt financially disempowered by historical legacies of inequality. They also

felt trapped by what they perceived as unfair culturally endorsed financial expectations of a Black father. The feelings of inadequacy and failure stemming from their inability to meet these expectations, along with associated shame and rage, were likely amplified by the internalised racial shame experienced by many Black South African men (Govender & Cartwright, 2021).

Another source of anger and shame for some of the participants was their relationships with their own fathers. All the participants had non-involved or emotionally absent fathers themselves, which supports the notion of intergenerational transmission in the phenomenon of father absenteeism (Madden et al., 2015; Pougnet et al., 2012, Shears et al., 2006). This study, however, expands thinking in this area, implicating feelings of rejection as playing an important role in this transmission. Many of the men in this study portrayed a preoccupation with experiences of rejection from their father figures. This, together with a notable lack of reflection in their narratives on the potential experiences of their children in relation to their non-involvement, suggests a possible lingering intrapsychic identification with a helpless, abandoned child position. This seemed to render these men highly sensitive to experiences of rejection from partners and maternal families and to experience the societal and cultural expectations of fatherhood as persecutory and unattainable. Having not been 'recognised' themselves, they struggled to 'recognise' the experiences of their ex-partners and children (Benjamin, 2016).

The narratives definitively showed that, for these participants, fatherhood is intertwined with perceptions of what it means to be masculine. As women gain power through social movements, greater legal protection and economic opportunity, men have been found to react defensively with aggression to reassert their power and alignment with hegemonic ideals of masculinity (Lange & Young, 2019; Nanda et al., 2014). We contend that the men in this study express their aggression

through a position of defensive indifference, alongside which a position of defensive victimhood is assumed, which is used to absolve responsibility for passive-aggressive withdrawal after partner rejection. Non-involvement in these instances, can be interpreted as an attempt to 'take back power' and reverse the rejector-rejectee relationship. While their positions are driven by a basic human need to avoid feeling vulnerable and powerless in the presence of another, they seem to negotiate these feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness by drawing on the opposing discourses of victimhood ('I have no control') and hegemonic masculinity ('No-one can tell me…I am a man', 'I don't care'). This seems to manifest in complex contradictory positions of masculinity. There is dual identification with a rejected, powerless child position (initially experienced concerning their own fathers as children and re-evoked by maternal rejection) and identification with a rejecting 'internalised' father (becoming like their own fathers) to re-align with a position of hegemonic masculinity after being shamed. The inability to become the ideal fathers of their fantasies, along with failure in social and economic spheres, is experienced as a loss of power:

> Ruptures in the perceived positive representations of self are closely linked to a consequent reactive need to reinstate a sense of power…The links between loss of power and its reassertion using violence [or in some cases in this study - indifference or retaliatory rejection] appears associated with an attempt to reverse accumulated humiliation and vulnerability linked to disrupted subjectivity (Govender & Cartwright, 2021, p. 58).

The conflicting self-representations evident in these narratives suggest attempts both to reassert a 'lost', albeit imagined identity of ideal, valued, powerful masculinity, while using claims of victimhood to dismantle perceived threats to these idealised self-representations and culturally constructed male rights to power and privilege (Demetriou, 2001). On intrapsychic and interpersonal levels, assuming a victim position appears

to fulfil several functions. It may defend against feelings of guilt and failure, shifting control for outcomes onto 'more powerful' others, such as scorned partners, disapproving maternal families and unsupportive legal systems. Inhabiting a victim position may also serve to protect these men from rage at feeling pushed into a victimhood position yet again. Lastly, it may also protect them from having to recognise their identification with and repetition of a rejecting father position.

Implications of the findings

From a social perspective, these non-involved fathers assuming a victim position may be an attempt to elicit compassion and draw attention to the challenges faced by many Black South African fathers in a bid to effect social change (Jeffery & Candea, 2006; Rosland, 2009). However, Rosland (2009) reminds us that '…depending on the contextual framework, victimhood can create confidence, empowerment, and agency, but also disempowerment and passivity' (p. 294). On a similar note, Silberschimdt (2001) has suggested that disempowerment contributes to men acting out in violent ways or passively as absent fathers. While acknowledging the victimhood of many non-involved Black South African fathers is important for re-thinking cultural, legal, and socio-economic barriers to involved fatherhood, it is also important to hold in mind that this victimhood position could perpetuate feelings of powerlessness. Additionally, when used to defend against feelings of shame and rejection in relationships, it may perpetuate intergenerational patterns of non-involved fatherhood. Black fathers positioning themselves as victims may be perceived in feminist circles as attempts to deny the role of patriarchal privilege and entitlement in the breakdown of relationships and fathering roles. The assumption of victimised positions may not elicit the desired empathy and social change, and rather invite further anger and rejection from women, thereby continuing shame-anger cycles in men.

It is important to hold in mind that 'victimhood is not a topic which lends itself to a unified account' (Jeffery & Candea, 2006, p. 291) and it is often difficult to determine whether the taking up of a victim position is genuinely felt or strategic (Ging, 2019). It is the opinion of this study that it can be both. Black South African fathers are both victims and perpetrators; they have been 'done to', but also 'do' (Benjamin, 2004). By acknowledging what they have 'done to' others and mourning what has been 'done to' them, these fathers can move from the defensive position of victimhood to being able to acknowledge their capacity for positive 'doing to'. In the dichotomy of masculinity as either toxic or victimised (Venäläinen, 2020), a middle ground must be found.

In the interest of addressing valid claims to victimhood, certain social dynamics require consideration. The ability to provide financially has been identified as a determinant of father involvement (Futris et al. 2010). Structural shifts are necessary at a national level to alleviate poverty and unemployment, ensuring that parents have opportunities to provide for their families. However, the economic empowerment of women should not render the father role obsolete. The construction of fatherhood in South Africa around material provision, with mothers and maternal families being perceived by fathers as privileging financial contributions over other forms of father involvement (Clowes, 2006; Lesch & Kelapile, 2016), also needs to shift. Alterations in the cultural emphasis on the provider role of fathers would help many men feel needed and valued beyond financial contributions, likely increasing fathers' feelings of self-worth and decreasing feelings of disempowerment (Carlson & McLanahan, 2002; Devault et al., 2008; Edin et al., 2009; Khunou, 2006; Mavungu et al., 2013). As previously theorised, thirdness is implicated in both fatherhood and victimhood. While successful fathering allows for triadic relating and opens up space for the assumption of a symbolic, thinking, agentic position, victimhood entails a collapsed third (Benjamin, 2004; Diamond, 2017). For these fathers to be able to recognise the suffering of their children, they need

their own suffering to be recognised. Beyond recognition from their fathers and the mothers of their children, it needs to be acknowledged by 'a larger witnessing world that cares' (Benjamin, 2016, p. 73; Gerson, 2009; Ullman 2006). Benjamin (2016) also notes that:

> The absence of this caring, acknowledging world—a function played by those personally known or globally identified witness—and the ensuing sense of abandonment has been noted in many studies of trauma…[and] lack of acknowledgment engenders a lack of such belief and indeed often a failure to be able to represent the idea of the third and access it as a psychological position in relation to others (p. 73).

It has been shown that men in stable relationships with their children's mother benefit from being assisted with taking up their fatherhood roles (Bryan, 2013; Easterbrooks et al., 2007). It might be that men with fewer experiences of present, positive fathering themselves require even more supportive facilitation when transitioning into fatherhood. This is, however, not as feasible when intimate partner relationships break down. The prioritisation of fathers' rights to be involved with their children, both legally and socially, could help separated couples to negotiate parental access to children.

However, social intervention alone is unlikely to solve the problem of non-involved fatherhood, as these narratives suggest ambivalence about their capacities to fulfil a father role beyond the identified societal barriers. For fathers to consciously choose to break intergenerational patterns, their internalised victimhood, along with accompanying feelings of rejection and anger, also requires addressing. This is the area in which mental health counselling services could contribute.

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