The experience of attempting to become a present father: Perspectives of absent Black South African fathers

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my daughter, Lehakoe. Although you are only two years old, having begun this research journey at the same time as your conception, and experiencing both you and my work develop from neonate has simultaneously been one of the toughest and most empowering experiences of my life. Achieving this goal moved from being a selfish and personal endeavour to constantly holding you in mind, in the hopes that you will one day view its completion as evidence and motivation that nothing is out of your reach. The timing of your arrival onto this earth, and the timing of me pursuing my goal was always meant to be aligned. Your existence motivates and strengthens me every day. Thank you my Bubsie. I love you immensely.

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To the seven fathers who participated in my study:

Thank you for sharing your personal fatherhood experiences with me, without your stories, my story would not have been possible.

Abstract

This research investigates the experiences of Black South African fathers who have been absent from their children's lives, who have attempted to or have reconnected with their children. It was focused on understanding what this process of reconnection entails, as well as the motivations, challenges, failures and successes these fathers experienced. The research was interested in what fathers regarded as a successful or unsuccessful reconnection according to their personal experiences.

A qualitative, psychosocial approach for this study was chosen to allow for an exploration of both the social and personal psychological influences on this process of reconnection from the perspective of the seven fathers who participated in the study. These participants were recruited via social media and through purposive, snowball sampling. They were all between the ages of 30-45 years old, and all of them had previously been absent from their child/ren's lives and had attempted to reconnect or had successfully reconnected with their child/ren. Two of the men had managed to successfully reconnect with their children, whilst the other five had tried and been unsuccessful. Hollway and Jefferson's (2013) psychosocial approach using the Free Association Narrative Interview (FANI) was used to guide the collection and analysis of data. Two semi-structured interviews that largely offered space for their narratives were conducted with each participant. The research showcased several factors that are important for research that were novel and were found to shape and influence their subjective experiences of this reconnection, such as socio-political factors, cultural influences, socio-economic factors and the intergenerational transmission of past relational patterns to their relationships with their children.

This research documents the ways in which these factors intersect in this sample reconnection experiences. Experiences of both successful and unsuccessful reconnection with their children are discussed. Particular attention is given to the participants' understandings of their fatherhood roles and how such understanding has been reconstructed within this reconnection process. Motivations for attempting to reconnect with their children are presented, alongside the meanings they made of unsuccessful attempts at reconnection. The findings suggest that a combination of both personal and contextual factors influence which fathers manage to form positive fatherhood identities and forge successful reconnections, and which do not.

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Chapter One - Introduction

1.1. Introduction

Black fathers have high absenteeism rates in South Africa, with statistics revealing that only between 30 and 40% of children in South Africa reside with their fathers (Khunuou, 2006; Ratele, 2012; Stats, 2021). Discussions around father absence in Black families has proliferated in South African academic discourses (Enderstein & Boonzaier, 2015; Khunuou, 2006; Lobaka, 2022; Mndende, 2021; Ratele, 2012; Richter et al., 2010; Theron, 2016). In the media, reality television shows that document reconnection processes between fathers and their children have also been popular (Mavungu et al., 2013). However, the focus of these shows most often is the children and the experience of this reconnection for the father is rarely explored. This lack of focus on the subjectivity of the father in popular media is mirrored in the research literature, which has tended to highlight the negative consequences of father absence rather than on the fathers themselves (Dawson, 2023; Gregory & Milner, 2011; Mavungu et al., 2013; Pichler, 2023).

While possible reasons for the high rates of father absenteeism in South Africa have been explored (Garfinkel et al., 1998; Khunuou, 2006; Lamb, 2004; Labuschagne, 2023; Lobaka, 2022; Nathane & Khunou, 2021; Ratele, 2012; Warria, 2022), there is little to no literature documenting reconnections between fathers and their children in South Africa. Thus, this research was interested in investigating the experiences of Black South African fathers who had previously been absent from their children's lives, who had attempted to or had reconnected with their children. It was focused on understanding what this process entailed, as well as the motivations, challenges, failures and successes these fathers experienced. The research was interested in what fathers regarded as a successful or unsuccessful reconnection and their understandings of the process and outcome. A psychosocial approach for this study was chosen to allow for an exploration of both social and personal psychological influences on this process of reconnection from the perspective of fathers.

1.2. Rationale

Approximately four million children in South Africa are estimated to be orphans and of those four million children, at least half of them are paternal orphans (Ratele, 2012; Mndende, 2021). Father absenteeism has been found to be the highest amongst Black South African families (Mdende, 2021). This is reiterated by the common trends found worldwide such as in The United States where it has been marked that African American families are the most disrupted and have the highest numbers of single mother headed households (Khunuou, 2006; Mavungu et al., 2013; Ratele, 2012). This may point to both cultural and contextual factors playing a role. The need for interventions to address 'absenteesim' in fathers more widely has been identified (Khunuou, 2006; Panter-Brick et al., 2014; Ratele, 2012). Ratele (2012) states that even though there is robust evidence of how fathers absence negatively impacts children and mothers, engaging with fathers is one of the least well-explored and articulated aspects of parenting research. Very little research specifically relevant to the South African context has been conducted, even less so from the viewpoint of Black males (Malherbe & Kaminer, 2022; Ratele, 2012).

Broader societal constructions of fatherhood and the effects of these constructions on absent fatherhood have been explored in the literature (Hamer, 1998; Manning, Stewart & Smick, 2003; Seltzer & Bianchi, 1988; Seltzer & Brandreth, 1994). Sadly, much of the literature has tended to perpetuate an all-too-common perception about fathering: that it is a social role that men generally do not perform adequately (Cornille, Barlow & Cleveland, 2006). One of the ways that fathers are often depicted to fail in their fatherhood is through an inability to meet ascribed roles as providers.

Legal initiatives in response to the initial highlighting of the crisis of absentee fatherhood in South Africa have unfortunately been ineffectual. In fact, laws that compel men to meet their financial obligations to their children have been found to exacerbate the high numbers of absent fathers (Khunuou, 2006; Mavungu et al., 2013; Morrell, 2006). If men are struggling financially, these laws disempower fathers further with regards to other forms of involvement, as they reiterate the provider role (Edin, Tach, and Mincy, 2009; Khunuou, 2006; Mavungu et al., 2013; Roy, 1999). Low-income fathers who cannot make their child support payments experience their self-worth being undermined (Khunuou, 2006; Mavungu et al., 2013). This low self-esteem and feeling unneeded is also addressed in studies that found that fathers did not feel they were necessary in raising their children as a result of their disempowerment

(Carlson & McLanahan, 2002; Devault et al., 2008; Lamb 1997; Townsend 2000). This, in turn, influences their abilities to fulfil other aspects of the fathering role (Roy, 1999; Settersten & Cancel-Tirado, 2010; Tach et al., 2009).

Historically, the norm for South African law courts was to award custody to mothers, which, in turn, had critical effects on the relationships fathers have with their children, and it is only in the last two decades that new policies that attempt to develop relationships between fathers and children have been advocated; . research on fatherhood in South Africa has called for a 'rethinking' of social policy with regards to fathers and their involvement with their children (Diniz et al., 2021; Jensen et al., 2021; Morrell, 2006; Sonke Gender Justice Human Sciences Research Council, 2018). While policy changes have begun, rates of father absenteeism remain high (Diniz et al., 2021; Jensen et al., 2021), suggesting that the issue is more complex. There are undoubtedly multi-faceted connections between culture, finance and fatherhood that play a role in many South African fathers not being present in their children's lives, and this has been reported on in the literature – to the extent that the positioning of South African fathers as financially unable to father has become a dominant narrative (Koketso, 2019; Malinga & Ratele, 2022; Ncayiyane & Nel, 2023; Sikweyiya et al., 2022). What appears to be missing from the literature is a fuller exploration of the experiences of South African men who are financially stable and yet still not taking up a present fathering role. Due to the lack of literature and minimal commentary on the latter group, there seems to be an over-reliance on the former factors in understandings of absentee fatherhood.

It is therefore not only important to explore implicit and explicit biases manifested in current approaches to research, intervention, and policy, but the fathers' psychological experiences too (Panter-Brick et al., 2014). In an American study by Randles and Carroll (2023) fathers felt that others' perceptions of them were based on gendered and heteronormative ideologies of masculinity and socially constructed distinctions between 'mothering' and 'fathering'. They felt judged as unworthy to father if they had not graduated high school or had poor mental health (Randles & Carroll, 2023). Fathers in this study discussed their appreciation of programs that allowed them to express their difficulties of living up to gendered parenting expectations and promoted the idea that fathers were valuable beyond their provider roles (Randles & Carroll, 2023).

Discourses in South Africa surrounding fatherhood have also been found to be highly influential. The current literature posits a complex relationship between the function of the

father and masculinity, with contrasting views argued (see for example Coltart & Henwood, 2012; Davies and Eagle, 2013; Langa, 2012; Langa, 2015; Morrell, 2006; Samuels, 1989, 1993, 1996). In South Africa, Black masculinities are inextricably linked to notions of culture, and although culture is changing, representations of Black fatherhood in relation to this topic still tends to stick to static and outdated representations (Tshisuaka & Langa, 2023). Literature such as this often includes the interconnection of manhood, fatherhood, fatherhood practices and parenting as being perceived as a rite of passage into manhood despite the progressive attitudes and beliefs on manhood that oppose the traditional gender roles of women being primary caregivers and men being financial providers (Tshisuaka & Langa, 2023). The dominant narrative is that of a specific type of manhood that is drawn from hegemonic masculinities, which is often shaped by patriarchal and negative stereotypes of what it means to be a Black man, and absent fathers' failure to live up to these hegemonic masculinities (Tshisuaka & Langa, 2023). Changes in society have challenged traditional paternal roles and men have had to find new masculine identities, which includes new fatherhood identities (Mavungu et al., 2013; Matee, 2016; Mkhize, 2006; Perry, 2009; (Tshisuaka & Langa, 2023). This process can entail men feeling victimised as fathers and taking on victim roles, experiencing feelings of powerlessness and lack of control in decision-making, and having to renegotiate the power of fatherhood and its connectedness to culture and tradition amongst other factors (Mavungu et al., 2013; Matee, 2016; Mkhize, 2006; Perry, 2009). The definition of a victim is someone who suffers under some oppression, who is badly treated or taken advantage of who suffers injury, hardship, or loss, whereas an individual with agency is able to transcend the social pressure of the immediate environment and has power to exert change on the environment and one's life course (Bandura, 2006; Bandura, 2018).

Studies have also shown that fatherhood patterns are transmitted intergenerationally (Davids, 2002; Devaut, 2008; Hofferth, 2000; Matee, 2016 &) and while there is some psychoanalytic literature documenting social shifts in fatherhood identities, there is currently no research that looks at the complex interplay between larger social discourses and the intergenerational transmission of fathering in personal fatherhood identity negotiation. Looking at the experiences of men who have been both absent and present allowed for a novel exploration of fatherhood experiences and in particular, a closer look at the process of identity negotiation in these fathers.

Literature that explores programs aimed at father involvement does not adequately capture fathers' engagement and motivation to participate, or their willingness to learn and implement new strategies and to support their partner (Connell, Sanders, & Markie-Dadds. 1997; Frank, Keown, & Sanders, 2015; Sanders, Markie-Dadds, Tully and Bor, 2000; Webster-Stratton, 1992). A need to shift away from a deficit perspective about fathers has been identified in this literature. It is suggested that if authors shift their focus from this deficit model of what fathers do poorly, to an asset model of what they do well, it can assist in providing ecological models of fathering that strengthen interactions in different social contexts, the relationship between the father and mother, the attitudes and skills of the father, and the relationship between the father and child (Cornille, Barlow & Cleveland., 2006). Attempts to do this have been documented in the literature (Shefer et al., 2010; 2012; Shefer & Ratele, 2023), however, these have tended to document fathers that remain present and committed to their fathering role from the birth of their child. No literature has documented the experiences of men who are trying to reconnect after a period of having been absent in their children's lives. Exploration of the experiences of men who have shown motivation to reconnect with their children will contribute to this research focus.

In summary, the complexity of fatherhood is often overlooked. Mavungu et al., (2013) make an example of the South African reality television shows 'Khumbul'ekhaya' and 'Papgeld' which depict the painful and turbulent consequences of having an absent parent until the child is reunited with this parent. Often there is little to no representation in these television shows of the emotional experience of the parent in reconnecting with a child (Mavungu et al., 2013). What it means to become a present father after a period of absence and the emotional human experience in this process is missed. Fathers who have attempted to reconnect or have reconnected with their children, are a unique group of fathers whose subjectivities have not been explored. This study provides a unique, in-depth contribution to the body of literature around fatherhood identities. An understanding of the decision to reconnect and the process of attempting to take up the role of father later in their children's lives allows for a deeper understanding of these men's subjectivities, contributing to this gap in the literature. It may also provide unique insights for programmes attempting to address absentee fatherhood.

1.3. Aims

This research aimed to explore Black South African men's experiences of attempting to reconnect with their previously estranged children after having being absent from their lives. The use of the word 'reconnection' in this study refers to fathers' desire for, and taking steps towards, the taking-up of an active parenting role in their children's lives. The term 'active parenting role' denotes assuming a present role financially, psychologically, physically and/or emotionally – what this looks like or entails is explained by the fathers in the study. This study aimed to look beyond the obvious, conscious accounts of the process of reconnection, to uncover unconscious influences and processes in these reconnections.

The study was interested in what kinds of factors influenced these fathers' motivations to attempt reconnection with their children, for example, possible pressure from society and change in socio-economic status, amongst others. The topic of fatherhood is complex and while this study aimed to be cognisant of all the multiple factors influencing fatherhood – both internal and external – it is noted that this study was only able to engage with fatherhood from the perspectives of the men who participated in the study, in relation to their attempts to take up an identity position which they had previously not taken up. The study hopes to contribute to the literature on the neglected subjectivity of fatherhood and aimed to document the ways in which these factors interrelated in this group of men's reconnection experiences.

1.3.1 Aim:

- To explore Black South African men's experiences of attempting reconnect with their previously estranged children after having being absent from their lives.

1.3.2 Objectives:

- To examine fathers conscious and unconscious motivations for attempting to reconnect with their children.
- To understand psychic defenses used by the fathers and how they position themselves in relation to societal discourses on absent and present fatherhood.
- To understand fathers attempts to reconnect in relation to their sociocultural contexts.
- To examine the process of identity negotiation in attempting to shift their fatherhood status.

1.4. Theoretical framework

Theoretical frameworks are a broad body of connected theories, that are general, unified explanations for a wide array of phenomena that allow researchers to generate explanations (Muthukrishna & Henrich, 2019). Such frameworks help prioritize certain research foci, motivate the use of research methods and, often, provide a natural means to integrate knowledge across fields (Muthukrishna & Henrich, 2019). The purpose of theoretical frameworks is to avoid research programs developing and growing from personal intuitions and culturally-biased folk theories (Muthukrishna & Henrich, 2019). This is achieved by setting expectations that determine whether a new finding is confirmatory, integrating with existing lines of research, or surprising, and therefore requiring further replication and scrutiny (Muthukrishna & Henrich, 2019).

This study utilised a psychosocial theoretical framework, which involves investigation of the interaction between external, social constructions and internal, psychic formations, using either psychoanalytic theory to explain concepts such as projection, internalization and identification (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008). Hollway's (2006) use of the term psychosocial assumes the presence of a psychoanalytic subject that is part of a unique life history. Harland (2015), Venn (2009) and Wetherrell (2012) state that psychosocial theorizing cuts across sociology, psychology and social psychology, with the aim of bringing interdisciplinary understandings to theorizing interrelationships between the emotional and social within the socio-cultural, discursive and psychological context.

The current study chose to use object relations theory as the psychodynamic lens through which to view fatherhood, as this theory offers useful understandings of the intergenerational transmission of early relational patterns and psychic defence mechanisms (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). A psychosocial understanding of fatherhood identity was used, which understands fatherhood as "a prevalent and constitutive discourse coexisting in a dynamic nexus with inter-generationally situated biographies and wider social and relational contexts, out of which assimilations of traditional and modern styles of fathering gain their momentum, meaning and currency" (Finn & Henwood, 2009, p. 548). Coltart and Henwood's (2012) psychosocial perspective is interested in men's narratives that depict the tensions,

inconsistencies and shifts in men's accounts of their affective investments in inherited masculine and paternal subject positions (Coltart & Henwood, 2012).

Also important in a psychosocial theoretical framework is the concept of reflexivity. Reflexivity in research can be understood as the use of a critical, self-aware lens to interrogate both the research process and the researcher's interpretation or representation of participants' lives in our social world (Finlay, 2017). It takes into account the complexity of a qualitative project, which involves challenging, uncomfortable, ambiguous processes that can run the risk of egocentric infinite regress (Finlay, 2017). In this study, I, as the researcher, had to continuously examine and deconstruct the way my research knowledge was constructed (Finlay. 2017). I had to evaluate how I might have been contingently implicated in this research by examining how my background, assumptions, positioning, behaviour, and subjectivity impacted on the research process and vice versa (Finlay, 2017). This was especially important, given that I am a daughter of an absent Black father.

1.5. Research methodology

The study took a qualitative, psychosocial approach to the collection and analysis of these Black fathers' narratives. It was expected that socio-political, cultural and socio-economic factors may shape these fathers' subjective experiences of this reconnection, along with personal factors relating to their early family relationships, given that studies support the notion of the intergenerational transmission of past relational patterns between parents and their children (Gupta & Featherstone, 2016; Randles & Carroll, 2023). Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant.

Within this approach, particular attention was given to the participants' understandings of their fatherhood roles and how these understandings had been constructed and then reconstructed within this reconnection process. How these men felt about their absence and presence in the process of active fatherhood was explored, alongside their conscious and unconscious motivations for reconnecting with their children later in their children's lives.

A qualitative approach was useful as it allowed the researcher to capture and make sense of the contradictions, nuances and complexities of the fathers' subjective human experiences, as well as allowed Black fathers a voice that is often marginalized in society (Duncan et al., 2014; Frazer et al., 2023; Mey, 2022). The use of a psychosocial approach allowed for a novel, in-

depth perspective and exploration of patterns in the unique interplay between intrapsychic factors and societal discourses around fatherhood in the participants. Consideration was given to how psychodynamics may influence the participants' broader experiences of fatherhood and how they negotiate and position their father identities in relation to broader societal discourses on fatherhood, and particularly absent, Black fatherhood - accounts of which are currently missing from the literature.

1.6. Structure of the thesis

Chapter one has provided the introduction to the study, outlined the research aims, and noted the rationale for the study as well as the theoretical framework utilised. Chapter two offers a literature review that explores key concepts and bodies of literature that surround fatherhood, as investigated in this study. Chapter three clarifies the research questions that this study sought to explore and delineates the methodological approach employed. Chapter four presents the themes that arose from the analysis that was undertaken, whilst Chapter five presents the discussion on the findings. The thesis closes with conclusions, contributions, limitations, and recommendations for clinical practice and future research in Chapter six.

Chapter Two - Literature review

2.1. Introduction

Since literature is scarce in the area of father-child reconnection, this literature review included a number of disparate bodies of literature that consider fatherhood from various positions. The research aimed to use these bodies of literature to try and understand the multifaceted experiences of fatherhood within a reconnection process and the meaning-making that these fathers undergo during this process. The following section explores the changing social constructions of fatherhood globally and locally, and critically discusses the psychodynamic literature on absent fatherhood. Then, to the knowledge of the researcher, the little literature that exists in the area of father-child reconnection is discussed. In the research area of absentee fatherhood, research has explored the effects of father absence on children, but there has been less research exploring the absent father's perspective (Gadsden, Wortham & Turner, 2003; Madhavan, Richter, Gross, 2015; Mavungu, Thomson-de Boor & Mphaka, 2013). Thus, gaps in the literature are demonstrated and where possible, the significance of comprehending men's experiences of fatherhood is highlighted.

2.2. Changing social constructions of fatherhood

Makusha et al. (2012) suggest that one of the most significant resources for a child's well-being is the presence and involvement of a father figure in their life. Desmond and Desmond (2006), Denis and Ntsimane (2006), Richter et al. (2010) also share the view that households that have a father figure in them are better off than those without. Lamb et al. (1985) and Richter and Morrell, (2006) state that factors that encompass responsibility, availability and engagement play a huge role in what contributes to the economic resources of a household. Men's involvement in their children's lives also has an influence on both their parenting relationship as well as the family relationships (Jia & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2011). Father involvement in the South African home is noted as significant for the development of South African children, and father involvement, where fathers reside with their children, has been linked to positive childhood development (Makusha et al., 2012). However, there is also evidence that indicates that it is the quality of the relationship more than the frequency of contact that influences the

father-child relationship (Carlson & McLanahan, 2004; Carlson, 2006). This has raised questions about co-residency or co-habitation as a requirement for involved or present fatherhood.

Absentee fatherhood is a broad term that most often denotes absence in engagement or physical presence of a father in a child's day-to-day life, where a man may, but most often doesn't, provide for a child financially (Mavungu, 2013; Redpath, Morrell, Jewkes, and Peacock, 2008). While the term 'absent fathers' has come to be synonymous with non-resident, non-involved fathers, it can also include resident fathers who are not engaged in the child-rearing process, thus absentee fatherhood can also include a man who resides with a child but is unable to meet a child's emotional, psychological and financial needs (Mavungu, 2013; Redpath et al. 2008). Recent studies on fathers and fatherhood in South Africa have challenged the focus on co-habitation as a meaningful predictor of father support and involvement, showing how many fathers continue to be in contact with and support their children even if they are not members of the same household (Dawson, 2023; Madhavan, Townsend, and Garey 2008; Madhavan, Richter, and Shane Norris 2016; Mavungu 2013; HSRC and Sonke Gender Justice 2018). While many father-child connections are limited to financial provision, several studies show that a substantial proportion of fathers fulfil a range of roles in their children's lives that include emotional support and hands-on nurturing (Dawson, 2023; Madhavan et al., 2008; Makusha et al. 2013; Malinga & Ratele, 2022; Morrell et al. 2016). Carlson and McLanahan (2004) and Carlson (2006) suggest that fathers who do not reside with their children are still able to make significant contributions to the co-parenting relationship such as financial contribution, social visits and calls, thus co-residence can be challenged as an adequate indicator for 'father involvement' measurement.

Some literature has attempted to capture the complexity in the types of contact and father-child involvement amongst those who do not live together, and how this does not automatically mean that children are neglected, or that the father is irresponsible, and how this does not necessarily equate to a break in social connectedness between father and child (Makusha et al., 2012), however, there is insufficient research in this area. This study hoped to contribute to this gap in the literature through an exploration of the experiences of fathers who have been both absent and present. Absentee fatherhood is defined in this study as instances where the biological father is unable or unwilling to contribute to familial affiliation other than medically determined paternity, or to contribute to the financial, emotional, psychological maintenance

involved in raising the child, whilst residing or not residing with a child (Langa, 2010; Morrell, 2006; Perry, 2009).

2.2.1. The socioeconomics of fatherhood

Relevant to many African cultures, fathering and fatherhood are embroiled in the concept of building a home (Hunter, 2006; Langa, 2010; Ratele, 2012). A successful home in the pre-colonial and early colonial era was regarded as one where a man could father the most children and thus was the most respected household head (Hunter, 2006). In the twentieth century however, the social values around fatherhood remained strong but there were changes such as the gradual replacement of rural agriculture being a man's means of financial lifeblood; the supremacy of Christian representations of smaller nuclear families and the movement of families into urbanization (Hunter 2006; Ratele, 2012). As a result, the performance of fatherhood has shifted as migrant labour removed men from their homes and children for lengthy periods of time and men became distant providers (Hunter, 2006; Lesejane, 2006).

During pre-colonial times, cultural practices such as 'ilobolo' and 'inhlawulo'(damages -) was more centralised around child-price rather than the now common sale of a woman (Hunter, 2006). Fatherhood was interwoven with the social role of 'umnumzana' – head of the household – as the leader and protector of his 'umuzi'. Fatherhood was fluid where uncles were known as 'ubabaomkhulu'- elder father - or 'ubabaomcane'- younger father (Hunter, 2006; Langa 2010). These are considered to be solid and supportive structures that African cultures provided for men to be able to transition into fatherhood. Other supportive structures in African culture that were designed to sustain fatherhood, such as 'Bogwera'- when boys were prepared for fatherhood through initiation, or 'Kgoro'- when a man inherited a piece of land to cultivate and farm so that he could support his family, are no longer strongly practiced, thus making entering fatherhood more difficult for men, especially those from low income status (Lesejane, 2006). These previously supportive structures no longer being actively practiced have left young fathers vulnerable (Allen & Doherty, 1996; Bunting, 2005; Devault, Milicent, Quellet, Laurin, Jauron, & Lacharite, 2008; Speake, Cameron, & Gilroy, 1997). Budlender and Lund (2011), and Esping-Andersen (1990; 1999) found that the legacy of Apartheid, social welfare regimes and social policies have played a big role in the destruction of family life.

Lesejane (2006) states that the apartheid system and advances in the liberation of women have challenged the notion of men being the head of the family, as women have begun to gain more economic power. This has also been reported by Stats SA (2022) which states that 42.1% of homes are headed by women. Dunn and Maharaj (2024) investigated female labour force participation in South Africa and found that the majority of women form part of the female labour force (50.21%). These estimates are similar in urban areas (55.77%) but lower among women in rural areas (40.29%) (Dunn & Maharaj, 2024). National data in South Africa shows decreasing rates of marriage, particularly among Black South Africans (Dawson, 2023). Some scholars attribute the decline in marriage to men's inability to pay the high costs involved in the customary practice of ilobola or bridewealth (Posel et al., 2011). Others draw attention to the growing significance of cash transfers (known as social grants in South Africa) that go predominantly to mothers and the elderly (Dawson, 2023; Dubbeld 2013). Still others point to the increase in the number of women entering the labour market, albeit at the lower and more poorly paid end (Casale & Posel 2002). What is clear is that persistently high rates of un(der)employment impinge on men's ability to get married, build a home, and fulfil the 'provider' role that is still closely associated with fatherhood (Dawson, 2023; Hunter 2010; Posel et al., 2011). There is some evidence that men's failure to pay 'damages' leads to fathers being barred from seeing and visiting their children. However, this form of gatekeeping appears to be much more common when a child lives with maternal relatives and when a father fails to financially support his children (Dawson, 2023).

The rise of the unemployment rate in the mid-70s to its current 40% nationally has been directly linked to rates of absentee fatherhood (Freeks & De Jager, 2023; Hunter, 2006; Rich et al., 2023). In South Africa unemployment and poverty are most prominent in the Black population (Mkhize, 2006). Socioeconomic status and financial expectations appear to correlate to the achievement of involvement of fathers in their children's lives (Settersten & Cancel-Tirado, 2010). The idea that all men have the privilege of consistent access or exposure to their children in South Africa is an unrealistic expectation (Clowes, 2006). For Black men it seems that being a provider takes precedence over physical presence thus the failure to do this leads to absenteeism (Lesejane, 2006). In addition, factors such as being young when their first child is born and low levels of education have been found to be linked to employment and income unpredictability, and together contribute to vulnerability in the transition to fatherhood (Devault et al., 2008). Socioeconomic hardship, when combined with cultural expectations of fathers to provide financially, appears to have set Black fathers up to fail. Hunter (2006), Langa

(2010), Matee (2016), Ratele (2012) and Makusha and Richter (2015) have found that the South African cultural belief systems of fathers as providers have influenced absenteeism in fathering amongst Black men. Each study used between five to 10 participant sample sizes, and inclusion criteria comprised of only Black fathers, employed and unemployed, across provinces. Whilst the sample sizes were not big, they yielded similarities in their findings of the struggles of Black men living in South Africa. One of the common findings was how cultural practices such as paying damages and lobola have been found to contribute significantly to whether men feel able to play an active role in their children's lives as many may not be able to afford to financially participate in these practices.

2.2.2. Shifting masculinities and changing gender roles

There has been increasing interest in the topic of fatherhood within social policy, sociology, and social psychology that addresses how fatherhood has evolved (Braun, Vincent & Ball., 2010; Featherstone, 2009; Herlandet al., 2015; LaRossa, 1997; Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Shirani & Henwood, 2010). Whilst a nuclear family has been prominent over the years, times are changing and so is the picture of a family. While the literature still highlights the importance of a father and fathering in a child's life whose family construct includes one (Perez-Vaisvidovsky et al., 2023; Sonke Gender Justice Human Sciences Research Council, 2018), it has been noted that the paternal function is an idea that is overlapping, but distinct from the role of the father in a child's life (Davies & Eagle, 2013). Parenting roles that are specific to the male and female gender have been debated with regards to what has heteronormatively been understood to be important in influencing a child's development and personality formation (Davies & Eagle, 2013). Furthermore, this debate has been extended to developmental and clinical theory where feminism has shifted the stereotypical gender-role thinking (Davies & Eagle, 2013). This, along with changing family structures due to divorce, single parenting, gay marriages and household division due to migrant labour, has brought an awareness of either gender being able to perform both maternal and paternal functions (Davies & Eagle, 2013). Notions of toxic masculinity and the empowered feminine seem to have served to construct the 'masculine father' as no longer necessary (Villamarín-Freire, 2021;Yunianti et al., 2023). Perhaps in response to this, there have been shifts noted in the expected parenting roles of fathers, particularly within Western literature. There is a shift from a more traditional

position of being a distant breadwinner to an equal, emotional, nurturing and committed parent (Halford, 2006; Herland et al., 2015; Lupton & Barclay 1997; Shirani & Henwood, 2010).

In Northern Europe a 'contemporary fatherhood' model that has emerged has an emphasis on an active and emotionally involved father in his child's life (Halford, 2006). Although South African research is still exploring its own context with regards to active fatherhood, this may be an example of a possible new traditional and cultural ideal that can be shared across similar contexts. Ellingsater and Widerberg (2012) and Hennum (2002) have written about the Norwegian discourse ideal of the 'involved father' as a person who builds an emotional relationship with his child and takes care of them, however, research has shown that real-life fathering practices are at times more fluid. Multiple factors, sociological, environmental and behavioural, including personality traits of a man, have been found to be fundamental in forecasting his parental involvement (Herland et al., 2015).

Linked to the idea of changing gender roles more generally, as motherhood has shifted to accommodate more women working, men have been expected to take on more responsibility within the home and with regards to child-care. Lamb (2010) and Lamb et al. (1985) talk about the explicit expectation of fathers being active and involved in their children's lives and spending time with their children in one-on-one activities.

A change in social discourses about fatherhood are also evident in changes in laws, rights and leave policies which appear to seek "to attach men to children" (Gregory & Milner, 2011, p. 590). Gregory and Milner (2011) discuss in their paper a French policy that has been proposed that advocates for the end of secrecy in adoption policies in order to allow men to have the option to access their biological children and vice-versa. These shifts in fathers' behaviour to become more present in their fatherhood roles has resulted in tensions, however, and continues to be controversial (Gregory & Milner, 2011). Fathers in the United Kingdom are pushing for a balance in the 'breadwinner' and 'carer' role with regards to a more father-sensitive legislation and call to reduce long working hours, addressing the inadequate financial paternity leave compensation packages (Gregory & Milner, 2011). Though this is still a controversial matter, there has been evidence of behavioural changes from fathers reducing their working hours or requesting flexitime after the birth of their child (Gregory & Milner, 2011). In South Africa, legislation has changed for fathers in two areas. Historically, unmarried fathers had no automatic parental rights to their children and had to apply through courts for access, custody or guardianship (Makhanya, 2021). This changed in 2010 when the new Children's Act

stipulated that married and unmarried fathers now gain automatic rights and responsibilities if they are the biological father and lived with the mother at the time of the child's birth; or have consented to be identified as the father and have paid maintenance and cultural damages (Makhanya, 2021). The second favourable change that has been made in the legislation is that since January 2019, working South African men are entitled to 10 days of paternity leave after the birth of their child (Makhanya, 2021). This paternity leave is paid by the South African Unemployment Insurance Fund at a rate of 66% of the father's earnings (Makhanya, 2021).

In France, it has been recorded that 69% of men in 2007 took up the option of extended leave (Gregory & Milner, 2011). Reforms that advocate for resident and non-resident fathers' involvement in children's education such as being sent school reports regardless of separation between the couple has seen a shift in father involvement (Gregory & Milner, 2011). There have also been men in France who have contested the preferred legal judgments that often keep the child with their mother after a separation (Gregory & Milner, 2011). These men have pursued shared residence orders through organizations that help them reject the above-mentioned preferred judgments in the legal system (Gregory & Milner, 2011). This speaks to 'new fatherhood' and depicts a significant shift in how men are starting to position themselves with regards to fatherhood, advocating against traditionally constructed primary childcare as being maternal.

2.2.3. Masculinity and fatherhood in the media

Gregory and Milner (2011) define the social construction of fatherhood as the "cultural characterization or popular images of fathers" (p. 590). The media has played a significant role in perpetuating specific discourses about fatherhood. Depictions of fatherhood in celebrity environments have been notorious for marital breakdown, repeated infidelity, substance abuse and other forms of excess (Gregory & Milner, 2011). This has contributed to what scholars refer to as the "crisis" narrative that dominates public and academic discussions of fatherly involvement, that tends to depict men in simplistic and stereotypical terms as "irresponsible" and "failing" in their social role as "providers" (Dawson, 2023; Pichler, 2023). In South Africa headlines such as "SA: A Nation of Deadbeat Dads" (Independent Online, 2013) and "How the 'tragic phenomenon' of deadbeat dads is having a detrimental effect on society" (News 24, 2021) attest to the existence of this 'crisis narrative' around fatherhood in South African society.

The consequence of this “crisis” narrative is that we know a lot about what Black un(der)employed fathers are not doing and little about what they are doing to maintain ties with their children under conditions of widespread economic uncertainty.

Perhaps in response to critique around how media was portraying fathers, glossy magazines and Hollywood films have begun to celebrate fathers’ attempts to find their own way of fathering in the absence of a mother after a bereavement, divorce or unplanned parenthood, challenging pessimistic notions of family breakdown and lack of generational transmission of values (Gregory & Milner, 2011; Lupton & Barclay, 1997; O’Brien, 2005 & Segal, 2007). Media publications have also been seen to publish idealised depictions of celebrity fathers such as sportsmen and others, that promote family values as a man being affectionate towards his partner and children, as opposed to offering guides on how to be a father (Gregory & Milner, 2011). Gregory and Milner (2011), Lupton and Barclay, (1997), O’Brien 2005, and Segal (2007) discuss the media’s role in shifting the social construction of fatherhood where traditional gender roles have been challenged with portrayals of ‘new fatherhood’ that depict affective and caring dimensions of fathers.

A recent example of this is the Netflix film ‘Fatherhood’. Afifulloh (2022) offers thoughts on this film, investigating how a man constructs his masculinity identity as a father and caregiver, exploring potential changes in gender relations not only within the family but in society. Notably, Afifulloh’s (2022) paper explores the meaning of American fatherhood as represented in the film, however it more broadly draws attention to how fatherhood is shaped by the choices and constraints in which gender is lived/performed, and which are embedded in the domains of home and paid work. While the film provides an illustration, the paper makes a strong argument for how currently masculinity is being redefined (Afifulloh, 2022). The study on the film showcases how fatherhood is not only culturally negotiable but also an attractive and desirable conceptualization of masculinity (Afifulloh, 2022).

Where a Black man is constructed as a multitasking father, an admirable domestic hero, and perhaps a 'super dad' who deserves to be adored, what is depicted is how a man must have his authority as the breadwinner but also have the attribute of femininity by showing his emotional side (Afifulloh, 2022). In the film Fatherhood, a Black man must divide the focus of his life between taking care of his daughter and his work as a professional who has a high position in a company, which is a shift from the usual assumed stereotype of Black men depicted in negative images and practices (Afifulloh, 2022). Furthermore, this representation is a positive

shift away from a Black man being synonymous with a rough and uneducated life, reconstructed into a man who is highly educated, successful in his career and work, and successful as a single parent (Afifulloh, 2022). This reinforces the changing roles and discourses of men and women in the family, as in the last decade men's involvement as caregivers has increased, particularly in western culture (Afifulloh, 2022).

In instances where fathers have published books and written for magazines, there has been a trend to focus on the difficulties of fatherhood with regards to not being experts in child-care, as well as the feeling of not having authoritative guidance on how to be a father (Gregory & Milner, 2011). An example is Michael Chabon's (2010) publication where he reflects on not having read a lot from men in his generation about the fatherhood experience which made fatherhood feel like 'uncharted territory', but also inspired him to write a book about fatherhood (Gregory & Milner, 2011).

Coltart and Henwood (2012), Dermott (2003), Featherstone (2009), Henwood and Procter (2003) discuss the dominance of sociocultural narratives that pronounce a new era of fatherhood, as men seem to be shifting the previously prevalent models of fatherhood-the father as the absent breadwinner- towards new hegemonic values that place weight on a fathers' active involvement in their child's life. Studies on masculinity have begun looking at when, how and why men's subjectivities differ from dominant formations of masculinity and fatherhood, and the tensions in fatherhood when 'crossing over' into 'feminine' spaces of nurturing (Coltart & Henwood, 2012). There is a grappling with identity within a context that is usually differentiated by gender emerging in the literature (Aitken, 2009). In South African academic literature there has also been critique of the stereotyping of South African fathers as disinterested (Enderstein & Boonzaier, 2015). Instead, fatherhood has been recognised as a site where dominant masculinities can be challenged and alternative masculinities developed (Enderstein & Boonzaier, 2015). Stereotypes are being countered with reports of some men actively renegotiating their identities and committing to taking responsibility for their children (Enderstein & Boonzaier, 2015; Mukuna, 2020).

2.2.4. Masculinity and fatherhood identities

Coltart and Henwood (2012) make reference to Aitken's (2009) work that highlights the emotional work fathers take on and the ways in which this is negotiated, modified and changed

as they navigate between social constructions of masculinity and fatherhood. In their study, Coltart and Henwood (2012) found that men were attracted to the new potential created within discourses of new or modern fatherhood, and that men tended to be enthusiastic about taking up modern fatherhood, but simultaneously struggled to balance this with dominant discourses of masculinity. An example of this were fathers who were seen to move back and forth between the masculine 'father as a provider, protector, and visibly and actively involved in public life' and the rejection of 'macho' masculinity through high involvement fathering and engagement in 'motherly' fathering (Coltart & Henwood, 2012). However, these disparate identities were often experienced as threatening to each other. Lupton and Barclay (1997), Henwood and Procter (2003), Plantin et al. (2003), and Robb (2004) explore men's perceptions of fatherhood identities in the context of changing masculinities. Notably, these studies highlight that why individual men invest in particular discourses and how social meanings interact with the personal and emotional impact of being a father has yet to be addressed in the literature (Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Henwood & Procter, 2003; Plantin et al., 2003). It is the intention of this study to fill this particular gap in relation to absent fathers attempting to reconnect with their children.

Pichler (2023) conducted a study that focused on (double) voicing/heteroglossia and discourse in relation to fatherhood and masculinity, that was also concerned with evaluating language and identity more generally. The focus was to capture the interplay between micro-and macro levels of socio-culturally and interactionally constructed identity; the interplay between language and identity positioning in relation to a range of different discourses, including the father as provider and the intimate/involved father (Pichler, 2023). The young men in this study aligned themselves both with more traditional discourses of responsible fatherhood and with the dominant 21st century model of intimate and involved fatherhood (Pichler, 2023). However, these constructions of fatherhood were also competing with another 33 identities, such as virile masculinity or 'bad boy identity'. Social class membership and (lack of) financial security was very much on the minds of the young men in the group, and the hardship of the role of 'father as provider' was felt acutely (Pichler, 2023). At the same time as experiencing this responsibility as a major source of stress, being with children was also presented as a means to destress; spending time with kids allowed fathers 'another place' to forget (Pichler, 2023). Fathers in this study emphasised that caring fatherhood is positioned as the norm in this group, providing support for the argument that caring fatherhood in itself has become hegemonic (Pichler, 2023). To qualify for hegemonic masculinity, it is no longer enough to be rational,

goal-oriented, career oriented, and disciplined, today, men must also show their readiness to engage in childcare, demonstrate a child orientation, and a willingness to live up to the ideal of gender equality (Pichler, 2023). This new masculinity is difficult to achieve when men are short of material resources and positioned as 'deadbeat' in public and policy discourse i.e. Black and working class fatherhood. For men who are not "at the top of the masculine pecking order" this new fatherhood can be unattainable, despite enthusiastic alignment with more recently hegemonized norms around caring/involved fatherhood (Pichler, 2023). This captures the complex, dynamic and ambiguous nature of hegemonic masculinity/ies and the importance of the contexts and cultures in which they are negotiating their fatherhood identities.

Scheibling (2020) speaks about how conventional understandings and expectations of masculinity can act as obstacles to being an involved father. His study focused on North American fathers who blog and discuss issues around how they perceive and redefine their own manhood, how they define their roles as fathers, and how they teach their children about gender (Scheibling, 2020). Being a caregiver has been central to these dad bloggers' identities, and defining manliness through paid work, competition, and physical toughness is considered reductive, problematic, and something they wish to explicitly challenge (Scheibling, 2020). Schieiblin's (2020) study, which focused on men who are committed to caregiving, highlighted how they have turned to the Internet to connect with other fathers, share stories about parenting, and seek out advice and interpersonal support, which in and of itself, is a shift in the broad topic of what is considered manly and masculine, as emotional suppression is often part of traditional masculinity (Scheibling, 2020). These fathers advocate for issues such as the importance of their children seeing them cry and addressing mental well-being as part of shifting what is considered masculine (Scheibling, 2020). It is important to note however, that majority of these dad bloggers appear to be white, heterosexual, married, and class privileged, so this is still a small group of fathers (Scheibling, 2020).

Sikweyiya (2022) conducted a study on South African mineworkers and their constructions of masculinity. The men in this study emphasised the responsibility of straddling the rural home and work spaces and negotiating the masculinity-related expectations that were specific to each space (Sikweyiya, 2022). Tension was identified in the construction of masculinity for poor Black African men, where they experienced difficulty using their meagre salaries to support themselves in the temporary space of work while also providing materially for their families and children who have remained in the rural home space (Sikweyiya, 2022). While away from

their families, some men constructed and performed hypermasculinity, aligning with expectations and opportunities in the temporary space of work (Sikweyiya, 2022). This performance of hypermasculinity and other exaggerated masculinities, which has been found to be common in resource-poor communities in South Africa and elsewhere, oftentimes leads to the detriment of the men who ascribe to role expectations (Sikweyiya, 2022).

The mining context where the men worked and resided was viewed as a temporary space for the purpose of generating income and subsequently transferring income to the 'real home' space to provide for their families. In the 'real home' space ideal masculinity was defined by establishing a family, being a provider, and having certain possessions, like livestock, all of which bestowed upon men a desirable masculine identity and respectable social standing among other men in the home community (Sikweyiya, 2022). These men's definition of manhood in the rural home space emphasized leadership, being accomplished, establishing and providing for a family–aspects of masculinity that have been associated with traditional patriarchy (Sikweyiya, 2022).

In the temporary space of work, in which men were deprived of external symbols corresponding to ideal masculinity (like having a family and livestock) that are present in the 'real home' context, men described a reconfigured masculinity (Sikweyiya, 2022). This reconfigured masculinity was constructed through the demonstration of monetary prowess and behavioural performances strikingly akin to the concept of hypermasculinity, such as spending money publicly (e.g. in bars/taverns), having sexual relationships with multiple women, drinking alcohol, and similar performative gestures that gained admiration and recognition by women and other men in mining environments (Sikweyiya, 2022).

2.3. Psychoanalytic understandings of fatherhood

2.3.1. Introduction

Psychoanalytic theory is still developing its voice with regards to contemporary understandings of the subjective father experience, as much of the focus has been on motherhood. This sub-section of the literature review explores the shift from orthodox theoretical underpinnings of the father, using Freud's texts that focus on a traditional, absent and punitive father, to more contemporary psychoanalytic theories that discuss a more active father. It briefly highlights the absence of focus on paternal ambivalence and discusses how fatherhood subjective identities

are not only interlinked with paternal ambivalence, but constructions of masculinity as well. The utility of Klein's concept of the paranoid-schizoid position when examining male development of fatherhood identity is also explored. The section then moves on to look at the intergenerational transmission of parenting experiences in psychoanalytic literature, focusing on the role of projective identification and attachment theory's concept of mentalisation. Lastly, the gap in recent literature with regards to conceptualising fatherhood is highlighted.

2.3.2 Shifting theorization of fatherhood: From Oedipus to paternal subjectivity

There are patriarchal assumptions that have shaped psychoanalytic concepts of fatherhood, such as the symbolic power of the father (Freeman, 2008). Tensions between the symbolic presence and substantive absence of fathers is, in fact, built into the heart of orthodox psychoanalytic theory; enshrined in Freud's foundational concept of the Oedipus complex (Freeman, 2008). Western constructions of fatherhood formed in early psychoanalytic literature appear based on Freud's (1900) harsh, punitive portrayals of fathers (Diamond, 2017). One way this was depicted was through Freud's explanation of the Oedipus complex, where a father was understood to play an important role in boundary setting and discipline and this was considered essential for the development of a child's identity (Freud, 1923). However, Freud (1923) also suggested that one of the most significant identifications a child experiences is that of primary identification, which is an emotional attachment in early life to ones' caregivers. During the transition into fatherhood, if a man has experienced 'good enough' caregiving in his childhood, this type of internal identification can be experienced between him and his child (Davids, 2002). In the case of previously absent fathers, consideration of the oedipal complex as well as primary identification may be disrupted (Freud, 1900). In some cases, failure of this may result in the child trying to disidentify with their father and consciously and unconsciously reject them (Greenson, 1954).

The paternal function, which is made up of a set of roles traditionally taken up by fathers, contributes to the mental and emotional development of a child (Davies & Eagle, 2013). The father is seen as a secondary attachment object who plays a role as separating third, facilitator of mental structure and capacity to think, facilitator of affect management as well as provider of psychic safety (Davies & Eagle, 2013). The process of separating third is one that cannot occur without the intra-psychic presence of a third object (Davies & Eagle, 2013; Ogden,

1994), in this case being a father who plays a role in what Freud (1900) termed as the triangular relationship. A child is thought to gain the capacity to think once 'the third' facilitates resolution of psychic separation and the oedipal triangular relationship (Davies & Eagle, 2013). This process involves the child creating a space for both their mother and father, mentalization and symbolically internalizing an unconscious paternal representation which will influence capacities such as those for intimacy and shape them as adults (Davies & Eagle, 2013; Diamond, 2017; Lansky, 1992). Furthermore, fathers play a significant role in frustration and anxiety tolerance as they can bring in a masculine element that is different to that of the mother (Davies & Eagle, 2013). Liebman and Abell (2000) investigated how shifts from Freud's 'punitive' understanding of paternal influence, toward a consciously supportive position during child development can lessen pressure on the mother. This is seen in how fathers are able to become holders of negative feelings from a child towards a mother as well as the negative feelings from the mother towards the child, in a manner that preserves this dyad as well as offers a child psychic safety (Davids, 2002; Davies & Eagle, 2013; Perkel, 2006; Rodica, 2019; Winnicott, 1987).

However, the portrayal of fathers and fatherhood within psychoanalytic theory has developed and changed over the years (Diamond, 2017; Palkowitz & Hull, 2008). An example of this change has been the definition of 'father' shifting from support to the mother to being the equivalent of 'secondary caregiver' which has shifted psychoanalytic identity norms (Diamond, 2017). Baradon (2009) notes the under-representation of fathers psychoanalytically as an object and attachment figure and highlights the lack of theorising of the father as having a central place in child development beyond the Oedipus complex. More fathers are becoming active in their children's lives which has impacted expectations of fathers (Diamond, 2017; Dick, 2011). Taking into consideration these shifts, Palkwitz and Hull (2018) are of the view that the conceptualizing of fatherhood within psychoanalytic literature has not kept up with changing fatherhood identities.

2.3.3 Intergenerational transmission of parenting

The intergenerational transmission of trauma, both personal and collective has been found to occur between generations. Intergenerational experiences of mothering from a psychosocial perspective have been explored in the psychoanalytic literature (Hollway, 2009; Moore, 2013). Hollway (2009) emphasizes the significance of a new mother's relationship with her own mother, and refers to a 'generational echo', in which patterns of relating re-emerge. Local research indicates the significance for mothers of social relationships with older female kin in their developing and evolving experiences and identities as mothers (Blake, 2017; Moore, 2013). The same applies to fathers, most notably in the intergenerational transmission of absent fatherhood, where absent fathers have often been found to have experienced an absent father themselves (Matee, 2016). Langa and Smith (2012) also found that teenage fathers' understanding of fatherhood was influenced by their intergenerational influence of having had absent father figures themselves.

Kellerman (2001) states that through a form of projective identification a parents' difficult feelings and anxieties from past experiences are projected into a child who introjects these feelings and experiences them as if they were his/her own. In the case of absent fatherhood, it is possible that the man's projective identifications of fatherhood that are not worked through, can become introjected into his child during their reconnection process: "It becomes the child's task to mourn, to reverse the humiliation and feelings of helplessness pertaining to the trauma of his forbears" (Volkan, 1997, p. 43). If this is the case, both the father and his child who are involved in the reconnection process of the father-child relationship, may undergo the above-mentioned process. This would require that father and child acknowledge and unpack their individual experiences so-as-to not to continue to let it shape the future. Hollway (2009) is of the view that people draw on their past and present relationships with significant others when identity changes occur. This can be relevant to the father-child relationship and the formation of parental identity (Hollway, 2009).

From a collective trauma perspective, Danieli (1998), Mohatt et al., (2014), and Rosenthal (2002) have discussed historical trauma as a shared collective trauma that is experienced across generations. This concept was originally brought forth to understand experiences of children of Holocaust survivors and perpetrators (Danieli ,1998; Mohatt et al., 2014 & Rosenthal, 2002). With regards to fathering and the 'masculinity crisis' in South Africa, which is characterised by high levels of violence, the political history of the country with its "violent and traumatic

struggles of domination over place, ideology and bodies" has been found to play a profound role in men being absent in their children's lives (Govender & Cartwright, 2021, p. 54). Govender and Cartwright (2021) have also written about how the shame of Apartheid is carried within constructions of Black masculinity and fatherhood. They argue that:

> …unresolved historical traumas have a transgenerational 'haunting' effect on contemporary identities…Focusing on black men who were subjected to a violent and repressive past, we have argued that ghosts of the pre-Apartheid to post-Apartheid modern day South Africa continue to have cumulative impacts on the black male psyche. It is suggested that these past traumas, together with contemporary representations of black masculinity, have led to a deep sense of unresolved shame" (p. 54).

These studies can assist in trying to understand the socio-historical, intergenerational transmission of fathering that is linked to trauma. Mechanisms of transmission have been linked to dissociated emotional experience that manifests in repeated patterns of relating, impaired parenting capacities in traumatized victims, collective memory, and the direct impact of poverty and discrimination that are experienced intergenerationally (Adonis, 2016; Kellerman, 2001).

Briggs (2023) suggests that if the biological male present at conception was either emotionally or physically absent, and the role of father remains vacant because no parent, of either gender or sex, single or couple, is able to fulfil it. This opinion stemmed from his observation of participants in his study whom he saw as struggling to offer paternal function (Briggs, 2023). He goes on to mention important aspects of the role of the father that he feels only the biological father can fulfil, which is suggestive of the idea that the father deep within our minds is male (Briggs, 2023). Briggs (2023) references (Edwards, 2022) work where the role of the father is disused as being occupied by female and male single parents, and heterosexual, gay and lesbian parental couples, and points out the significance of differentiating between the father's role and the paternal role. The occupant of the father's role is the male who was part of the conception of the child and provides a genetic link with the infant, which later becomes a major source of curiosity for the child through life (Briggs, 2023). The paternal role, without the genetic link means that other role holders provide the rest of the paternal functions within the father's role

(Briggs, 2023). In his opinion, this contradiction is a reflection of the psychoanalytic literature that seems presently unable, with a few notable exceptions, to accommodate the role of the father, or the diverse occupants of the paternal role, without making gender neutral, if not gender non-specific (Briggs, 2023). He comments in agreement with the viewpoint that states that the role of the biological father is central within the Oedipus complex, and at other parts that the biological relationship is not important in prohibiting the child's excursions into the parental sexual relationship as he finds that the modern role is diverse (Briggs, 2023).

2.3.4 Paternal ambivalence

While psychodynamic theory has recently noted the importance of theorising maternal subjectivity and acknowledged the ubiquity of maternal ambivalence (Raphael-Leff, 2010), paternal ambivalence has been neglected. Some literature highlights that in numerous studies, new fatherhood presents itself with many contradictions as most men struggle with the idea of their expanding roles and their changed lifeworld's (Spiteri et al., 2023). Many men have described new fatherhood as being a difficult experience, one that requires endurance and patience. Spiteri et al., (2023) discuss how men have reported feeling as though society does not attribute the same importance to new fatherhood as it does to motherhood, and this is exacerbated in maternity settings where men express feeling excluded by the professionals they encounter (Spiteri et al., 2023). This has implications for men's mental health and well-being and the midwife has been identified as a key supportive figure who can help men traverse the transition to fatherhood (Spiteri et al., 2023).

While there is little mention of paternal ambivalence in psychodynamic literature, authors such as Langa (2016) and Robb (2004) are notable exceptions. Langa's (2016) work looks at the multiple factors that influence male subjectivity, and how psychodynamic approaches construct masculinity. He found a psychoanalytic approach helpful with regards to the exploration of men's subjective experiences and identities, as it allows for a focus on their conflicting desires and emotional dynamics (Langa, 2016). Robb (2004) describes paternal ambivalence as being managed through the use of splitting, where aspects of the self that are perceived as not good enough are split off and projected into other fathers that are then perceived as bad and denigrated. Robb (2004) also describes this process being used to manage conflicts between developing father identities and masculine behaviours associated with a pre-fatherhood identity, which the father finds difficult to integrate. These studies help to elaborate the concept of paternal ambivalence, as well as provide insight into men's experiences of father readiness,

experiences of resentment and persecution amongst others (Langa, 2016; Matee, 2016; Raphael-Leff, 2010; Robb, 2004). By exploring the complex interpersonal dynamics of paternal subjectivity, these studies could contribute to the gaps in psychoanalytic literature that do not address mirroring to include fathers more in parenting (Raphael-Leff, 2010).

Paternal ambivalence has also been linked to the difficulty some men experience in navigating representations of themselves as fathers (Berman, 2021). Fathers whose children were in the pre-oedipal phase found have been found to have the mother occupying centre stage in their minds (Berman, 2021). This focus on the mother was filled with anxiety and concern about the mothers physical and psychological health during pregnancy, childbirth and post-partum, as well as her capacity to mother (Berman, 2021). Fathers considered it their duty to care for the mother and, by implication, the baby which led to father's suspending their own needs in order to offer support to the mother who they perceived as being in a greater position of vulnerability and chaosc(Berman, 2021; Berman & Long, 2022). While fathers 'put on a brave face', it was also noteworthy that the fathers really struggled to provide nuanced representations of themselves as fathers, preferring to draw on stereotypical notions of involved fatherhood instead, which the researcher understood as failing to really present a picture of themselves as individuals (Berman, 2021; Berman & Long, 2022). Being a 'good father' meant being physically present for one's child, and the fathers spoke about how important it is for them to play a part in changing nappies and bathing their children, however, Berman (2021) felt that was potentially being missed was that actual presence did not always equate to intrapsychic presence. An example that the researcher used was of one the participants being unable to consider that there may have been other factors in his own internal world that contributed to his difficulty consoling his child, and it being possible to become able to emotionally comfort her, even if he was not as physically present as he would have liked to be (Berman, 2021). With this example, Berman (2021) was drawing our attention to the idea that foregrounding physical availability at times risked ignoring the father's capacity to see himself as a father and being conscious of his own intrapsychic dynamics, ideas, wishes and fears related to being a father.

The researcher also makes reference to how fathers struggled to imagine how the mothers of their children as well as their children viewed them as fathers, which further drove her point that the men in her study struggled to conceptualise themselves as fathers beyond the societal stereotypes. Thus, the notion of involved fatherhood can be problematic at times, as it emphasizes the actual presence or absence of the father for the child, and it does not sufficiently

interrogate the presence and quality of the intrapsychic representation of the self as a father (Berman, 2021; Berman & Long, 2022). Winnicott stated that when the baby looks at the mother, the baby will see himself or herself reflected back, which suggested that the baby starts to get a sense of itself through the eyes of its mother, and this process requires a mother who can see her baby (Berman, 2021). The fathers in this study seemed to require a similar sort of mirroring in order to see themselves as fathers more clearly, however, what was observed was that their experiences differed, as it takes time for a father to become a father and to connect to the baby (Berman, 2021; Berman & Long, 2022). The father's experience was that they felt better able to bond with their baby once the infant was seen to be interactive and responsive in relation to them, which led to feeling seen by their infant, thus able to see himself as a father (Berman, 2021). In this way, it seems like the infant functions as a mirror for the father and that this was the moment at which the father was conceived (Berman, 2021).

2.4 Renegotiation of paternal identities

A number of factors have been found to influence the transition to fatherhood and the development of a paternal identity. Hollway (2009) writes about the psychosocial nature of identity formation, in which identity is mediated by both personal and social factors. In various Black cultures, the transition into fatherhood or fatherhood identity is facilitated by the immediate and extended family; a good male role model that is available to share his moral authority and his upholding of family customs and principles (Lesejane, 2006; Perry, 2009). Men having experienced absent fathers themselves or negative childhood experiences of fatherhood, often describe having consciously and unconsciously internalized and modelled physical and emotional unavailability as fathers (Davids, 2002; Matee, 2016). This means that men who have had satisfactory childhood experiences and internalized 'good-enough' emotional, psychological, physical and social caregivers, will develop a good sense of identity that positively influences their transition into fatherhood (Davids, 2002; Devault, 2008; Hofferth, 2000). A parent's confidence in their parenting skills and their long-term behavioural patterns have been found to be influenced by their own experience of security as a child (Abidin, 1992; Dallaire & Weinraub, 2005; Kretchmar & Jacobvitz, 2002; Schroeder & Mowen, 2012). Harland (2015) found that in instances where men were struggling to fit the 'good father' expectation, a 'troubled past' was used as explanation. In cases where fathers

were considered as delinquent adolescents with severe adjustment problems, there was uncertainty and insecurity as to how they will adjust to fatherhood (Harland, 2015).

Early identification of paternity has also been found to influence the development of a paternal identity. Various studies conducted in the USA and Ireland by Ashley et al. (2006), Ferguson and Hogan (2004), Garberset et al. (2006), Lloyd et al. (2003), and Mincy et al. (2005) have addressed the significance of early identification of paternity, inclusion during birth and subsequent processes, as well as fathers being 'held' adequately whilst fostering involvement. The need for support during the transition to fatherhood appears crucial. Harland (2015) speaks about the significance of a father having support and someone to share fatherhood with such as their spouse or partner or even child welfare. This could be significant for an absent father who tries to reconnect with their child, even in co-parenting form. The support of the child's mother in the transition to fatherhood is also highlighted, as despite shifting expectations of fathers, the majority of fathers maintain an overarching belief that children need their mothers more than their fathers in their younger years (Brannen & Nilsen, 2006).

Coltart and Henwood (2012) and Lupton and Barclay (1997) refer to fathers' ability to show affection for children openly as becoming part of the late 20th century masculine disposition. There appears to be a need for fathers to grapple with changing 'private masculinities', in changed working patterns, and increased caregiving responsibilities (Coltart & Henwood, 2012). The development of a paternal identity also appears to require a retracing of historical fatherhood patterns. In order to meet current fathering expectations many men have had to commit to shifting away from childhood family microclimates such as 'a father as a distant authoritarian' in order to accommodate the emotional work of fatherhood; this brings about subjective change, such as 'internal pressure' to create 'child time' in their busy lives (Coltart & Henwood, 2012). This difficulty may depict the struggle with which fathers who attempt to become present fathers may have to grapple (Coltart & Henwood, 2012).

A few local studies allow for optimism about the positive ways in which men are navigating through socio-economic, gendered and generational barriers to present fatherhood. Shefer et al. (2010) speak about the importance of understanding the complexity of social pressures that accompany young men's formation of their masculine identities, in order to develop interventions that aim to empower young men to develop non-violent, non-abusive, less risky versions of masculinity in favour of masculinities that are more life affirming and life enhancing to the benefit of all. This outlook was in line with shifting the narrative of young

fatherhood as well as challenging popular narratives that position men as largely absent fathers (Hendricks et al., 2010; Shefer et al., 2010). This perspective goes on to emphasize how it is imperative to consider the social and historical contexts in which these young men wanted to become fathers in order to explain both their choices and reactions to impending and actual fatherhood (Hendricks et al., 2010). For an example, poverty has been identified as a risk factor for early fatherhood in that it provides a public recognition of claims to masculinity built around 'ownership' of female bodies, whilst many succumb to this socioeconomic challenge, some of these young men still aspire to be 'different' from their own fathers (Hendricks et al., 2010). Young men were found to resist following the model of their own fathers, and hoped to embrace alternative visions of adult masculinity and a more engaged and present fatherhood (Hendricks et al., 2010). Langa's (2012) study is referenced where he discusses how young fathers were able to admire their mothers and viewed them as positive role models for positive adulthood and respectable citizenship, which challenged the traditional psychological notions of the importance of a father figure for their fathering (Hendricks et al., 2010).

The many changes that fathers may experience in adulthood will not only have an impact on their emotional, intellectual and social capacities, but on the ways in which they will be attuned to their children and how they raise them (Herland et al., 2015). Schroeder and Mowen (2012) expand on factors such as divorce, family structure, occupational changes, job loss or the onset economic distress as impacting paternal approaches. Brannen and Nilsen (2006) found higher levels of men's involvement in their children's lives in households with two incomes as childcare responsibilities can be shared. Their study investigated four generations of fathers, considered multiple factors such as employment, level of income, level of education, marriage, inter and intrapersonal relationship with fatherhood and the age at which they became fathers (Brannen & Nilsen, 2006). Fathers spoke about how their perceptions on fatherhood changed over time due to these above-mentioned factors (Brannen & Nilsen, 2006). Fathers from an older generation discussed how they experienced fatherhood and parenting when their children were much older as opposed to fathers from a more contemporary era, who spoke about fatherhood in the here and now with fathering their children whilst much younger due to enabling societal factors (Brannen & Nilsen, 2006). These intergenerational transmissions of fatherhood may have an impact on the reconnection process moving forward where one needs to consider the intersection of structural and cultural changes.

Stelle and Sheehan (2011) have explored older father's relationships with their adult children with regards to how older men assess what they consider to be advantages and disadvantages of fatherhood, as well as how their level of paternal maturity influences their perceptions of fatherhood. Stelle and Sheehan's (2011) study was particularly focused on fathers and their adult children, however, the principles addressed in their study could offer some thought for the proposed study. What may be important for fathers who reconnect with their children, is to place an emphasis on their connectedness as well as respect for their children's autonomy as they may reconnect with them when they have navigated their way through life and are much older (Stelle & Sheehan, 2011).

Stelle and Sheehan (2011) define this as paternal maturity which is "capturing fathers' ability to simultaneously balance needs for connectedness and separateness in relationships with their adult children" (p. 46), which they consider to be necessary for fathers to have meaningful relations with their children, where they can reframe and redefine them. This would also include a father being able to realize their children's changing needs (Stelle & Sheehan, 2011). This may be significant for fathers who reconnect with their children, depending at what age they last saw their child. For example, a father who reconnects with their child in their teenage years, may need to think about the needs of a teenager as opposed to an infant and what it means to form a connection with them during a phase of their life where they require some autonomy versus total dependence.

Fathers who reconnect with their children may experience a number of fears and anxieties, however, an encouraging view that Nydegger and Mitteness (1996) hold, as seen in Stelle and Sheehan (2011), is that mid-life may be the prime of fatherhood, as the gains of this phase comes with friendship and companionship that may override the roles of authority, provider and teacher that they may have missed out on in earlier years. Furthermore, individuals who are mature are likely to have a positive sense of self, warmth in relation to others, emotional acceptance, self-insight, realistic perceptions of self and others, increased ability to create intimate relations, amongst other qualities (Stelle and Sheehan, 2011). This is based on the assumption that fathers who attempt to reconnect with their children would have tried to develop these parts of themselves or be open to do so, which places them in a more favourable position for the process.

More recently, some studies have looked at reconnection processes with previously absent fathers, however, most of them are concerned with incarcerated fathers, fathers who have been

estranged for employment purposes such as being deployed in the military, or fathers reconnecting after their authoritarian or abusive parenting style had been questioned (see Birch, 2022; Blankenship, 2023; Charles et al., 2019; Daniels 2023; Rocker, 2022; Sabey, 2022; Storer, 2023). Studies that have focused on incarcerated fathers who reconnect with their children offer useful insights in understanding the experiences of men being separated from their children and what subjectively transpires for them when they gain the opportunity to reconnect with their children. There is still little to no literature on fathers who have been absent and estranged from their children for other reasons and have attempted or successfully reconnected with their children.

Charles et al., (2019) investigated Black incarcerated fathers in the United States who, upon exiting prison, return to their families and communities. They found that their re-entry process as a parent, and their involvement with their children after prison is not well understood (Charles et al., (2019). This study discussed some of the challenges that this reconnection process navigates through such as the numerous negative child outcomes, being poorer health, academic, social, and behavioural outcomes in addition to aspects of cumulative disadvantage such as poverty, residential instability, and food insecurity, that is associated with parental incarceration (Charles et al., 2019; Turney & Marín, 2021). Furthermore, they found that the father-child relationship was a protective factor in reducing recidivism rates for fathers re-entering the community after incarceration (Charles et al., 2019). It has been identified that it was the quality of father-child relationships maintained during a paternal incarceration that was as a key predictor of relationship quality upon the father's re-entry (Charles et al., 2019; Turney & Marín, 2021.)

While partial father absenteeism caused by incarceration is not the main focus of this study, the findings on the reconnection process between previously incarcerated fathers and their children may be helpful to shed light on the topic of reconnection. An important finding was that caregivers (mothers and grandmothers) played a pivotal role in facilitating reconnection, where they either served as a gatekeeper in maintaining an ongoing relationship between fathers and children or prohibiting contact all together (Charles et al. 2019). Maternal gatekeeping has been an issue that has often come up in studies that look at father absence (Charles et al. 2019).

For previously incarcerated fathers, successful reintegration was dependent on leveraging positive relationships with family members and peers; however, these relationships were confounded by past experiences such as familial disputes, prior history of criminal activity or

drug use, or housing and employment instability (Charles et al. 2019). Furthermore, Charles et al., (2019) found that what led to unsuccessful reconnection were unrealistic expectations such as an inability or mismatch in meeting desired needs for financial, housing, health, or social support. This speaks to the intricate relationships between mothers, children, and incarcerated fathers as some mothers try to control and regulate fathers' access to their children, and fathers viewed their relationships with their children and the child's mother as intertwined (Charles et al., 2019). In Turney and Marín's (2021) study, it was found that upon their fathers' release, children and fathers could now partake in activities that had not been allowed during incarceration, and some children commonly expressed happiness about having their fathers physically back in their lives and excitement about seeing their fathers daily. Upon release, father-child relationships were further reestablished as contact increased in frequency and this reestablishing of relationships via contact offered children the opportunity to find comfort in unstable situations (Turney & Marín, 2021). This is an example of how despite challenging and painful circumstances reparations are possible.

In some instances, fathers retained a fatherhood identity, and this can be understood within a framework that posits that the identities most salient to an individual's sociohistorical context (i.e., those that are a result of family schema and established parental expectations) shape the way men view themselves as fathers both while they are incarcerated and during the re-entry period (Anthis, 2006). In other words, despite the ways in which prisons can detrimentally influence individuals to adopt a criminal identity (Little, 1990), fathers in prison can also maintain, develop, and demonstrate strong personas as parents, which provides them with an alternative identity to that of offender or prisoner (Meek, 2011). After release, this identification as father over ex-prisoner or ex-inmate can also transfer to the community context. On the other hand, Jones's (2019) study on Black incarcerated fathers and paternal identity found that fathers in that study sometimes requested for their families not to visit them even being in a local jail. This was linked to how fathers experience feelings of ambivalence and shame when their children view them in a setting which does not represent or enhance positive fathering ideals (i.e., being responsible, following rules). These feelings of ambivalence and shame are what sometimes led to unsuccessful or unpursued reconnections.

2.5 Situating this study

Anthropological and sociological studies by Draper and Harpending (1982), East et al. (2006), Harper and McLanahan (2004), Lamb (1997) and Lamb (2004), McLanahan et al. (2013), and Padi et al. (2014) have investigated absentee fatherhood, explored various definitions as well as its casual factors and its effects on child development. Hunter (2006), Khunuou (2006), Lemay et al. (2010), Matee (2016), Ratele (2012) have looked at how absent fathers construct their identities, the factors that contribute to their absenteeism and the meanings they draw from this. Lesejane (2006), Liebman and Abell (2000), Madhaven et al. (2015), Mkhize (2006), Makusha and Richter (2015), Mavungu et al. (2013), Nathane-Taulela and Nduna (2014), Nduna (2014), Nduna (2015), and Perry (2009) have explored the effects of culture, social factors and the role of interpersonal relationships on absentee fatherhood in South Africa. Langa (2012), Langa (2015), and Morrell (2006) have looked at absenteeism in relation to black masculinity. Richter et al. (2012) and Rienks et al. (2011) have conducted studies that focused on low-income father involvement, the co-parenting relationship and early paternity detection.

What can be gathered from all these studies is the complexity of fatherhood as a concept and that idealization of fatherhood seems to worsen the effects of fatherlessness. Societal prescriptions with regards to what a father should be often means that the importance of the father outside of a nuclear family is missed. Fathers feel blamed for deficits or negative effects on the child. Contextual and cultural reasons behind fathers being absent may need consideration, rather than a blaming perspective being taken. African constructions of fatherhood versus western perspectives differ and some Black fathers feel that they play their role and are present in a manner that is not acknowledged by society. There is no single template for fatherhood, this all depends on the time, the context and the shifting beliefs around masculinity.

There are little to no South African studies that document reconnection experiences from the fathers' perspectives. If father absenteeism is going to be adequately addressed, it is important that research expand understandings of the perspectives of these men themselves, their psychological experiences and how this is influenced and connected to their social contexts. It is the hope that this study will be one of many studies that begin to shed light on this topic.

Chapter Three - Methodology

3.1 Research questions:

The aim of this study was to explore Black South African men's experiences of reconnecting with their previously estranged children after previously being absent from their lives. In relation to this aim, the following research questions were posed:

- What are men's subjective experiences of attempting to reconnect with their estranged children?
- What are men's conscious and unconscious motivations for wanting to reconnect with their children after having been an absent father?
- What psychic defenses are used by these fathers and how do they position themselves in relation to societal discourses on absent and present fatherhood?
- How do these fathers understand their experiences in relation to their socio-cultural contexts, including the role of their own experiences of having been fathered in this process?
- What is the process of identity negotiation involved in attempting to become more present fathers?

3.2 Research Design

In order to answer the research questions, qualitative approach was used. Research methods serve as the foundation of scientific inquiry, guiding scholars in the systematic exploration of phenomena and the generation of knowledge (Dehalwar & Sharma, 2024). Qualitative research focuses on exploring and understanding the complexities of human experiences, behaviors, and social phenomena through non-numerical data (Dehalwar & Sharma, 2024). The crucial characteristics of qualitative research include in-depth Exploration of the subject matter through interviews, focus groups, and participant observation to gather rich, descriptive data (Dehalwar & Sharma, 2024). The design focuses on subjectivity and context by acknowledging the subjective nature of human experiences and considers the influence of context on behaviours and perceptions (Dehalwar & Sharma, 2024). Qualitative research designs have an emergent design, which allow researchers to adapt their approach based on ongoing analysis

and findings(Dehalwar & Sharma, 2024). Lastly, they typically involve smaller sample sizes, allowing for a detailed examination of individual cases where most qualitative researchers do not consider generalization a problem of interest but rather they focus on a dynamic and exploratory approach that aims to understand the complexities of human experiences, behaviors, and social phenomena (Scârneci-Domnișoru, 2024).

3.3 Research approach and theoretical orientation

A qualitative, psychosocial approach which drew on both social constructionism and psychoanalytic understandings was chosen for this study (Hollway & Jefferson, 1997; 2008; 2009; 2013). Hollway's (2006) use of the term 'psychosocial' assumes the presence of a psychoanalytic subject that is part of a unique life history constructed by anxiety-and desire-provoking life events that transform internal reality. Hollway (2006) argues that unconscious defensive activities affect and are affected by discourses and systems of meaning, which are intersubjective processes that are influenced by the people around us. Frosh (2003) believes that a psychosocial approach regards an individual's subjectivity as emerging from the social sphere and evaluates ideological factors in psychology. Frosh (2003) makes the example of a human being as a bounded subject of biology, psychology and the social simultaneously, where an individual is not reduced to one or the other. By this Frosh means that the individual is constructed by their social class, gender or race in a manner that the social is the social is not 'bracketed off' (Frosh, 2003). It is rare in psychological literature to observe the individual and society as a seamless entity as they are often traditionally differentiated, and it is the purpose of a psychosocial approach to consider them as closely connected (Frosh, 2003; Saville-Young, 2009). This approach intends to assist in resolving the struggle between the individual as being seen as either solely 'personal' or solely comprised by their social class, race, gender, etcetera and rather focuses on the relationship between the personal and the social (Frosh, 2003). This approach offers a language for studies that seek not to reduce their understanding to either sociology or to psychology (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008). Contemporary psychosocial studies focus on conceptualizing and researching a type of subject that is both social and psychological, which is constituted in and through its social formations, yet is still granted agency and internality (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008).

Within a psychosocial approach to research either Lacanian or object relations theory are used to explain internal psychic formations and concepts such as projection, internalization and identification (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008). While other useful psychosocial studies on

masculinity have used a Lacanian framework (Frosh, 2002), the current study chose to use object relations theory as the psychodynamic lens through which to view fatherhood, as this theory offers useful understandings of the intergenerational transmission of early relational patterns and psychic defence mechanisms (Frosh, 2003; Saville-Young, 2009).

In recent years, 'psychosocial studies' have been viewed as psychoanalysis' way of re-inserting itself into the social sciences as a discourse that can explore how social context impacts one's psychological experiences (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008). When utilised alongside an awareness of context, psychodynamic theory has been found to be valuable in qualitative studies that aim to explore masculinity and gender; allowing for exploration of what it means to be a male subject from both social and psychological perspectives, including analysis of external and internal behavioural processes and how these interact and influence each other (Langa, 2016). Langa (2016) suggests that psychodynamic theory can be a useful theoretical tool of analysis understanding gender and sexual identities, in that it allows for the identification of contradictory desires, conflicts, and emotional compromises in the negotiation of both hegemonic and subordinated forms of masculinity. This makes this approach relevant for this specific study, as constructions of fatherhood have subliminal links to masculinity and gender (Langa, 2016). Object relations theory's focus on intrapsychic experience meant that this approach could be tailored for the topic of fatherhood as the aim was to address the lived aspects of these men subjectivity.

Psychosocial researchers draw on psychoanalytic theory in order to understand and explain how an individuals' relations and actions, and the discourses with which they choose to engage, are all substantially influenced by the way their dynamic unconscious defends against anxiety. Hollway and Jefferson (2013) refer to Melanie Klein's (1988) body of work that discusses defences such as splitting and projection. Frosh (2016) also notes defences such as introjection and projection as helpful in understanding how 'inner' and 'outer' lives may be entwined and related. Hollway and Jefferson (2013) talk about how a psychosocial approach offers a theoretical explanation of the rationality and irrationality through which the defences may shape the discourses through which individuals understand themselves, the world and their consequent actions and practices in the world. Mentalization can be defined as "the individual's imaginative capacity to understand and interpret – both implicit and explicitly – behaviour in self and others as conjoined with intentional mental states, such as motives, affects, desires, beliefs, goals, and needs" (Tanzilli et al., 2021, p. 31). It has been found that the capacity to

mentalize is dependent on the primary attachment that one has with their caregivers (Tanzilli et al., 2021). Mentalizing is operationalized through the concept of reflective function, which is important when it comes to emotional regulation, the development of coherent sense of identity, making sense of one's own and others mental states, distinguishing internal and external realities without distortion (Lingiardi & Bornstein, 2017; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2018; Tanzilli et al., 2021). Good reflective functioning correlates with mature defences and specific defensive mechanisms that serve in better regulating affective states (Lingiardi & Bornstein, 2017; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2018; Tanzilli et al., 2021).

Harland (2015), Venn (2009) and Wetherrell (2012) state that psychosocial theorizing cuts across sociology, psychology and social psychology, with the aim to bring interdisciplinary understandings to theorizing interrelationships between the emotional and social within the socio-cultural, discursive and psychological context. In the current study, this allowed for exploration of how men comprehend and approach fatherhood, and how they are emotionally impacted by structural or discursive mechanisms. This draws attention to the ways in which discourse can generate feelings and affects, for example, feelings of mastery, failure and not fitting in (Harland, 2015). It was assumed that the experiences of absent fathers' re-involvement in their children's lives would be influenced by both the participants' personal and social experiences of fatherhood, which would entail the inclusion of factors that fall under macro and meso-levels, such as broader structural forces, social networks, employment, security and autonomy, home circumstances and work-family conflict amongst others (Martikainen et al., 2002). Taking a psychosocial approach to the study thus allowed for the inclusion of external factors such as societal norms and culture, as well as internal aspects such as unconscious motivations of human experience. Together, these enhance psychological and sociological research as this approach provides deeper insight into human constructions (Clarke, 2002; Clarke 2006).

However, the use of psychoanalytic theory in research, and in psychosocial studies, has been critiqued for its insinuation that researchers can 'know' subjects and their subjectivities more than subjects can know themselves (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008). Furthermore, psychoanalysis has been critiqued for its involvement in oppressive power-knowledge practice relations (Hollway, 2008b). Frosh (1987, 2007, 2008) has spoken about his concerns regarding the way in which he feels psychoanalysis tends to lose its social critical power once it is appropriated as a mode of institutional knowledge and should rather be used to unsettle. However, Hollway

(2008b) is of the view that psychoanalysis offers a positive consequence, namely depth of understanding, that counterbalance potential destructiveness. Martikainen et al. (2002) caution against possible methodological problems that psychosocial studies experience when it comes to confounding and contamination of cause and effect. In this regard, Frosh (2008) cautions against instances when psychoanalytic concepts are carried from the clinical to the research environment without meticulous detail being given to different demands and characteristics of these different contexts (Frosh, 2008). Frosh (2008) critiques how concepts, such as countertransference, from clinical settings are used in research as though the situations they develop from are the same, which he believes raises epistemological and practical concerns for research. These cautions have been heeded in this study and the use of psychoanalytic theory to uncover possible unconscious motivations in fathers was thoughtfully and judiciously managed in the analysis of participant narratives. Countertransference responses in the researcher were scrutinised against the researcher's history and subjectivity, and only used as 'evidence' of a participant's pattern of relating when triangulation with other data supported this particular interpretation.

3.3. Participants

After five months, seven men had volunteered to participate in the study and, with the exception of one participant, were each interviewed twice. They were between the ages of 30-45 years old, and all of them had previously been absent from their child/ren's lives, at any point in their child/ren's lives, and had attempted to reconnect or had successfully reconnected with their child/ren. Pseudonyms were used for all fathers, Andile; Bandile; Jabu; Mabena; Sipo; Wandile and Thato. Two of the men had managed to successfully reconnect with their children, whilst the other five had not. While the study defined a successful reconnection as a father managing to be in contact with their child, gain physical access to their child, and be able to foster a consistent interpersonal relationship with them. An unsuccessful reconnection was defined as a father who attempted to gain contact and physical access to their child and was unable to achieve that. The definition of successful and unsuccessful reconnections is likely to differ amongst researchers, however, this study utilised these definitions.

Although homogeneity would have been ideal and may have yielded data that included dynamics that were potentially similar with regards to the father-child relationship, the ages of

the child/ren were kept flexible. The research was exploratory in nature, thus the child/ren's ages during the reconnection process varied between two years old and thirteen years old. It was anticipated that finding a sample was going to be challenging due to the sensitivity of the topic, thus broader inclusion criteria were used. It was also anticipated that the ages of the child/ren would likely elicit diverse data, and this was indeed the case. Participants with younger children tended to focus on the relationship between parents in relation to the child, whereas in those with older children who have more autonomy, reflections focused more on the father-child relationship. The researcher clustered the data and results in line with their similarities and differences to circumvent an overly contrasting understanding of the topic.

The ability to be interviewed in English, for the most part, was an inclusion criterion, however, times that participants swapped into their home languages was noted.

A particular socio-economic status was not included as an exclusionary criterion, as it was anticipated that social mobility changes or class shifts may influence fatherhood experiences and motivations. This was indeed the case, and the socio-economic status of the participants was seen to have shifted over time for many of the participants, most notably between absence and reconnection, which did impact their motivations and their subjective experiences in their reconnection process. It was these tensions that the study was particularly interested in exploring.

The researcher took into consideration that not all fathers may have had enough time to reflect on the experience of reconnecting with their child/ren, which was dependent on how long the reconnection had been for. While it was hoped that the experience of having a space to explore their experiences may have assisted in this reflection, it was anticipated that fathers may be at varying levels of meaning-making about their experiences.

Purposive sampling by posting invitations to participate in the study on social media networks such as Facebook, was used to recruit participants for this study, in addition to snowball sampling. NGO's (Child Maintenance Difficulties in South Africa and Fatherhood Friday) were also approached to try and source participants; however, no participants came from these attempts. Most of the participants were accessed through word-of-mouth snowball referrals, approaching colleagues and acquaintances who assisted in making contact with appropriate participants. Participants who were interviewed were asked if they knew of any other fathers who fit the inclusion criteria of the study. Those who did, were requested to ask if this

person/people might be interested in participating in the study. The interested parties gave their number which was passed down to the researcher who made contact. The participants in this study are introduced at the end of this chapter.

3.4. Data collection and analysis

The psychosocial approach used in this study aimed to capture and explore the social and intra-psychic aspects of the participants' experiences and their identity formation. Hollway and Jefferson (2013) postulate that the inner worlds of research participants cannot be understood without understanding their social experiences as well as the ways in which their inner worlds let them experience an external world. A consideration of both social constructionism and psychodynamics was significant in understanding both absent and present fatherhood as it allowed for the examination of the complex social, cultural, historical, personal, affective and intergenerational components that form the memories, experiences and identities of fathers. Due to the complexity of the process of reconnection, the study took an exploratory approach and was interested in understanding diverse experiences in-depth, with the aim to narrow its focus once data had been collected and analysed.

As mentioned above, each participant was interviewed twice. Hollway and Jefferson's (2013) psychosocial approach using the Free Association Narrative Interview (FANI) was used to guide the collection and analysis of data. The first round of interviews were conducted face-to-face at the participants' homes or in quiet coffee shops, and the second round of interviews were conducted virtually due to the researcher's progression in her pregnancy at the time. While the first interviews lasted approximately 60-90 minutes, the second interviews were shorter, lasting approximately 30 minutes. A semi-structured interview schedule that largely offered space for their narratives was used.

The initial interview was used to explore the fathers' experiences of reconnecting with their children and gaining broad understanding of what the process entailed. Furthermore, the interview involved asking the participants questions that related to their own childhoods and their relationships with their fathers, in order to capture their histories. It focused on their thinking processes with regards to fatherhood and how they transitioned into their father roles, as well as allowed for space to address any issues they brought up. The second interview was used to reflect on the participants' experience of the first interview, clarified issues that may have arisen in the first interview, as well as allowed the participants to share information that

may have come up for them since the last contact was made with the researcher, whilst concluding the interview process.

These interviews aimed to uncover 'faded-out' memories and recollections of emotional encounters by using open-ended questions to elicit narratives (Hollway & Jefferson, 1997). It involved participants talking about their experiences, attentive listening, note taking during the initial narration, and recording of the interviews in order to be able to quote the participant verbatim (Hollway & Jefferson, 1997). The interviews were conducted in English, however, at times participants interchanged their home languages with English. These instances were translated by the researcher in order to capture the nuances in meaning. While the FANI approach is an open-ended technique, in this case the researcher facilitated and gave a few prompts to assist the participants to feel comfortable with the topic and the interviewer, as participants sometimes feared being judged and took longer to open up. Please see the Appendix for the Interview Schedule which contains this list of prompts.

A psychosocial analysis was then conducted on the transcribed interview material. Both intra- and inter-participant analyses were conducted, in order to generate themes within and across participant narratives. This allowed for the uncovering of unique processes within individual case studies and for the identification of common themes across the group of fathers. Narratives were interpreted holistically, with awareness of the participants' contexts.

A psychosocial approach assumes the individual to be 'a defended subject' (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). This suggests that a person's dynamic unconscious is what defends against their anxieties, which influences their behavior, interpersonal relationships and experiences as well as their life stories (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). The data analysis process thus included paying attention to the discourses drawn upon by participants in their narratives. Free associations made by participants were considered central to this process (Hollway & Jefferson, 2008). The analysis of discourses within the narratives involved the identification of more-or-less dominant discourses drawn upon by participants, noting the participants' ambivalent relationships to these, and their positioning of themselves in the narrative in relation to the identified discourses (Frogget & Hollway, 2010).

With regards to their reconnection stories, it was anticipated that the fathers would likely invest in certain discourses linked to their identities as fathers in ways that would secure and

strengthen this identity as opposed to pose a threat to it (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). Thus, the positions that fathers took up at different points of their narratives were noted. The analysis also focused on how psychological and societal-cultural processes were articulated by the participants (Frogget & Hollway, 2010). Gough (2009) highlights the usefulness of the macro understandings that Hollway and Jefferson (2000, 2005) offer as they present a broader cultural range, and engagement with what they term 'scenic understandings', which consider the influence of the context of the interview, and the social positioning of the researcher in relation to the participant.

Hollway and Jefferson (1997) believe that the premise of a psychoanalytic analysis begins with the assumption of a dynamic unconscious as the core subjectivity, thus an interpretive method allows a researcher not to take the participants' responses at face value but rather uses absences and avoidances in their narratives as much as what is said to identify areas of significance. This method searches for coherence and consistency in the narratives, as well as highlighting and working with inconsistencies, sections where less coherence is noted, and contradictions (Hollway & Jefferson, 1997). The participants' capacities to mentalise their own experiences and mentalise the possible reactions and behaviours of others were also noted throughout the narratives. Deficits in mentalising are most often associated with the use of defences such as denial, splitting and projection, which are also considered to distort perception (Lingiardi & Bornstein, 2017).

Use of the researcher's countertransference as data is a technique that has emerged from psychoanalytic theory (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013; Holmes, 2014). This data includes bodily manifestations and/or changes in feelings that are projected from the participants into the researcher (Holmes, 2014). Countertransference is considered a useful research tool in that it makes it possible to draw conclusions about the participants and their defensive processes (Holmes, 2014). Thus, the data analysis process also utilized the transference and countertransference in the relationship between the researcher and the participant. This allowed for the capturing of more embodied and affect-based ways of knowing, which assisted the researcher to deal with the complexities of their participants' inner and intersubjective lives (Hollway, 2015). Froggett and Hollway (2010) assert that the researcher's emotional experience can add to the psychosocial exploration of meanings in participants' narratives, through the lens of symbolized and unsymbolised emotional experience. Rich description and

the use of triangulation in analysis to confirm interpretations were utilized to ensure context-aware use of researcher countertransference.

Themes and patterns that were found in the analysis were then grouped according to larger meta-themes that spoke to the research questions. Particular attention was paid to their experiences of shifting fatherhood identities, the discourses that influenced their attempts at reconnection with their children and how they positioned themselves in relation to these discourses, and how their own experiences of being fathered affected their relationships with their children. The analysis process sought to understand their anxieties and emotional investments before, during and after their reconnection journey.

3.5. Credibility and Trustworthiness

The problem of credibility in qualitative research can be dealt with by ensuring that appropriate operational measures, in terms of the tools, processes and data analysis, are used in order to answer the research questions at hand (Leung, 2015; Shenton, 2004). The reliability, or credibility, as referred to in qualitative studies, was assured through an additional mind(s), in this case my supervisor, to review themes and judge whether they represent the narratives presented (Elliot, Fischer & Rennie, 1999; Flick, 1998). Comparison of the data to itself as well as to existing data from other similar sources also assisted in ensuring the credibility of the research (Leung, 2015; Shenton, 2004). Shenton (2004) explains the issue of credibility by stating that the researcher needs to demonstrate a 'true' picture of the phenomenon under question. Other authors refer to this process as establishing the 'trustworthiness' (Mishler, 2000) of the findings and ensuring that they are 'defensible' (Johnson, 1997). With this said, the researcher needed to be aware that due to fears of judgment, the participants may have limited what they said during the interviews and this in turn may have limited the authenticity of the responses received. As a result of not interviewing the partners and children of the fathers in question, the information received was taken in good faith, but considered in light of Hollway and Jefferson's (2013) notion of the 'defended subject'.

The use of psychoanalytic theory in the analysis of narratives can also pose challenges to credibility, as interpretations of motivations, feelings and patterns of behaviour or speech that may be outside the conscious awareness of participants are made. Tuckett (1998) recommends the use of quality data (narrative), and ensuring that sufficient evidence is presented in the write

up of findings to allow for readers to follow the argumentation. A tentative writing style that includes a few possible understandings to enhance the credibility of psychoanalytic research is also recommended (Tuckett, 1998). Quality data was ensured through the incorporation of a second interview into the data collection process. This offered an opportunity to clarify participant understandings, which afforded more trustworthiness to the research. The extensive use of direct quotes from the participants' narratives to evidence interpretations made by the researcher also allowed for higher levels of trustworthiness.

Holmes (2014) cautions researchers about the concept of interfering countertransference, where the feelings that arise in the researcher are linked to their own history and context, which need disentanglement. Credibility can be enhanced once the researcher accepts that feelings in the researcher are inevitable and may be difficult to identify and acknowledge at times, thus they need to make a conscious effort to look out for these 'interfering' countertransferential elements within the data (Holmes, 2014). Tuckett (1998) emphasises the need for researchers to make an effort to think through and elaborate their assumptions and links made in arguments presented. The researcher was mindful of the limitations of countertransference data and cross compared and corroborated this type of data with evidence emerging from the narratives. The notion that the results of the study are a product of the intersubjectivity of the participants and researcher was firmly held in mind, and the researcher engaged in extensive reflexive processes to understand her own influence on the research process (Holmes, 2014; Tuckett, 1998). The researcher was mindful not to present opinions as factual material based on her countertransference (Tuckett, 1998). Evidence from the narratives and the inclusion of psychoanalytic literature that supported particular arguments are presented (Tuckett, 1998).

3.6. Reflexivity

Reflexivity throughout the research process was emphasised. A substantial amount of self-awareness was required of the researcher in relation to the topic as psychosocial research views reflexivity as essential as the researcher is viewed as being part of the process (Campbell, 2002; Padgett, 2004). Bias was considered inevitable from the researcher and given the sensitivity of the topic, the researcher remained conscious of the societal judgement and stigma surrounding absentee fatherhood, as well as the stigma placed on fathers who attempt to, or return into their children's lives. The researcher made every effort to be respectful of the men's experiences,

viewpoints and opinions (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000). It was important to try to allay any fears around possible judgement in the participants. This was done by beginning the interviews by stating the researcher's awareness of the participants possible concerns and discomfort around discussing such personal and sensitive material. Participants were told that the researcher's only aim was to hear their side of their story in order to better understand the process of reconnecting with children as a father, and not to judge it.

In terms of the reflexivity process, my own grappling with my experiences, views and emotional responses has been a complex and continuous process due to my own history, growing up as the daughter of an absentee father, the fact that I have prior experience researching absentee fatherhood, and the fact that I became a mother during my PhD studies. These have all played a role in how I experienced this research process and have required thought and consideration in order to disentangle my responses from those of the participants in this study.

My Masters thesis, 'Constructions of absentee Black South African fathers', was my first exploration into this particular topic and had required me to reflect on my motivations and reactions to the topic of fatherhood. This had involved much reflection on my identification with the children of absent Black fathers. During the Masters research process, I was aware that my identity as a young Black female was difficult for the fathers, and I kept this in mind and was sensitive to it. By virtue of being a female, men sometimes struggled with viewing me as just a researcher and my gender seemed to have made some of them uncomfortable, as some of the questions required them to be honest about their ex-partners. This meant that at times they possibly limited their responses or were disingenuous for fear of offending me. My age at that time also meant that some of the interviewees possibly identified me with their children, or viewed me through a cultural lens where they would be viewed as my elder. Some participants in my Master's study became emotional when talking to me, usually when speaking about the ways in which they wished to have a different relationship with their children and how they felt about being absent fathers. At these times, I paused the interview to allow that participant some time to compose himself and if appropriate, to reflect on the participant's feelings. At these times, I also tried to be aware of my own feelings in response to the participants' pain. Given my own history, which included an absent father, I noted that I found it difficult not to become emotional when listening to some of the participants' narratives, and at times, experienced difficulty remaining neutral in my stance. I felt sorry for the

participants when they expressed their deep longing to be with their children and their preoccupation and concern for their children's well-being. This made me wonder and fantasize about whether this was my father's experience which made me more empathic, not only towards my personal situation but also towards the men with whom I was talking. At other times, I had felt irritated and upset as I felt that the men did not try hard enough to be in their children's lives and rather made what felt like excuses for their absence, which again made me fantasize about my own father's efforts regarding our situation. I was constantly aware of the possible vicarious trauma that both myself and my participants might experience and I noted emotions such as irritation, agitation, and disagreeableness in both the participants and myself, which may have indicated some over-identification that may have occurred. Between interviews, I debriefed with my supervisor and took note of what was happening. These dynamics were considered useful information and were taken into account during the following interviews and analysis of the data. This experience during my Master's research study allowed me to have a better sense of what to expect in this study.

Thus, this current PhD project was not starting out on a blank slate. More reflection was not only necessary but inevitable, as this time I found myself experiencing different identifications. I was pregnant at the time of the interviews for this study and was a new mother at the time of data analysis and writing. Again, I experienced mixed feelings during this study; feelings of judgment, irritation, empathy, sadness, to mention a few. These feeling states were not linear, but rather I found myself moving back and forth between feelings throughout the interviews. As a new mother, I found that my irritation with the men intensified during the process of analyzing the data, in comparison to the time that the interviews were conducted. Interestingly, a common theme that emerged in the participants' narratives in this study was the fact that the ex-partners of the men were able to offer more patience and empathy in the beginning of their relationships, and less so when their children were born. The men described their partners as retaliating and reacting in undesirable ways after the fact.

The process of collating and trying to understand my countertransference experiences, aided in understanding what these fathers' perceived behaviours may have triggered in the mothers of their children, society and the communities they live in. However, my feelings of irritation cannot be attributed solely to the participants.

As a researcher it is prudent to state upfront my intersubjective position during this research process. As stated above, I was pregnant at the time of the interviews. I was engaged to the

father of my child, also a Black man, and experienced a healthy pregnancy. However, unforeseen factors soon came to impact negatively on our experience. Our pregnancy occurred during the COVD-19 lockdown and anxiety of infection was at its peak. We were both frustrated by the restrictions, lack of movement and I started to feel the frustration and entrapment of both the lockdown and that of normal pregnancy developments. This was one of the difficulties that placed a strain on the romantic relationship as well as on my experience of becoming a mother. Moreso, it influenced how I viewed my partner at the time and strained my expectations and needs from him. To add to the frustration, the father of my child struggled with the transition into fatherhood and to 'show up' in ways that I felt were important during pregnancy and after the baby was born, such as demonstrating emotional awareness and attunement to me and the baby, and accommodating the lifestyle changes required as the pregnancy and life after birth developed. I felt myself become angry, resentful and let down. Whilst at times I understood and empathized with reasons as to why he struggled with his fatherhood transition, such as not having a father figure present to guide him, I felt resentful that due to my own life story, I too was not fully equipped for my motherhood transition but managed and in fact had no choice but to learn as I went along. As a result, six months after giving birth, we legally separated and began a co-parenting relationship. It was against this context that I was analyzing the narratives collected from my participants.

It was significant that I felt less empathy for the participants while analyzing the data. At times I felt angry and judgmental towards my participants, and found myself identifying with the mothers of my participant's children. With time and supervision, I was able to claim what belonged to me from a countertransference perspective, and what belonged to the fathers in my study. My empathy returned during the write-up phase and I found that I was able to offer a balanced perspective on the narratives. In retrospect, although challenging, this process was helpful in showing what and how these fathers and fathers in similar positions might elicit in others.

3.7. Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained before the research took place. All ethical considerations were were administered in line with the POPI Act and university policies. Consent from organizations ('Fatherhood Friday' and 'Child Maintenance Difficulties in South Africa') to

use their databases to recruit participants was obtained. Informed consent from individuals to participate in the research as well as for the audio recording of the interviews was obtained before the interviews were conducted. Anonymity in reporting of the results and confidentiality was guaranteed by the researcher through the use of pseudonyms and through the removal of any identifying personal information from the transcripts. Consent to use direct quotes from narratives was obtained, and any identifying details that participants included in their narratives was disguised. Participants were informed that recordings and transcribed interviews would be anonymised and stored in password protected cloud storage, and that recordings would be deleted after examination of the thesis. Consent was also obtained from participants for the anonymized transcripts to be archived by the researcher and her supervisor in cloud storage for possible future research purposes.

It is recognized that psychosocial studies require sensitivity in their management as the process of consent is complex (Hollway, 2008; Holmes, 2013; Josselson, 2011& Kvale, 1999). The use of psychodynamic analysis of defensive processes in the narratives, means that the participants may not be aware of the depth of analysis entailed i.e. they can't know what unconscious material may emerge, and thus consent given prior to the analysis of the interviews can't be considered as 'fully informed' (Hollway, 2008; Holmes, 2013; Josselson, 2011; Kvale, 1999). This was managed through sensitivity in the write up of the analysis of the interview material- where potential harm to participants was held in mind throughout.

It was made clear to participants before the interviews that the researcher would be engaging with participants in her capacity as a researcher, not as a psychotherapist, but that she could provide referrals for counselling if required. Despite this, it did become clear during the interviews that some participants had hoped that their participation in the study would be a means to receiving therapeutic benefit or to change their situations or personal circumstances. A distress protocol was in place in the event that any participants became distressed during the interviews. Details for free counselling services such as the Emthonjeni Community Psychology Clinic were provided to all participant son the information sheet. The Centre was aware of the study and was willing to provide access to free counselling for participants – in person or online if required. Although the interviews evoked strong emotions for some participants, only one participant requested and accepted counselling services. The other participants were offered counselling services and declined the offer. Distress was most notable

in those who had been denied access to their children or in those who experienced remorse regarding their fatherhood experience.

The researcher made every effort to exercise sensitivity throughout the research process (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000). This is especially pertinent to research that involves subject areas where shame or stigma is attached to the topic at hand. It was recognized that some of the men may fear being judged, thus the researcher ensured that the participants felt respected. This also applies to the write up of the psychosocial analysis. Research involving depth analysis of narratives that may reveal unconscious conflict, which by nature implies that participants will not be aware of this (with various defences utilised to keep particular information out of conscious awareness), demands greater levels of ethics and integrity from the researcher. This is because participants can then be deemed as unable to give informed consent as they would not have known what might be revealed through their narratives (Saville-Young, 2009).

Nduna et al. (2015) also emphasize the importance of ethical processes with regards to father absence in order to ensure the physical and emotional safety of the researcher and participants. For example, Nduna et al. (2015) discuss the potential of some interview responses being unlawful though essential to the study. These may include disclosure of non-compliance with maintenance orders, possible intimate partner violence or even child abuse. It was explained in the participant information sheet that if participants disclosed any situations where there was direct and current risk to the participant or another person that the researcher would be obligated to involve a social worker in order to access assistance and intervention. While there were instances where participants disclosed previous intimate partner violence, these situations were not current. None of the participants disclosed any immediate risk to themselves or children that the researcher was ethically obliged to help them gain assistance with. Participants were informed that they could request a summary of the findings, which would be made available to them via email.

3.8. Introduction to the participants:

This section is focused on summarizing each participant's background. This is to offer the reader context as to the participants' stories, in the hopes that the results and discussion sections are then read with better understanding. An account of my experiences during the interviews and analysis process are interwoven. All the names used are pseudonyms to protect the

identities of the men, and certain potentially identifying details have been changed or omitted to uphold promises of anonymity in reporting.

ANDILE:

Andile is a father in his mid-thirties who was predominantly raised by his mother. His parents never married; however, his father was present in his early life. Andile's father was killed when Andile was in preschool. He did not offer much detail about his father's passing. Andile met the mother of his child when he was a university student. They were living in different provinces. Their relationship of three months ended, and shortly after, they found out that they were pregnant. Andile stated that he questioned the legitimacy and paternity of the pregnancy, but never voiced these concerns to his ex-partner. Due to the pregnancy, they rekindled their romantic relationship, but started experiencing difficulties shortly after the birth of their son. This eventually led to their breakup, which Andile described as due to her feeling neglected, as a result of him feeling pressure to provide financially. In his attempt to provide, he was often away from his child, and this further strained the co-parenting relationship. Andile described having tried to reconnect with his child for years to no avail, and at the time of the interview, had given up. He therefore had not 'successfully' reconnected with his child. Later in life, Andile started a new relationship and got married. He had two children in this relationship and described himself as a present father. Andile was the only participant that did not return for a follow up interview. Andile had been contacted several times for a second interview but failed to commit to a date and time. Though he never explicitly gave a reason, an assumption can be made that the topic at hand and interview process had been too emotionally challenging for him.

Andile was tall and confident with the mannerisms of a gentleman. He arrived earlier than our agreed time and appeared to be eager for the interview. He was patient and waited for me to arrive. Andile was very concerned about where the interview was taking place and made sure that it was a quiet enough spot in the coffee shop so that the voice recorder could pick up the sound clearly. This alerted me to the fact that he really was keen on telling his story. It felt like his need for a 'quiet place' had less to do with privacy, and more to do with needing me to pay attention, along with the imagined audience through the voice recorder.

During the interview, I remember being interested in what he was saying. I felt no extreme feelings when he told his story. There was a consistent feeling of 'he really wants me to know how hard he tried' and I did not have a feeling of needing to dispute that or believe it. He was very preoccupied by me being visibly pregnant and I was aware that this would impact the interview somehow and, in this case, it felt as though it heightened his need for him to paint himself as a 'good guy' who tried his best in his situation.

Interestingly, during the data analysis stage, I felt differently towards him. I had very distinct feelings and found it difficult to empathize with Andile as I read through the transcribed interview. At this point, I was no longer pregnant but a mother to a two-month-old infant, and currently experiencing how difficult it was to be a full-time parent. Something about being in the 'thick of things' with regards to parenting made me empathize more with the men's ex-partners – a joining of sorts. When I consciously distanced myself from the situation and applied my academic mind, I knew that some of the things the men spoke about experiencing at the hand of their exes could not be justified, yet I found my empathy and bias leaned more towards the mothers. I understood why a woman would get angry at the accounts that Andile described, and I found myself feeling angry with him and judging him. The general feel of this story was of a man who wasn't ready for fatherhood, tried to do the right thing, but struggled with agency and victimhood. Later in his life, he now described himself as someone who had an idea of what it would take to become a present father but was still reliant on the mother of his child and son to make things happen or 'right his wrongs'. The part of his story with which I could empathize was the constant theme of loss in his life; his loss of his father, his loss of his early adulthood, his partner, his child and his idealized image of himself as a present father to his first child. Andile chose not to return for his second interview, which further made me feel like his sense of loss was a lot for him to bear. It seemed as if it may have been too painful to keep revisiting and talk about. He just needed to tell his story to someone once, and that was a stepping-stone in his fatherhood journey.

BANDILE:

Bandile was in his late thirties and a father of two children, a boy and a girl, from two separate relationships. He was single, present in his daughter's life, but not his son's. His son was the second born child and was in preschool. At the time of his son's birth, the mother of his child

was still a college student and unable to care for the child. According to Bandile, for the first year of his child's life, he was the primary parent. The romantic relationship ended shortly after their son was born, and the mother of his child soon moved into a new relationship. From the second year of his son's life, their child lived with and was raised by his maternal grandmother. It is at this point that Bandile describes losing contact with his son and struggling to reconnect with him. Bandile stated that once his child no longer physically resided with him, it was difficult for him to negotiate visitation. While he had tried to negotiate access, he stated that the mother of his child and the maternal family required certain cultural, financial processes to be followed in order for access to be granted. At points in the interview, he stated that he himself found these processes to be important before he felt he could claim his child, thus at some point he stopped pursuing gaining access to his child. Furthermore, Bandile stated that once the mother of his child started a new relationship, he struggled emotionally with this development, and he pursued access to his child less.

I experienced Bandile as charming and entertaining. He had a very charismatic manner about him, which at points had me feeling positively towards him and at other times, feeling mistrustful. He had a very 'black and white', rigid way of thinking that left me feeling that he would not be able to engage in debate or alternative ways of thinking. I found myself 'humouring' (what I felt were) his old fashioned outdated patriarchal views that weren't helpful to his situation. He, unlike the other participants, seemed unphased and unaffected by my pregnancy. This was a good thing for my research as it offered me his unfiltered truth. I was left feeling from both interviews that his reflective capacities were poor. However, as a woman and a mother, it brought up feelings of irritation in me and my fantasy was that this characteristic may have been equally irritating for his ex-partner whilst in a relationship with him. Again, I felt my identification to be with the mother of his child and I struggled to empathize with him.

JABU

Jabu was in his mid-thirties, single and father to one child. Jabu's own father had passed away when he was in preschool, and he was raised by his maternal family. Jabu was not married to the mother of his child and described their pregnancy as unplanned. They separated briefly

after finding out about the pregnancy, and according to Jabu, his ex-partner had wanted to terminate the pregnancy. They rekindled their relationship, and she changed her mind and continued with the pregnancy. He described the romantic relationship to have had difficulties prior to them finding out about their pregnancy. He was already unsure about their relationship. Jabu also stated that their families were not in agreement on a way forward. He felt that the pregnancy came with the pressure to get married, but he had felt they were not ready or in a 'good emotional place' to take such a big step. Jabu stated that soon after the birth of his child, his romantic relationship ended. He identified the cause to this end as him being unwilling to marry the mother of his child. Jabu stated that both the mother of his child and her maternal family felt frustrated about this and at some point, made a decision to keep his son away from him. Jabu had approached the children's court for assistance but felt that he was not assisted adequately and thus gave up on following up on the process a year after being estranged from his son. His son was in primary school at the time of the interview. He claimed to not know where they resided and that any attempt made by him to find out was not successful.

Jabu was very polite and friendly. He was upbeat and seemed eager for the interview. The interview took place in his family home where his grandparents lived, and he introduced me to his grandparents before walking me to the room that we would conduct the interview. The overall energy was very warm and calm, and I worried that the topic that we were about to discuss would taint or disrupt this energy; as if it might taint him and the 'good gentle guy' that he presented. At the time of the interview, I had positive feelings towards Jabu. He used humour a lot throughout the interview as a way to manage the difficult or uncomfortable parts of his story. Even during the points where he said something that was potentially controversial or problematic, I did not find myself having extreme feelings towards him. However, during the data analysis phase of the research, I found myself experiencing more ambivalent feelings towards him. I felt he was unable to recognize his unhelpful part in the situation and take accountability. Jabu's partial openness to his situation made me wonder whether access to psychotherapy as well as psychoeducation would make a difference to his situation, though I recognized that this was not my role as researcher.

MABENA

Mabena was in his mid-thirties and his child was in primary school. This was his only child and he described a tumultuous romantic relationship with the mother of his daughter. Mabena

described that he was physically violent towards the mother of his child during their relationship and pregnancy. He had served jail time for a period of six months as a result.

My first impression of Mabena was that he was a very respectful and humble man. He was soft spoken and offered brief responses. In the beginning of the interview, I quickly realized that he was struggling to express himself in English and I offered for him to speak his home language, isiZulu, and he declined. It felt like this would be shameful for him even though at times I would respond to him in isiZulu to try show him that it would be okay to speak his home language. This demonstrated that he struggled with allowing himself to be vulnerable, to be in a position of not knowing or to experience vulnerability in front of a woman. He seemed to be slightly detached from the seriousness of the topic at hand. At points that I expected him to express emotion, he came across as very calm and at points nonchalant. My countertransference was strong and mixed. I felt sorry for him and empathized a lot with the parts of him that seemed genuinely wishing to be part of his child's life. However, at a point in the middle of the analysis process, I became aware of feeling anger towards him, and I struggled not to judge him after he became defended in the way that he answered questions.

His dismissiveness regarding his abusive tendencies in his relationship with the mother of his child made me angry. I felt that he had no regard for how much emotional and psychological damage he had caused his ex-partner. The interview process went by very quickly as he felt very defended against thinking. At first, I wondered whether this was due to a language barrier, however, as the interview went on, it became clear to me that the choice to express himself in a language less familiar to him was used defensively. Though unconscious, Mabena could not allow himself to introspect. I felt myself losing interest in the interview process and just wanting to get it over with.

SIPHO

Sipho was in his early thirties and had an on and off relationship with the mother of his child when his child was born. Soon after the birth of their child, they separated, and he felt that his ex-partner was influenced by her family to keep him away from both her and their child. His daughter was three years old at the time of the interview. He stated that he made numerous attempts to reconnect with his child by going to where she resided and setting up family meetings with his ex-partner's maternal family and was met with rejection. Sipho stated that

he was always met with financial requests before he could see his child which felt like exploitation. He expressed that even during the times that he was employed and able to financially contribute, he felt exploited and would withhold money and not try to visit his child, which exacerbated the situation. He expressed a lot of frustration and anger, however, when probed about considering a legal resolution, he objected stating that he could not take the mother of his child to court. At the time of the interview, he was unemployed, and he described this as the primary difficulty contributing to reconnecting with his child.

I had a neutral countertransference towards Sipho during the time of the interview. I did not experience any distinct strong feelings at the time. There were moments where I felt that he was not telling me the full story or that he had rehearsed what he wanted me to know or take away from our time together. He was polite and presented himself as open to talking. He came across as smart. I often felt confused during the interview, as though I was missing something. I struggled to place him mentally. These feelings changed during the data analysis process, during which I felt a more negative countertransference towards him. I noted that I was only able to empathize with him on two occasions.

The first time was when he spoke about the maternal gate-keeping that he experienced with his ex-partner's family members. There was a sadness in how difficult it seemed for him to try and access his child, or how many people he felt he had to get through. The second time I found myself empathizing with him, was when he spoke about his own experience of having an emotionally absent father. Sipho was raised by his mother and her maternal family until he was in primary school. He described his parents' relationship as on and off until his father married another woman. When he was in primary school, Sipho took the decision to go live with his father who he described as having a strained relationship. He hoped that living with his father would mend their relationship and bring them closer. However, Sipho felt that his father was preoccupied, emotionally absent and he stated that they argued often when they did spend time together. During the rest of the data analysis, I noticed myself feeling judgmental towards him and the vagueness that pervaded his interview. This feeling was the same in the second interview where he came across as more guarded than before.

WANDILE

Wandile was in his late thirties. He was a father to three children. His first-born daughter from a previous relationship was the child he was estranged from, and topic of discussion during this interview. In his current relationship, he has two other children that he was present for, but with whom he also did not reside. Wandile had a history of being violent with the mother of his child during their relationship and had had a restraining order against him. Wandile stated that after the relationship had ended, he had taken the matter to court in order to gain access to his child. The magistrate had granted him visitation rights with his daughter, but his ex-partner had not complied with this. He stated that each time the child was supposed to be dropped off at the police station by the mother or maternal family, he would arrive and be told that no one had come. He stated that he knew that his child and the mother of his child resided with her maternal family in an area nearby. He also knew which school his daughter attended but stated that he was too afraid to approach his ex-partner and her family due to their past altercations in court regarding gaining access to their child.

My first impression of Wandile was that he was extremely guarded and suspicious of me and my intentions. He was extremely anxious in the beginning of the first interview. His anxiety settled after I explained to him the purpose of the research and interview. He appeared clinically depressed with an extremely low mood. I felt that I was intruding. He came across as a self-respecting man, and almost intimidating at times. He was very aware of my pregnancy as he kept looking at my belly at the time. As time went on, however, something about me being pregnant also seemed to assist him to him let his guard down and have a gentler demeanor with me. I quite liked him. He cried throughout the interview. At the end of the interview, he requested therapeutic and ancestral assistance, to which a referral to a colleague was made. In his follow up interview, Wandile sounded very motivated to change his circumstances.

THATO

Thato was in his early thirties. He was a father to four children from three women whom he had contact with. The eldest was his daughter from his first relationship. He was completely absent in her life, had attempted to reconnect to no avail. He stated that this was due to the breakdown of that romantic relationship and the mother of his child not being willing to move past their difficulties. He did not want to speak about that process further. His second born child

was his teenage son from a previous relationship. This was the child he spoke about in the interview. His other two children were from his most recent relationship with his fiancé.

He separated from the mother of his son shortly after birth, however, Thato stated that he felt that his ex-partner never fully accepted this decision. Thato expressed that he felt that his ex-partner still felt romantic feelings towards him. At the time of the interview, Thato was engaged and in a new romantic relationship of over five years, and shared two children. The relationship between Thato, his fiancé and his ex-partner was strained. This had spilled over to his relationship with his son with whom Thato also described having a strained relationship. Thato explained that his son initially lived with his mother [child's mother], where Thato was absent until the age of two. His son then intermittently lived with Thato's mother, and Thato had partial access due to not residing with his son on a full-time basis and his mother [Thato's mother] gatekeeping. Thato explained that the gatekeeping he experienced from his mother [Thato's mother] was due to her not respecting him as a father and them not agreeing on how to raise his son. As a result, Thato's mother would sometimes prevent him from seeing his child. However, when his son became a teenager, Thato had managed to convince the mother of his child to allow the child to live with him. Before the interview, Thato's son had been living with him and his fiancé for three years before returning to reside with his mother [child's mother]. Thato appeared to have alternated from complete absence and partial presence between birth and pre-teen years, to having access to his child in his teenage years even though they no longer lived together.

Thato came across as very eager to share his story. He did not come across as shy or reserved. I experienced him to be confident, headstrong and very firm in his stance. I got the feeling that his strong personality did not always win him favour with others, but at points I experienced a positive countertransference towards him. At other points, I felt suspicious of him and wondered whether he always told me the full story. During data analysis, I felt a negative countertransference towards him as I felt that his responses were at times insensitive towards his son and the mother of his child.

Chapter Four - Findings

4.1. Introduction

This chapter aims to discuss and capture the experiences of the Black fathers who participated in this study. These men biologically became fathers but have had the process of fatherhood disrupted at some point in their journey. Specifically, the focus is on these fathers' experiences of attempting to reconnect, successfully or unsuccessfully with their children. Outlined first is this group of men's sense of their own fatherhood identities. These were found to entail a complex and ambivalent transition into fatherhood, in a journey that implicated their constructions of masculinity, including obligations with regards to financial provision. The construction of their father identities also involved negotiating these identities in relation to negative societal discourses around absentee fatherhood and a more personal grappling with their own experiences of having had absent fathers.

Next, their experiences of disconnection from their fatherhood roles are presented. Implicated in this was the breakdown of the relationship with the mother of their child/ren, financial arguments, the mother finding a new partner, and a lack of support or interference from the maternal family.

Following this, their experiences of both successful and unsuccessful reconnection with their children are discussed. Motivations for attempting to reconnect with their children are presented, alongside the meanings they made of unsuccessful attempts at reconnection.

Lastly, some of their reflections on their experiences of the interviews are provided.

THEMES	SUBTHEMES
4.2. Construction of the fatherhood identity	4.2.1The ambivalence of the transition into fatherhood 4.2.2Fatherhood and masculinity 4.2.3 Financial expectations of fatherhood 4.2.4 Positioning of fatherhood in relation to societal discourse 4.2.5 Experiences of having had absent fathers: Denial and idealisation 4.2.6 Absent versus present fatherhood

4.3 Experiences of disconnection	4.3.1 The role of the end of the romantic relationship 4.3.2 Financial disagreements 4.3.3 Being replaced in the father role
4.4 Experiences of reconnection attempts	4.4.1 Motivations for reconnecting 4.4.1.2 A wish to break patterns and not repeat history 4.4.1.3 To alleviate painful affect 4.4.2Experiences of a successful and unsuccessful reconnection 4.4.2.1 Experiences of successful reconnection 4.4.2.2 Experiences of unsuccessful reconnection 4.4.3Defensive positions assumed in relation to unsuccessful reconnection 4.4.3.1 Rationalisation 4.4.3.2 Managing appearances 4.4.3.3 Shifting the blame
4.5 Experiences of the interview process 4.6 Conclusion	

Table 1: Summary of themes

4.2. Construction of the fatherhood identity

Firstly, it was important to clarify what this group of men understood the concept of fatherhood to mean. From the analysis of the narratives, it became clear that there was a process of transition into fatherhood that was experienced as life-changing, holding both the potential for growth, and a sense of overwhelm. The amount of overwhelm apparent in these men's narratives suggested that the role of fatherhood was bigger than anticipated. They drew on various discourses to inform their understandings of fatherhood. The first was fatherhood as 'a man's job'. References to the need to be grown up and responsible emerged. This construction seemed closely linked to notions of masculinity held by these men. Ideas of masculinity appeared to be strongly linked to cultural and family groups, but notably, the influence of cultural constructions of masculinity and fatherhood were described as shifting and changing. Secondly, fatherhood was constructed as involving the imperative to provide financially. How these men positioned themselves in relation to these discourses of fatherhood was also noted. Significantly, strong fears of 'not being enough' emerged throughout. Societal discourses on Black fathers emerged in all the participants' discourses and the ways in which these men responded to and positioned themselves as fathers in relation to these discourses is explored. The participants also drew on their own histories when talking about their fatherhood journeys. The ways that they understood their own experiences of having been fathered and the role that this may have played in the construction of fatherhood is also presented.

4.2.1 The ambivalence of the transition into fatherhood

Many of the fathers referred to fatherhood as being a process of transition that was joyful and growth-promoting but also intensive, complex and requiring maturity and responsibility. Sipho's mixed feelings about his transition into fatherhood are clear in the excerpt below. He described a positive experience that simultaneously felt overwhelming:

> *…more than being joyous… it has been a life changing experience. Because, uh, I…got a sense of what is it like to live for the next person more than myself. So it's been, like one of the best, best moments. So, um, and it's… it was overwhelming, or is overwhelming but in a good way* (Sipho).

The blissful experience that he describes suggested that becoming a father opened an opportunity to get in touch with a meaningful sense of purpose. Whilst he described his

transition process as enjoyable, the growth aspect connected to his transition seemed to be overpowering. Mentally Sipho seemed overcome by the idea of having to learn to take another person's well-being into account. He recognized the magnitude of this change; however, he looked forward to it. Likewise, Wandile's experience of transitioning into fatherhood comprised mixed emotions. He described simultaneously connecting with feelings of excitement and shock:

> *Um, I was so excited… I didn't plan to be inside the theatre. It was me, the mom and the doctor. Traumatic but a wonderful experience that I enjoyed. I have been part of, of her pregnancy since she was pregnant the whole month. I attended the doctors, the gynae. It was… it was… it was a wonderful feeling. It was… it was… it was me evolving actually to, to, to, to be a father, to grow up* (Wandile).

For Wandile, the transition process included moments that seemed to have caught him off-guard as well as moments he had never imagined that he would be part of. Wandile described experiencing an enjoyable sense of shock from the very beginning of the pregnancy, which he speaks to as his early sense of connection to becoming a father. For Wandile, his fatherhood transition began before the birth of his child. He too referenced an experience of growth and a shift that entailed becoming an adult man. Thato also spoke of a sense of overwhelm at the intensity of fatherhood and its responsibilities:

> *In all fairness, it has been very challenging. I think, challenging just sums up the whole experience… Because when you grow up, you think you'll just meet a woman and you make a baby. After making a baby then it's your child and you raise him… I think it has been challenging and I can say for lack of a better word, can we can you stick to challenging?… there's no time off of being a dad. Being a father, you can't take a break. You can't take a break* (Thato).

Thato appeared not to have anticipated the complexity and difficulty of the transition to fatherhood. He found early fatherhood relentless; he seemed overwhelmed by how much work it required to care for a child continuously without being able to take a break from the role of parenting and fatherhood. His experience seemed to be one of feeling consumed by the infinite amount of responsibility. The overwhelm for Mabena was associated with the enormous responsibility of fatherhood:

> *I, I felt overwhelmed that I have become a father. And there's someone who looks up to me* (Mabena).

Mabena constructed a father as someone who must be a good example or set a good example for their child. His comment implied a fear of perhaps setting a poor example and being found lacking. Significantly, fatherhood, and the transition into fatherhood, was found to be complex and overwhelming. While Andile also felt that becoming a father contributed to his growth and fulfilment as an individual, he struggled to articulate this precisely, despite being a father of three children:

> *But I didn't really have anything definite of what a father is asides from fathering someone's existence…I still have no definition…But I grew as a person from being a father…It's hard to describe. But fulfilling too you know…It's a moment-to-moment thing.* (Andile).

Andile grappled to describe in what ways he experienced growth and fulfilment from fatherhood, struggling to identify words that would capture this for him. Even though he was a father of three, this was still a concept that was difficult for him to define. Andile alluded to a fatherhood identity that he only felt connected to in moments. This is perhaps suggestive of the complexity of establishing a fatherhood identity, beyond the newness of first-time fatherhood.

Furthermore, some fathers expressed frustrations and feelings of 'not knowing' when it came to taking up their fatherhood roles. Many of their struggles suggested that men need facilitation to take up their fatherhood roles. This facilitation, it seems, was something they expected and/or needed from the mother of the child, as well as from the maternal and paternal families. Bandile, who had taken up the role of primary caregiver for the first year of his child's life, sounded hurt and resentful about having no assistance in the early part of his child's life:

> *I had to teach myself how to change diapers alone with no help and I think because of life goes on that pain will always be there* (Bandile).

The feeling of pain associated with having to teach himself fatherhood responsibilities, suggests a wish that someone would have been available to guide him. Andile also expressed how his fatherhood identity was encompassed by a deep sense of 'not knowing', which he linked to the lack of a helpful model when growing up:

> *...I mean, you're not born a dad, you were once young. So they [peers who had present fathers] luckily had people that could tell them that, "Look, when I was your age, I went through something similar." So, I had to experience things and learn it the hard way. Because I didn't have somebody to guide me* (Andile).

Andile's experience of not having a template to follow, meant that he had to learn tough fatherhood lessons on his own. It seemed that he felt envious of men who had more guidance in their development. Additionally, as a result of not having had facilitation or guidance with regards to fatherhood, Andile spoke about unconsciously repeating patterns and taking on parenting identities that he later realized were a direct influence from his parental figures. He felt that he had learned how to be a parent through his mothers' influence:

> *So, the things that my mother did, and the fact that she never remarried, till this day, you know. So, she dedicated herself to me, instead of like, considering marrying again. She's just dedicated herself to me. So unfortunately, that means working longer hours. Because you're the sole provider. And it goes back to the mistake that I made with my, uh, initial experience of fatherhood. Where I thought money equals problems solved. And only now when I'm older, I really appreciate her. But I wish she could have… we could have… we could have still been okay with less. Uh, but time, you know, time is not something that you can buy back or anything. So, yeah time is very important. My experience with family, everything just taught me the importance of time* (Andile).

In the above excerpt he appears regretful for the time missed with his mother as a child, and by implication, time missed with his child when he had prioritised working over being present. He questioned whether the time lost with his child could be made up in the future. There was a deep wish that something lost could be recovered. Andile was also able to recognize that he had unconsciously mimicked the cycle of absence that he experienced with his father:

> *My, my, my dad, funny enough, only ever hit me once when I was six you know … it's so funny that it's almost like history repeats itself. But my dad himself wasn't around the first… around the same age as I was absent from my child's life* (Andile).

Overall, the transition into fatherhood for these men was experienced with much ambivalence; their constructions of fatherhood as a highly responsible role together with their feelings of not being adequately prepared through role models or supported by the mother of their child or extended family left them, for the most part, feeling overwhelmed.

4.2.2 Fatherhood and masculinity

Many of the men's fatherhood identities were deeply connected to their beliefs around what it meant to be a man, as informed by broader concepts of masculinity and for some, more culturally endorsed notions of masculinity. Of note in the narratives, however, was the sense of tension evident in descriptions of changing societal ideas of masculinity and those more traditional ideas passed from generation to generation:

> *But we have been told, if you listen to your uncles they are going to tell you what a father or a man is. And that's what it used to be for them. Today's experiences, they're different. I'm friends with girls, you know. I would have been considered gay back in the day, you know. [laughs] So, but I want my son to have that. I want him to have relationships with women just outside of like, him interested in them in a sexual way or in any other way. So yeah, it would be great if the narrative were to change a little bit.* (Jabu)

Jabu's fatherhood experience was one that was passed on from one generation to another amongst males. He referred to teachings that boys received from the men in their lives about manhood that later informed their ideas about manhood and fatherhood. There was a recognition that contextually these experiences for men have begun evolving and that he embodies a different sense of masculinity to that of men 'back in the day' – one that he hopes his son can also experience. However, his wish for 'narrative[s]…to change a little bit' suggests that he experiences tension between the traditional constructions of masculinity learned from uncles, and his current embodiment of masculinity. This tension was evident in his narrative as he appeared to shift between constructions of a more modern fatherhood, as above, to more traditional constructions of fathers as providers. Significantly, he felt that current society does not enable or support men to be providers. He compared himself to his grandfather who he seemed to feel was able to embody a provider role, even under Apartheid, while he finds that he cannot:

> *Our parents, my grandfather, he grew up in apartheid. But yet he was able to do the things that as a man he needed to do, why can't we do the same? And we are so called free* (Jabu).

In his articulation of the tension he feels with regards to what it means to be a father and a man, he implies that he is not 'free' – and there is a suggestion that he is not 'able to do the things that as a man he need[s] to do'. Jabu seemed to be suggesting that men and fathers today are grappling with their masculinity in a disempowering system and are consequently less able to take up their fatherhood identities. Besides for shifting constructions of masculinity, this uncertainty around what fatherhood entails also seemed linked to cultural identities. While some men seemed to have stronger cultural identities that appeared to inform their fatherhood identities, others did not. Thato located the significance of fatherhood in the of passing down of cultural practices from one generation to another:

> *As a Zulu guy, you tend to have a culture that you want to instil in your offspring. So, I think for me, it kind of means I need to leave whatever instructions that I was left with… so they can fit in public…It's basically about his roots* (Thato).

In Thato's case, his fatherhood identity encompassed the passing down of cultural practices which he considered to offer a sense of belonging for a child. Furthermore, he perceived it to assist one to navigate through life and 'fit in'. While Thato's fatherhood identity appeared closely linked to a cultural identity, Bandile's did not:

> "*…being a father, you're just a father, yeah. So, it wouldn't define me if I was a Sotho maybe it was going to be… so maybe if I was iShangaan it was going to be…* (Bandile).

When considering whether fatherhood identity differed from culture to culture, Bandile felt that the concept of fatherhood could be generalized for all men. His comment suggested that certain cultures may have more strongly defined roles or expectations for fatherhood than others, but that his personal experience was that culture did not strongly influence his understanding of what it means to be a father. It should be noted, however, that his narrative appeared somewhat 'psychically distanced' and it seemed difficult for him to think about himself and his experience in a nuanced way.

4.2.3 Financial expectations of fatherhood

All of the participants made strong associations between their fatherhood identities and financial provision. However, there seemed to be mixed feelings and tensions with regards to this link. For Andile, becoming a father for the first time while he was a university student

meant that his transition into fatherhood was challenging as he was still trying to become financially stable:

> *I saw my first child. I was happy completely, you know …I was a student at the time, right? So, as much as my family would have been able to help regarding raising the child, I wouldn't have felt any way good about it as a man... But this new aspect of my life it meant less time, uh, to make money, you understand?* (Andile).

He alluded to feeling compelled to take on his fatherhood responsibility on his own despite his family being able to assist him. His statement carried the implication that requiring assistance and not being able to take financial responsibility himself made him 'less of a man'. Andile's narrative involved a boy transitioning into a man, as well as a young adult transitioning into seasoned adult responsibility. Despite his fears, Andile seemed positively connected to his transition to becoming a father and it was important for him to go through it in a manner that felt noble. His comment suggested that he was perhaps not yet ready for fatherhood and would have preferred to have established himself financially before becoming a father. Mabena also constructed fatherhood as that of a provider, and linked this to notions of masculinity; his inability to provide left him feeling 'less of a man' and 'less of a father':

> *Like I was so happy. I was working by then… For me, when I go to see my daughter without something like previously before, I feel less of a man or less of a father, okay? I'm not saying that money buys love, but nowadays, a child will ask you…you cannot even provide* (Mabena).

Although Mabena somewhat recognized that being a father entailed more than financial provision, he placed most significance on being able to provide financially, consistently. Being employed and having access to funds to offer his children, meant that he could feel worthy as a man and a father. Wandile also equated fatherhood to financial provision:

> *Responsibility. Take care of our home. We, we provide. We, we live for our kids* (Wandile)

Wandile seemed to place a lot of prominence on being able to earn an income and on material provision. He described an experience of having achieved success from humble beginnings:

> *…my first job was at FNB, as a financial advisor on commission days only. Bear in mind, I went to school in the township I know nothing, English was hard. But you won't believe I was… I was a laughingstock, but I became a top consultant. I was earning 27,000 within two months. After that, I was unstoppable…* (Wandile).*….I'm working, living a good life, I like clothes and stuff, to an extent when I'd be at the mall and see a beautiful shoe, it would be hers. She knows, I used to pamper her too. Like, like crazy like crazy…* (Wandile).

For Wandile, his worthiness to be a partner and his ability to gain respect as a man was his ability to provide certain things. However, he developed a substance use problem after a car accident and 'things fell apart':

> *…I ended up using substance, that I never thought I would use. Just to numb my feelings, to, to clear my mind. And when I lost my job, that… that was after the accident, I resigned. And everything fell apart. Everything fell apart…* (Wandile).

It seemed that when Wandile lost his source of income, he lost his sense of belonging and sense of power as a man. He seemed to have nothing else to ground him. He could not imagine that some men would be able to take up their fatherhood roles despite the challenge of unemployment or a lack of access to funds. He seemed to devalue himself and other fathers who 'could not'. For most of the participants, the inability to financially provide brought up feelings of shame. Financial means were also linked to feeling more powerful and having agency. Bandile, felt that the only way he could reconnect with his first child was through regaining financial stability:

> *that's why when I get financial power I will have a plan to get him back and stay with him* (Bandile).

This was an intriguing perspective because during the interview process, Bandile spoke about having access to his second child despite being unemployed. The mother of his second child allowed access despite Bandile's inability to provide financially. This appeared to highlight the role of mothers in gatekeeping and either facilitating fatherhood or not. This is discussed in more detail further on in this chapter. Sipho also constructed fatherhood with financial provision at its core. He described his inability to provide as problematic:

> *the issue here was that me coming to see her broke or with no money or no whatever, whatever, uh, I, I need to provide, or I'm able to provide. Just, just coming by myself as I am, I think that's, that's, that's where the problem lies* (Sipho).

Sipho felt that he was not enough 'just coming by myself', and he explained that the shame he experienced coming to see his child 'broke or with no money' had prevented him from taking up his father role. Andile described a similar situation, an internal struggle in relation to his fatherhood identity and his access to money:

> *Because I was trying to make money, you understand? And then now I understand that it's not all about that. That presence counts far more than that. They just want you there. And I wish I was mature enough to see that when I was younger. But I was in panic. You know, my first child. I wanted to make sure that they wanted for nothing. And, uh, that's where I went wrong from my side.* (Andile).

In hindsight, Andile had come to realize that a father identity entails more than financial provision. Andile depicted a fatherhood experience that initially was very consumed by being able to provide financially, that then later changed. Somewhere along his journey, Andile came to realise that fatherhood also encompassed other aspects such as physical and emotional presence. One could postulate that perhaps something about his interactions with the two children he presently lived with, demonstrated to him that he could father in ways that he felt he couldn't with his first child. Andile's experience speaks to the potential of a corrective experience when one can identify feelings, process those feelings as well as maturity to think about and see things differently. At points in his journey a shift in the definition of what it means to be a father occurred, which meant that his fatherhood identity also shifted. To a point, it can be said that this was possible because he now had financial means, however, it also seemed that with age and experience of fathering, Andile now felt regret that he had not been able to move past his inability to provide for his first child in order to be physically and emotionally present in his child's life.

4.2.4 Positioning fatherhood in relation to societal discourses

Within the participants' narratives, there were a number of broad, negative societal discourses around Black fatherhood. Jabu spoke about the discourse of South African men as being 'trash'. This is a reference to a hashtag campaign - #MenAreTrash – that was started in South Africa

in 2017, that went viral, spreading globally. The campaign was started by women in response to high levels of gender-based violence in South Africa. Jabu laughed when using the phrase and then defended men, citing fatherlessness as the factor to blame:

> *South African men? We're trash. [laughs] We're trash. Um and I can't blame a lot of us…Anyway, so many of us grew up without our fathers. We don't know… we were taught how to be men from a woman's point of view as well. And some of us find that we learn how to be men from the streets and we know the streets, information is never reliable. And the people that are telling you it's either they've been through the moves, or they're just tainted in, in their view of the world. So the narrative is that we are trash. And we are… unfortunately, we're living up to it* (Jabu).

Jabu identified part of the problem being due to many Black men being raised by single mothers and having to learn masculinity from the streets. In this comment he holds both a critical and sympathetic stance towards men. Sipho expressed a deep wish to break away from what he felt were stereotypes that society had associated mainly to Black fathers and the Black experience:

> *But then Black fathers can be… you know how it's, uh, stereotypically been put out there, you know, of the majority of Black fathers like they, they, they don't care or they're deadbeat or… yeah, all of those. But then I think it's, it's like a, a chance to prove, as a Black father, I can… I can be… I can be a family man, a family orientated man, you know. Love my kids or my kid and, and yeah, provide. Be, be there… be there more than anything. Show love, support and be there, be present. Yeah* (Sipho).

Sipho referred to discourses that positioned Black fathers as uncaring and unable to offer stability, emotional availability and care or financial provision. He depicted an image according to society of Black fathers as unable or unwilling. He expressed a wish to be able to challenge these discourses and prove that he as a Black man could be a good father. Andile also felt that the identity of a Black father was tainted by negative societal generalizations and stereotypes from which Black fathers want to break away:

> *…and stereotypes. And look, I'm not alone in my situation. A lot of my friends are in the same boat, and all of us want our kids. That's it. I mean, being a dad is… like being a father separately, and being a person of African descent is like the two is… one end from the emotional aspect from being Black, it's wanting to break stereotypes* (Andile).

However, Andile referred to a societal norm where he felt that fathers' experiences are not seen and heard, but rather they are judged as less than. As a result of being viewed as less than, fathers are not respected:

> *Because unfortunately the world not only… we don't listen to people. Um, we, we, we tend to judge people instead of listening to them. So, if you got advice for instance, from a person that you would look at as a social outcast, or lesser than you, you tend to not regard it. So, I didn't want to be in that situation when he [his child] was older* (Andile).

Andile expressed a fear of his child viewing him as less than, due to him not being a good enough father according to societal standards. Thato explained how this judgement comes from various opposing sides and often leaves men feeling lost. He felt that he experienced forms of rejection when he made efforts to become a responsible father:

> *There's a lot of people changed. Because I don't drink now, I'm boring and people ask me where are you and I say I'm picking up the kids, we're playing PlayStation. So, I lost a lot of friends which was good, for relationship with my kid. I think personally at home it was threatening because I had a really strong relationship with my son to a point where they could pick it up* (Thato).

This may highlight the fact that fathers may at times find themselves in environments that foster and encourage unhealthy fatherhood identities. Thato's experience highlights how perhaps it has been set up in society that it is 'uncool' to be a responsible father in the Black community.

There seemed to be a narrative around the Black boy child largely being unfathered, thus being unable to father. Furthermore, how society views Black men and Black fathers, seemed to have a negative tone that was both internalized and challenged by fathers.

4.2.5 Experiences of having had absent fathers: Denial and idealisation

Perhaps partly in response to the community narratives described above, there seemed to be an idealization of memories of their experiences of their fathers amongst some of the participants. It seemed difficult for many of them to acknowledge the pain of what it truly felt like to grow up with an absent father. Early on in the interview, Andile expressed:

I mean, I feel I owe it to my child to give them, uh, what I had. Which is, look, um, I think my father was one of the first to break the rules of what was considered normal for Black parents. He showed me compassion, understanding. He wasn't just the person that was there to further my existence (Andile).

Andile first depicted an image of having experienced a present, in tune and emotionally available father. This was followed by a contradictory statement later in the interview that revealed the statement above to be an idealization:

So my dad, no, he wasn't around. The ideas, I had of him, and the little bit of experience made me a better human being you know...And I had an okay, uh, upbringing. Just the fact that my father died. He was killed. And luckily, the bad parts was before I had a sense of the world or myself. So I don't remember them a lot. I just kept on… but other than that… (Andile).

However, this idealisation of his father seemed to put extreme pressure on what Andile felt he was expected to emulate as a father:

Yeah, my father was God to me, you know. He was… I admired everything about my father. Every… till this day, like, everything that he was, I just wish I could be just half the man, you know. So, when I look at my other son today, and how he regards me, I understand completely. Because that's how I saw my dad, you know (Andile).

Andile seemed not to be able to recognise his views of his father as idealised and what he wishes he had experienced. Bandile also described growth, a change in mindset and needing to be exemplary, that he associated with becoming a father. His use of the word 'hero' illustrates an idealization of the father role:

…it's a stage of growth, ya, its a stage of growth and a stage where you shouldn't be thinking like before, because of if you're a father…you're changing from playing, from things that you used to think of and you no longer thinking about yourself anymore but you're thinking that eish, there is now a person that is watching me as a father, and I must be a role model to them…Being a father, you're a role model to somebody so that when they look at you, they see a hero (Bandile).

The above views were often shortly followed up in the interviews with information that revealed that these fathers did not get the opportunity to experience having a present father.

Thus, some of their descriptions of their childhood experiences were recognized as idealized in an unconscious attempt to manage the pain connected to accepting the absence or loss of their fathers. The absence and loss of their fathers was painful to acknowledge and accounts of times they felt the loss were often filled with rationalisations and attempts to minimise the pain by including gratitude and emphasis on their father's lack of fault:

> *I grew up without a father. Through no fault of his own. He passed away. He was killed when I was very young. You know, but, those few years I was with him, and later on not having him and seeing friends around me, uh, parents' evenings, everything in school, they had their dads. I mean, I was brought to tears the first time I had to think these are things that my father should have taught me. And the world itself, like, I'm appreciative of lessons I learned. But unfortunately, some things I didn't have to experience* (Andile).

Throughout the interview, Andile spoke as though he had a lengthy experience of a present father, until this moment of expressing that in actual fact it was brief and incomplete. He was able to briefly get in touch with his feelings of loss, longing and envy and raw pain. In this moment, he was able to express his deep conscious wish to have been guided by his father. Jabu's interviews were similar. He initially gave the impression that his father had been present for him until his death, however, it eventually emerged that his father was absent even before he passed away. Before this moment, he had explained his fathers' absence being solely due to death:

> *My father couldn't be there, you know. And even when he was alive, I was a part of his life somewhat* (Jabu).

This difficulty acknowledging the absence of their fathers suggested attempts to deny the pain it had caused them, as well as perhaps some tension around the fact that recognising their disappointment in their fathers might mean acknowledging the pain they may have caused their own children. Later in Bandile's interview, he elaborated on how he managed to disconnect himself for years from the disappointment and reality of his absent father, by choosing not to know the entire truth about his father:

> *I didn't really follow the story but from what I was told he used to love girls and he would hit my mother, so I did not like that about him and I didn't entertain him because of I was young. I think I was early 20s at the time. Early 20s. I think I was early 20s* (Bandile).

Jabu also seemed to suppress the traumatic experience of the loss of his father, by focusing his attention on his grandfather's presence as a father figure:

> *I think my father passed away when I was about three or four. So, I'd say my grandfather was my father…Um, my, my real father's story like I just said, it's, uh, he passed away when I was a kid. And he passed away when he was a kid, too. I just recently realized he passed away when he was 24. That's crazy, right*?...*Like the person that played a father role in my life was an… was an… was an awesome man. So, um, I didn't feel like I didn't have a father. I just didn't have one* (Jabu).

While he did seem fortunate to have had a grandfather who stepped into the father role, he struggled to acknowledge the reality that he had not had his father around when growing up. This is captured in the statement "I didn't feel like I didn't have a father. I just didn't have one".

For most of these fathers, recalling their own childhoods entailed grappling with complex and painful realisations of what they had and had not received from their fathers. Although some of the participants were not able to reflect on how this may have impacted their own fatherhood journeys, desires for a different outcome for their own children was evident. For most of the participants, however, these desires had not materialised.

4.2.6 Absent versus present fatherhood.

In addition to idealising their own fathers, it was also very difficult for fathers to articulate their own absence in their children's lives. There were moments where fathers completely denied and disowned the idea of absenteeism and them being absent fathers:

> *I mean, it's, it's unfortunate that it's, it's almost perpetuated by media. That, like father's, uh, run away. But it wasn't my experience growing up. Every single family member I know, grew up with their dads. And if it was not so, it was sometimes, it was an unfortunate instance of their passing away* [his own father died when he was very young]. *It's odd that I don't know where people actually get it from, you know. But it must be true, I suppose if there's… I mean, you can't really question data. If, if, if statistics say that Black parents, you know… because again, within my social group, it's, it's usually so that people are usually in the same class. So I don't know what*

> *happens in different classes. So my view could be sheltered and suppose maybe stats agree with the portions that I'm not aware of in society* (Andile).

Andile psychically defended against acknowledging that father absenteeism was a prominent occurrence in society amongst the Black community. In this instance he appeared to use class as a way of distancing himself from the discourse of absent fatherhood. This was despite data he later referenced, stating different statistics. He spoke in a manner that was out of touch with a problem in South Africa that one could say is widespread and known by most. It seemed that his feelings of frustration with how media outlets portray the issue perhaps revealed an unconsciously trigger for him – he became irritated when reminded of his own absence to one of his children as a Black father. At other points in the interview, perhaps when spoken about more abstractly and less personally, Andile was able to allow himself to think about the idea that Black father absence was an occurrence. However, he seemed to need to defend against what this would mean for him as a father.

Andile spoke about class as being able to protect one from being an absent father. While he explained that he was unable to fully take up his fatherhood role and identity for his first child, due to him not being able to financially provide, he appeared more comfortable focusing on a 'breaking cycles' narrative – that becoming financially successful had allowed him to be a present father for his subsequent children:

> *So I'm very grateful for that experience with my father. And that's the type of father I want to be. Not, not… as I said before, not be applauded for doing what I'm meant to do. But I would just like to break certain cycles, you know, and stereotypes* (Andile).

His role as a present father appeared threatened by the existence of a simultaneous absent father role to his first child and he glossed over the fact that he had become emotionally absent from his first child, and subsequently physically and financially absent with time. In subtle ways, Andile demonstrated his internal struggle to acknowledge his absenteeism, needing to deny having this experience with one of his children. He failed to recognise that by aspiring to be a present father, meant that he was acknowledging that for one child, he is absent. Andile's narrative suggested a fantasy he held: that being present in his other two children's lives would somehow make up for and absolve him of his identity as an absent father in his first-born child's life. When he was able to acknowledge his absence for his first child, he struggled to find words:

Because more than for my sake, I'd just like for my kids to know each other. I'm married now with two more kids. And that just is almost proof to the fact of my willingness to be a parent, you understand? It's not even… it's just horrible, you know (Andile).

Another way that father absence appeared defended against in the narratives was through the use of the word 'we', where, for example, in Jabu's narrative, blame was constructed as shared through the use of the word 'we' to make his ex-partner complicit. The use of 'we' versus 'I' allowed him to share the responsibility of his absence, which perhaps allowed him to be able to engage with the reality of his absenteeism:

Why, why… are we doing this to appease this guy [their son]? Or, are we doing this because, you know, I must have hurt her very badly?" I don't know… I don't know what it is (Jabu).

While his partner's gatekeeping does make her complicit, Jabu appeared to struggle to own his father absence fully and take responsibility for his contribution – the fact that he is the only absent parent in his child's story appeared too painful to bare. Later in the interview, however, Jabu was able to take some responsibility and he attributed his absence to selfishness and taking his fatherhood for granted:

Um, there are times when I blame myself, because maybe I feel like I could have done more. Or I can do more. Um, but I'm not. I'm just maybe just selfish, focused, [chuckles] or whatever… I also was careless… Because I always thought, I, I can always go back. I can just get some money then go back and just fix everything (Jabu).

Again, there appeared to be a fantasy that helped him in this regard. In Jabu's case this was a fantasy of reconnection, in which financial success would allow for reparation and magical resolution. Sipho also struggled to acknowledge his absent fatherhood. It was difficult for him to acknowledge that he had an experience of not being fathered that psychically and emotionally affected him. He disavowed the impact that his father's absence consciously and unconsciously had on him, and later how this potentially impacted and predisposed him to becoming an absent father:

The experience I had with my father hasn't influenced my experiences, or my fatherhood experience in, in any way whatsoever. Because like I said, I promised myself that I, I will… I will never… like I will never… I will never be like my dad in any way. So it's just unfortunate that yeah technically I'm not there for her, but… which is not

intentional. You know, but my experience with my dad didn't, didn't influence or doesn't have any influence on my experience, or on my fatherhood experience whatsoever in any way. Like even though we have our downfalls and everything, but it didn't influence me in… in anyway (Sipho).

Sipho defended against the idea that he repeated the same absenteeism pattern that he experienced as a child. He instead viewed his absenteeism as a technicality that was different and excusable from his father's, where in fact both men were absent due to the dissolution of romantic relationships:

…I think it wasn't absent, absent. The fact which I'm calling it absent makes me feel like I was completely out of it. So, I was still present and participating in things. But I felt like I more participate… I just contribute towards transport money. But emotionally I wasn't so connected. I think the reconnection was more emotionally inclined… I mean, the kid stayed with my mother so we kind of had a direct clear vision (Thato).

Thato referred to a partial absence that felt easier for him to own and accept. His narrative highlighted the different types of father absence that one can qualify for. Thato's on and off relationship with his son appeared to create a tension for him and thus he was unable to fully engage with that fact he had been absent for long periods of time.

Bandile also struggled to own his absenteeism. His narrative suggested that he defended against this identity by painting himself as a victim, as well as by joining in with other absent fathers and justifying his choices:

…we as men don't have anything that will help us to fight for our children. I even see the reason, because I also grew up without a father. So I even understand why our fathers they were not there for us because if you'll be busy going after someone who's blackmailing you with your child, you might end up doing things that you didn't plan on doing. But now so, what prevents us from getting along is you need to stop seeing the child, you need to stop because of this person is always provoking you, provoking you. She knows that you love the child so you are going to get there saying that you love your child, so that's what's happening yeah (Bandile).

He placed a lot of blame on mothers for the position that fathers found themselves in, without any reflection about how men contribute to these situations. This sense of detachment was to a point where he struggled to engage with his own father's absence in a manner that would

require his father to be accountable. One could hypothesize that, in order for Bandile to hold his father accountable, it would in turn require him to hold himself accountable.

In general, the narratives suggested that the label of 'absent father' was deeply painful - perhaps too painful for these fathers to perceive themselves in this manner, thus they needed to defend and distance themselves from the label of absent.

4.3 Experiences of disconnection

The participants' narratives constructed marriage or partnership with the mothers of their children as important with regards to the father role. It seemed that many of the participants struggled to claim their fatherhood identities as separate from their relationships with the mothers, and in many instances, mothers were blamed for fathers' absence in their children's lives. In some cases, it seemed that the participants gave the power to mothers to determine their fatherhood journeys, and in turn, mothers exercised that power to their liking and advantage. The degrees to which the ending of the relationship with the mother of their children had been processed differed. The participants demonstrated varying levels of insight and capacity to be accountable for the roles they may have played in the breakup of the intimate relationship, and for the lack of relationship with their children. In most cases, the dissolution of the romantic relationship made it difficult to co-parent, as difficulties arose after the breakup of the intimate relationship. These further contributed to disconnections in the father-child relationship. The three issues identified by participants as creating problems in the co-parenting relationship were: financial arguments, the mother finding a new partner, and a lack of support or interference from the maternal family.

4.3.1 The role of the end of the romantic relationship

Andile was able to acknowledge his youth and the fact that he was not ready for fatherhood as having played a role in the end of his relationship with the mother of his child. He seemed to have reflected on the situation and made space for the possibility that his partner acted from a space of feeling neglected:

> *Uh, like just being present. I only learned later on that, look, I, I... like I say, I won't put sole responsibility on the mother and everything. I wasn't the best person. I was*

young. So I suppose in the midst of him being born, I forgot that she was my partner, and it was all about him. I neglected her. So you become aware of certain things as you grow older as well. So that's why I'm not even mad at her because I saw she did things in response, not necessarily because she was a hateful person (Andile).

Andile felt that his age affected his ability to navigate through his relationship difficulties with his partner in a manner that could allow for him to father. However, the institution of marriage also appeared to influence how he navigated his claim to fatherhood:

I went to the court. Her father, uh, um, the grand dad told me that there were different ways of doing it. But that hurt me because, okay I understand and I respect what he brought forth, that, "Look, you could have approached me", but within our culture, it's almost like… almost disrespectful. I didn't marry your daughter and yet I want to address certain issues with you. So, I did what was best for everyone, you know. And I, I got, uh, like mediated visits. And when that didn't pan out, like, uh, every week I had… it was every weekend..." (Andile).

Andile decided to pursue the legal route to try and reconnect with his child. It seemed that because he was not married, the only way that he felt he stood a chance in fighting his cause was to approach an objective legal authority. Years later, Andile invested into the institution of marriage which seemed to make him feel like he had more legitimacy in the world:

I'm more respected now. Far more respected. I thought, um, obviously, it's all about perception management… I think so. I think so. Because again, I mean marriages are very difficult. This is what I experienced. But my willingness to stay there, I suppose, gives people that had thoughts of being married, hope that it can work out. All of that. So people will, will have respect for that, and admire that (Andile).

Furthermore, Andile felt that society generally perceives unmarried fathers as not being worthy of respect. In his opinion, fathers are more likely to gain respect if they are married, as it categorizes them as family men. He struggled to attain this in his first relationship and experience of fatherhood. Thus, there was a sense that being married now has made a significant contribution to him being able to father his second and third children. Many of the participants' ability to fully take on their fatherhood roles seemed to be tied to the authority that marriage seemed to hold. This was linked to the degree that unmarried fathers felt they had no power, and no right to exert themselves as legitimate fathers.

In Jabu's case, he reasoned that because he did not choose to marry the mother of his child, it led to him not being able to gain access to his child nor have a voice in his future. Furthermore, Jabu felt that when his ex-partner did eventually get married to another man, he lost his child to this man, with no room for negotiation:

> *It had to do more with the family, and everything. And at the time, I was just… I've, I've… and I thought about it, because what she wanted, she wanted marriage. And I was like, I'm not gonna get married, right now until you and I are at a good space". Because the worst thing that you could ever do is be together and be with this kid…Uh, and then she got into a relationship, but at the time I was already also in a relationship, which I… you know, it was… it was really up to her to be with whoever she wanted to be with. And then casually I started seeing [his child] less and less… Maybe I shouldn't have broken up with her. Maybe I should have just stayed there, you know [chuckles]…And then she got married…[she said] "I'm just letting you know, this guy says he wants to marry [their child] as well"… "okay, marry your daughter, not my son, you know?" And they're like, "No". They're pretty adamant that this is gonna happen"* (Jabu).

Once again, marriage seemed to carry a lot of authority – this time in a manner that disempowered the biological father.

Jabu could not reflect on how him being in a new relationship potentially contributed to him slowly becoming distant from his child. In his mind, Jabu seemed to link the idea of seeing less of his child to the presence of a new relationship on his ex-partner's part. The fact that Jabu alluded to the idea that staying in a relationship with his ex-partner may have resulted in him being able to parent, highlights the role of the relationship with the child's mother as potentially facilitating the fatherhood role. Additionally, evident in many of the excerpts above, there seemed to be a common understanding of 'a cultural way' of handling matters. This included the expectation to marry the mother of your child. An inability to do this was experienced as disempowering for fathers. This will be discussed further under the section below on gatekeeping by mothers and the maternal family.

Bandile also associated his ex-partner entering a new relationship with not wanting him to father his child. He understood his ex-partner and her family pushing for a lobola process with her new partner in order to displace him as a father.

> *...she started seeing this other guy and they were busy together and then they [the maternal family] pushed for lobola so that I wouldn't have access. So I respected that and I couldn't do anything about it. But for me that thing hurt me a lot because when the child is raised by a different father there are often complications and he'll be raised by a different set of values so it doesn't make any sense* (Bandile).

This way of understanding what happened in his fatherhood process highlights the rejection he felt. He was particularly embittered since he felt that he had had to parent in a manner that he considered unusual. Due to his ex-partner needing to focus on her studies, he was forced to take on what he perceived as the role of a mother. This brought up feelings of resentment in him:

> *And my story is very painful because when the child was born the mother of the child was still in school. I had to become the mother here, you understand, for a newborn. I need to feed them, I need to bath them from a new-born baby, can you imagine?…and the child at the age of one year…the mother started dating and doing untoward things. I even said to her family, to make things easier, because she still wants to fool around, she must give me the child, then she can go fool around so that her and I don't fight* (Bandile).

The maternal family did not give him the baby, however, instead opting to take the baby into the maternal grandparents' home to be raised. Bandile had allowed this, and then appeared to have given up his parental rights when his ex-partner remarried. While his narrative blamed the mother for his absence, he was able to acknowledge his role in a somewhat tangential manner:

> *I was raised by my grandmother and grandfather, and I only understand my father now that I'm old. I wish if he was still alive because he's late, because of through the experience that I have with the mothers of my children I am now able to understand that there are mistakes that were made with my mother that made her move on with other people* (Bandile).

Bandile acknowledged the mistakes that he felt that his father had made with his mother. This seemed to be his indirect way of beginning to get in touch with the idea that two people contribute to the outcome of a circumstance. In all three quotes, however, it seemed that Bandile felt rejected by his ex-partner and thus was unable to fully immerse himself in his

fatherhood role. Significant to all narratives, in fact, was that when the romantic relationship ended, fathers seemed to experience a sense of rejection from their ex-partners that contributed to them disengaging from their fatherhood roles. Although Andile had won legal rights to his child, it appeared that his ex-partner later became angry and stopped allowing visits because she felt that he was leaving the child with his mother rather than caring for the child himself during visits:

> *But this new aspect of my life it meant less time, uh, to make money, you understand? So she didn't like that at all. So it caused further friction…And it got to a point where my mother, uh, who at the time was living in Cape Town. Every time she'd come to Joburg, she'd come see the child and then come home, you understand? So she came… she came to Gauteng every weekend. And she [his ex-partner] sent me a text message saying, "This is your child, not your mother's". And she became very different, um, with the child. She had… in her head, it looked like a bargaining chip* (Andile).

Although Andile realized that he was not spending as much time as he could have with his child, it appeared as though he blamed his partner for the lack of relationship with his child, and instead of reaching out to his child, was now passive-aggressively waiting for his ex-partner to *'do the right thing'*:

> *And I intentionally didn't move, thinking that at some point, she'd just feel, let me do the right thing. I haven't moved for that reason… I know where she stays. I don't know if I should say this, but I've stopped. I… like it's… yeah, but that's where also I'm not okay mentally, you understand* (Andile).

He described what seemed like acting out behaviour, by choosing not to try and reconnect with his child. It seemed that Andile felt that it was his ex-partners responsibility to reach out to him and help him reconnect with his child. He appeared to hold some awareness of his passive-aggression in his wondering whether he *"should say this"* and his qualification of his behaviour as being a result of his being *"not okay mentally"*.

Wandile's narrative also reflected ambivalence around his role in the lack of relationship he has with his daughter. Wandile had a history of being physically violent towards his ex-partner, however, at first, he struggled to reflect on how some of her actions may have been extreme measures to try and protect herself and ultimately their child. He described with indignation times where he felt that his ex-partner was being unreasonable:

So she'll drop the kid at the police station. A two-year old, on the day that I need to go and see my daughter. Imagine, she's like, "You'll find her at the police station".I'm like, "Okay, it's fine". And that never happened (Wandile).

Whilst victim-perpetrator dynamics are often complex and mutually abusive, it was apparent that Wandile experienced this as his ex-partner manipulating him, as he would arrive at the police station and she wouldn't arrive with the child. He struggled to recognize that his ex-partner might have been fearful of him and this was her way of communicating this. This could have been her way of making a statement that she felt that he should not be given the opportunity to father and that she felt that she needed to protect their child from possible harm. Rather, he seemed quite consumed with the rivalry between himself and his ex-partner, that he (rather illogically) appeared to perceive decisions pertaining to his child's well-being as being related to his ex-partners dislike of him:

Rumour is she's in [location] but the dad [ex-partners dad] is in… apparently her dad is, is fond of my daughter. He's so fond of my daughter. They're trying to spite me they're taking her to private school. She's [ex-partner] close to her dad actually. She moved with her mom and dad to a townhouse or somewhere. I think she's in [location]. Still driving the same car. So she's, yeah. I don't know… I don't know about her, but apparently she's in [location] (Wandile).

Wandile downplayed the role that his physical abuse of his ex-partner played in his lack of relationship with his child, to the point of reversing the roles and depicting himself as a frightened victim:

I used to be violent. I'm not gonna lie. I used to, to be violent. I used to be physical. But funny now I'm scared of her… I'm still with the person that she caught me cheating with … and we've got a second child now. Fine. I'm not fighting her. I just wanna be part of myself, my daughter. That's all. (Wandile).

Wandile's comment above seemed to reflect a belief that his biological contribution to his child entitles him to access, as she is *"part of myself"*, and that this was being denied to him by his ex-partner. This entitlement was also apparent in his statement that the break-up of the relationship with his ex-partner had surprised him, despite his acknowledgement that he had been abusive in the relationship:

…we were so…we were so close to such an extent that I also never thought that we would break up (Wandile).

Although at first during the interview it had seemed difficult for Wandile to comprehend the reaction and decisions that his ex-partner had decided to implement, he eventually was able to take some accountability with regards to the turnout of events:

I blame myself, on that I disappointed her…Because at times I, I applaud her… I'll drive. I'll, I'll party. I'll drink. I used to drink a lot. I used to drink. Uh, at times I would say…I told myself, "Maybe she did the right thing". Because I know she also loved my daughter… whatever decision she took, she, she does have a reason. It might have helped…because I was still young. I was still young. I'm not going to lie to you. I was still young and knowing her, she never… it was all about me and her and the kid. She didn't want me to have friends. There was a time I befriended some guys here in the township and we'd drink, she didn't like that. Because I was not giving her enough time anymore. So, I know, whatever decision she took, it must have benefitted the kid. That's how… that's how… that's how I am right now. I fear at the same time I applaud her. I don't know up until I meet my daughter and hear what she says (Wandile).

In the moments Wandile acknowledged his contribution to the breakdown of his romantic relationship, and ultimately his relationship with his child. He recognized that he had excessive behaviours that contributed to the demise of the romantic relationship and compromised the safety of their child. He felt that he was too young for the kind of responsibility fatherhood required and that the mother of his child was justified in her reaction and made a decision that was in the best interests of their child. However, these moments would not last long and he would shortly resume a position of anger and having been wronged.

Sipho was not able to reflect on the possibility that he may have contributed to the breakdown in his relationship with the mother of his child, or that he may have contributed to the difficulty of his situation. He struggled to see the possible influence of both parties in this outcome. Sipho presented a storyline that was vague and one sided. He positioned himself as a victim who had been denied the right to his child, which he seemed to feel absolved him of having to take any accountability:

Being denied . I was… I was being denied to not be in my child's life. Like that's the honest truth. I didn't wake up one day and decide that I don't want to be a part of my

child's life anymore. Or decide to neglect her for whatever reason. No. I, I was just purely denied (Sipho).

I have asked her. Well, after, after that meeting, with her brother coming to threaten me and everything. So we had like, sort of a family meeting. My family was there. Her family was there and then words were exchanged. You know, yeah, things were said. And then I think that's what like made everything worse more than anything. Because at some point she did… she did say or confessed rather that, "Because of a certain individual said this and this, this is why I'm not or I was not allowing you to see your child." And a certain individual not me but a certain individual said this and that, so yeah (Sipho).

Thato also struggled to reflect in a manner that took into consideration the perspective of multiple parties involved. He referred to him and his new wife finally being able to convince the mother of his child to allow their son to live with him. However, this did not last long. There seemed to have been conflict between his son's mother and Thato and his new wife. Thato's son expressed to him that he felt that Thato was insensitive about his mother's Bipolar diagnosis. As a result, Thato's son chose to only live with him for a couple of months, and soon moved back to live with his mother. He appeared to have felt angry with Thato and protective over his mother:

We won. I have every right that my son to stay with me. But when it happened, I think, November December. And when it happened he decided to leave, and the question, why did I speak to his mother the way I spoke to his mother with the mental condition. Because I had to. I knew that I had to. Because my woman now is moving out because she feels threatened. She feels unsafe. She can't sleep (Thato).

Thato had managed to reconnect with his child, however, he struggled to recognize how some of his behaviour towards the mother of his child negatively affected his child emotionally. His preoccupation with his strained relationship with his ex-partner seemed to interfere with his capacity to think about his child. He struggled to understand why his child would choose to distance himself from him. In this instance, it was not only important how the dissolution of the romantic relationship happened, but also how the child felt about the dissolution, as well as the parents' treatment of each other thereafter.

In all the participants' accounts of the endings of their relationships with the mothers, it seemed difficult to think in-depth about their role in the matter. Some of the fathers had 'blind spots', however, in some instances were able to offer some recognition that they had contributed in some way. Some of the participants were able to reflect on how they had perhaps not been ready for fatherhood, in the the ways fatherhood required and they were able to take responsibility for their absence. Thus, some of the fathers took accountability for how they contributed to their ex-partners' negative reactions towards them as fathers, while others assumed a position of victimhood and felt wronged – blaming the mothers for not allowing or facilitating their fathering roles. In all cases, however, the cause of their absence was often attributed to the end of the relationship and their ex-partners, and ex-partners moving on.

4.3.2 Financial disagreements

One of the factors implicated in a disconnection in the father-child relationship was financial arguments between the separated mother and father. Some of the men felt that the mother of their child, as well as the maternal family, made requests that were intended to keep them away from being able to father. Sipho was unemployed when his child was born. He stated:

> *...no matter the circumstances. Like I'm saying, even though I was unemployed and everything, but then I, I tried my hardest to be there, no matter what. Whether I'm broke, whether I have a bit of money* (Sipho).

However, this determination to be present appeared to be only half of the story. It seemed like Sipho's ex-partner asking for financial assistance in order to help raise their child had been internalized as him 'paying to see his daughter'. Sipho did not seem to consider this as him playing his part as a parent:

> *And then sometimes, it gets to a point where, like, "Why do I need to pay to see my daughter?" Like, like it feels… it gets to that point where it feels like now I need to pay to see my daughter. And then, uh, it really dampens the spirit honestly. And then sometimes you feel like, uh, let me just… even if sometimes I have money, I would just, uh, you know what, let me not… and then sometimes it hits me, "Oh, no, I cannot." And then I try to reach out again. And then they become difficult. Sometimes they open up to me …* (Sipho).

It is implied above that his access to his child was determined by whether he had contributed financially or not, and this angered him. He retaliated by withholding funds; there were times that he could have financially contributed towards the care of his child but chose not to. This then also contributed to the fact that he unable to physically see his child and be present in her life. There seemed to be a tension between him blaming his ex-partner for creating this problem and sometimes recognizing that he had contributed to the disconnection. He described 'try[ing] to make amends':

> *And then because even during the period, um, that transcended into me disconnecting from her, but then when I had maybe a bit of money to give or clothes or whatever, that's the only time I would get a chance to see her. So and then at some point, you know, I, uh, the heart... the heart gets heavy, and then you… like it's, it's really… it's derailing you know, when you, you try to make amends, to try and see the child and then they, they, they keep like, shutting you out* (Sipho).

It is clear that Sipho felt shut out when he could not provide materially for his child and that he eventually gave up. Wandile also felt extorted by his ex-partner:

> *…I realized that no man, life is too short. I need to live. That's when I started. That was… we broke up in 2010, I tried 2011, but nothing happened. I was told that I need to pay 1,400 to, to, to see my daughter first. I've got the email* (Wandile).

In these descriptions, it is not clear whether he was being extorted or purely required to financially contribute to the maintenance of his child. Later in Wandile's narrative he reported that his ex-partner had stolen funds from his bank account:

> "*I didn't pay it. How can I pay it after you, you, you cleaned my account? And I've got proof. You cleaned my account and you send me a message. I asked you why are you doing this? I don't have any contact from the bank*." (Wandile)

Whilst the events described above by Wandile were disturbing, it felt suspicious that the matter was not pursued legally. I wondered if a garnishing order had been made on his salary at that point. Nevertheless, he also felt shut out by the mother of the child and seemed to have chosen not to pay maintenance because "life is too short and [he] need[s] to live it". These two fathers expressed disagreement with regards to mothers requiring a financial contribution from them. They felt that these requests were not justified and were used to prevent them from being present fathers. Bandile placed more emphasis on feeling connected to his boy child that he did

not have access to, versus his girl child to whom he had access. He described having an amicable relationship with the mother of his daughter, because she did not require him to provide financially for their child, thus he was able to father. His relationship with the mother of his son was more fraught, however, and he did not visit or see his son.

Whilst Andile could afford to financially contribute to his child's needs, it that he did not fully trust the mother of his child, experiencing her as attempting to punish him financially and through the withholding of access to his child. He was able to reflect on how his retaliation to this did not help matters:

> *Not being able to see my boy. Uh, creche payments, and I also became difficult. She would choose very expensive creches on purpose. And then come month end, she'd give me a call asking, uh, where the money was. And I said, "I deposited." And she'd be like, "It's, it's, it's short." I explained to her, "Look, uh, we're co-parenting. You should have your half." So that further, um, exacerbated the situation. And I told her, "Look, list me every single thing he needs monthly, and I'll pay for it and just delivered it at your home. But I'm not going to give you money directly." And, yeah, that just made everything worse* (Andile).

4.3.3 Being replaced in the father role.

Sipho felt displaced with the idea of another man being present in his child's life:

> *It's, it's technically like, we don't have a relationship now. Honestly, it's like, because also the, the mother of the kid now has… um, I don't know… I don't know how to, to put the title to that guy. Because I'm not really familiar with him in that way. I wouldn't know if… I wouldn't… like I wouldn't even know if they're married. Maybe it's the husband or boyfriend. Or, and then he, he spends more time with my daughter. So, what was the question again? I'm sorry* (Sipho).

Sipho seemed to struggle to fully acknowledge or reconcile the presence of a new man in his child's life. While possibly reflective of an unconscious attempt to dismiss the reality, the mother of his child's new partner's presence seemed to disorient him. The end of his romantic relationship as well the presence of a new partner in the mother's life, also appeared to evoke difficult feelings of rejection and neglect for Bandile:

> *...it was not easy to reach the child, she [the mother of his child] made a terrible decision. First of all, you can't neglect the person you have a child with, the father of the child, because of people like so and so for you, you have moved on with another man. Not like only dating, but you are staying together. So for me calling my son at the age of two, or three years or four years, on your phone that means that man will think that I still want you back. So, I'll wait until my child is grown then I will be able to buy him a phone and talk to him, because of I don't want to talk to the mother* (Bandile).

Bandile seemed to feel that the presence of another man meant that he could not access his child. The presence of another man appeared to be humiliating for him, and his perception that his calls to his child would be interpreted as him trying to 'get back' with his ex, suggest that this was perhaps his desire, as evidenced by his clear envy and anger at having been replaced. It seemed that his anger towards the mother of his child for rejecting him was so intense that his need to cut her off ("I don't want to talk to the mother") took priority over maintaining a relationship with his child. It seemed that the end of the romantic relationship was still something that Bandile needed to process and consolidate in his mind. He appeared to have relinquished the idea of reconnecting with his child as there may have been an underlying wish to raise his child with his ex-partner whilst still in a relationship with one another, and failure to do so meant that he would not father at all. There seemed to be no room to coparent outside of a romantic relationship existing. Jabu also had the experience of being replaced, although his experience of this differed from Bandile's in that he did try to maintain a relationship with his child, but felt kept out by his ex-partner and her family:

> *Oh, so many times. Oh, I've had everybody involved. Um, I tried to suck up to the father. I tried to suck up to the mother. I tried to suck up to the grandmother. Uh, I spoke to the grandmother. She told me point blank that she doesn't want to get involved. She… uh, as far as she's concerned, this guy is the new father therefore I had no place* (Jabu).

This seemed to be the case in Andile's experience with his first-born child. Whilst he decided to pursue a legal route to try to reconnect with his child, he simultaneously unconsciously disavowed himself as a primary parent and internalized that this definition belonged to the mother of the child. Andile displayed a conflict within in him, which may have been a deep wish to be able to single-handedly care for his child, whilst accepting the mother as primary and pushing the parental responsibility away in a manner that absolved him of having agency.

The mother becoming involved in a new relationship caused men to feel fearful about being replaced as fathers. Some of these fathers seemed not to feel confident enough to hold onto their fatherhood positions as the presence of a 'other' created insecurity in them.

4.4 Experiences of reconnection attempts

There was a predominant theme of loss in the fathers' narratives and a hope that there could be a positive future through reconnection. There was an awareness that a day would come where their children may want to know them or about them. Thus, reconnection was motivated by this concern and how they would be perceived and judged by their children in the present and in the future. Fathers expressed various feelings such as anxiety about future reconnections, a sense of sadness, hopelessness, guilt and shame. They highlighted the importance of the continuation of their genetics, generational bloodline and their children needing to be connected to this paternal identity. Fathers hoped and desired to make amends with their children as they expressed experiencing psychological and emotional distress and depressive symptoms due to being estranged. Many of the fathers empathised with the idea that their children potentially experienced similar psychological and emotional distress and wished to break a cycle of absenteeism.

4.4.1 Motivations for reconnecting

Each of the fathers had a unique combination of motivations that lead them to want to reconnect with their child. These included a wish to know their children and be known by them, a wish to rewrite narratives about Black fatherhood and not repeat history, and as a way to manage difficult affect.

4.4.1.1 Bonds: Knowing and being known

When asked about why they wanted to reconnect with their children, some of the fathers linked their motivation to the concept of family lineage and continuity. The notion of fatherhood as the biological contribution of genetics arose. Sipho expressed pride in being able to procreate, and felt that he had been able to offer the world a gift:

Like [chuckles] the thought of, knowing that, you know, I gave back to nature. Like I have… I have a brought life into the world (Sipho).

His motivation to reconnect seemed to involve wanting to continue to give back to life in some way through his child. For some of these fathers, the opportunity to reconnect meant an opportunity to pass down parts of who they are to the next generation. Failure to reconnect with their children would mean that this could not happen:

Especially because, uh, we've got pretty strong genes in my family. He's identical to me. So, it's, yeah, it's enough to drive you insane (Andile).

He alluded to a hope that his son carried something that was representative of him such as his genetics, however, this knowledge of a genetic link but no other connection evoked distress for him. Bandile also experienced his lack of access to his child as a loss in that he could not see himself and his genetic contribution through his child:

There are things that I will never see such as physical features that resemble me (Bandile).

Here Bandile was referring to how up to this point, he was not able to physically see or confirm whether his child resembled him in any way. Perhaps for him, this was the only way that he could feel connected to his child. Beyond genetic similarities, for some of the fathers, the wish to reconnect with their children was linked to a desire to know their children and to be known by them. Jabu described his shock when seeing a recent photograph of his child and realising that his child now wears glasses and that he had not known this:

… the other day somebody sent me pictures of him [his child] and he wears glasses. I was shocked. I was like, "Who wears glasses in my family?" [laughs] You know, I don't know those things about him. You know, he plays games. I saw he had a joystick on him. So, I was like, okay, we have that in common…For me, it stays with me and it upsets me quite sometimes. I think about it quite often, so but yeah (Jabu).

Jabu's comment suggests some preoccupation around wondering about how much of him his child had inherited, and the difficulty that lay in not knowing or being able to find out. A part of this wish seemed to be for the child to share a part of their identity. Wandile worried that without access to his child, she would develop an identity very different to his own:

> *We named our daughter [child's name]. I'm on her birth certificate. I'm there and I'll hate hearing that my child is smart and goes to school here and constantly speaks English* (Wandile).

It was upsetting for Wandile that he had no say in decisions that were made relating to his child's upbringing, despite being her father – a fact he attempted to legitimise through emphasising his appearance on her birth certificate. A common motivation for connection was a wish to know their children and be known by them. Andile found it very painful that his son did not know him:

> *Yeah, so he personally doesn't know me, you understand? So nothing is worse than that* (Andile).

These fathers had hope that through reconnection their children would internalize them in some way and hold them in mind:

> *So, I did things, not because they needed to be done. But even more so was open to it knowing that there's somebody one day that's going to be asked a question. Like, "Who's your dad?" I was very proud of my dad, you know. So I wanted the same thing for him. So when we reconnected, I saw myself slowly, reassembling, you know. Wanting to be that example* (Andile).

Andile had hopes that his son would hold him in positive regard in the way that he had felt about his own father. His comment highlighted the reciprocal nature of the relationship – that as much as his presence may allow for his child's healthy identity development, his child's approval seemed to allow for the development of a healthier father identity for him. The wish for their children to hold them in mind as fathers they could be proud of, was also evident through fears of the opposite occurring. In these cases, despite a wish to be known, for some fathers 'being known' by their children was anxiety-provoking. Jabu and Wandile wondered whether they were alive or dead in their children's minds, and what their children may think of them:

> *Because I'm not dead. I'm alive. Or they told him I'm dead, you know. Um, what he also thinks of me is important. And I think he thinks, I'm, you know… he thinks very less of me, if he does think about me* (Jabu).

It was painful for Jabu to imagine what his child may think of him, or to wonder if his child even thinks of him at all. Notably, as discussed above, Jabu's fear of being 'killed off' in his child's mind, may be linked to the fact that he had very few memories of his own father. His absence in his child's life seemed to feel like a repetition for him of the death of his father. Wandile also worried that his daughter had been told that he was dead and seemed to be anxious about how she may react towards him if he did try to reconnect:

> *I'm scared. Um, I fear how she's gonna… she's gonna react. I don't know whether she's told that I'm dead* (Wandile).

Wandile expressed a deep sense of fear and worry about whether his daughter would react in a manner that would be rejecting. He seemed unsure about whether he existed in her present reality.

4.4.1.2 A wish to break patterns and not repeat history.

There was a wish to change history and break patterns, both on the level of societal discourse about Black fathers and on a personal level – a wish for their child to have a different experience to what they had. Sipho expressed a desire to change the narrative about Black fathers in society and thought of reconnection with his child as a chance to prove that he can be a present father:

> *…it's a chance, a God given chance to prove that, um, Black fathers can be just as, as um, present and, and genuine and, and loving just as… I don't wanna… I don't wanna like pull the race card or anything. But then Black fathers can be… you know how it's, uh, stereotypically been put out there, you know, of the majority of Black fathers like they, they, they don't care or they're deadbeat or… yeah, all of those. But then I think it's, it's like a, a chance to prove, as a Black father, I can… I can be… I can be a family man, a family orientated man, you know. Love my kids or my kid and, and yeah, provide. Be, be there… be there more than anything. Show love, support and be there, be present. Yeah* (Sipho).

Jabu expressed a similar sentiment and included himself in what he believes is a problem in Black fatherhood as well as his own personal story:

> *I wanted the narrative to change. Like, I, I, I don't know how to say this. I, I feel as fathers we suck, right? Black South African fathers, like we just generally suck whether we're there or not. Like I've seen fathers that are there that really suck. So, I wanted to*

change the narrative. I wanted to have a relationship and not just like, um, a relationship where I'm just taking care of him, you know. I nurture him emotionally, mentally and otherwise (Jabu).

He acknowledged that he is part of a systemic problem that he has continued and would like to change once he reconnected to his child. Jabu had no information with regards to his own fathers' story, thus, he had a wish for his son to know his story:

And I can die anytime …You know, um, just like my dad. And I wish I could go somewhere and read something he wrote. I wish I could get his side of the story…I don't even know how he passed away. I don't want to ask that question… like I'm losing out on him (son), on the most formative years of his life. (Jabu)

He identified with the possibility of his child possibly not being able to have the opportunity to know his side of the story. He also felt sad that he could not be part of and experience his child growing up, and the loss of the chance to know and be known by his child appeared to resonate with the loss of his own father and the opportunity to have known and be known by him.

There was a strong desire to be able to guide their children. Andile also expressed a wish to be able to teach his son valuable lessons, so that he could be a "better version", and by implication, not make the same mistakes:

So it was almost like, he could have possibly been a better version of me. So, everything that I suffered, now made sense. Like, my life was no longer purposeless. That every bad thing I experienced, this was the reason. I can teach him now, you understand? It makes… nothing is better than validation, you know. Knowing that I didn't suffer for nothing (Andile).

He felt that the hardships that he had experienced during his absence as a father, would serve a positive purpose in his life upon reconnection with his child. He felt that these experiences would allow him to one day instil and pass on life lessons to his child. Bandile also felt that reconnecting with his child was important for the purpose of passing life lessons down to his son:

I know even my mistakes and that my children should not make, make the same mistakes, because when we grew up as guys we would adopt what was fashionable on the street

> *and then we would be influenced and think that a guy should be like this and know it all and stuff like that, but because of now I have experience of that thing I can give my child better lessons about those things* (Bandile).

In reconnecting with his child, Bandile hoped that it would protect him from the risks that come with life and growing up. He hoped that it would assist his child from repeating mistakes that he had made as a boy and man. The reconnection process would be for him to offer his son guidance.

For Sipho and Wandile, it was important for their children not to have the same experience of a father-child relationship that they had as children:

> *But then, personally, I told myself that the day I have a child, I wouldn't want the same thing to happen. I wouldn't want the same thing to happen to my child or to me or to my relationship with my child or something like that. But then yeah, to answer your question, my relationship with my dad was, was not all roses. Still not all the roses* (Sipho).

> *She was everything and the aim was not about the mom or anything. I just wanted my daughter. Because I never, I never planned. I never thought, um, my, my child would grow up without a father like I did. I never thought it will happen. But yes, it did* (Wandile).

The realization of the repetition of absence was a motivation to undo that pattern, as they could resonate with what their children were potentially experiencing. Most of the fathers had moments of being thoughtful about how their absence could affect their children, thus they longed to undo this. Andile, in particular, expressed an awareness that may be directly linked to his identification of once being in his sons' position:

> *And I can't imagine what he must be going through… I don't want him to have underlying issues unconsciously and let him have a negative experience of it. That's the last thing I would want* (Andile).

His reference to his son potentially developing underlying issues appeared to indirectly acknowledge his own negative psychological experience due to having experienced an absent father. Mabena also felt that his presence in his child's life would help her advance and succeed in life:

> *I'm her father… I'm her father. I'm her biological father. I need to be there for my child. I need to see her venture. I need to see her become something. She doesn't have to grow up the way I grew up. She has to be something in future if I may put it that way* (Mabena).

It also felt important for Mabena to bear witness to his child's success, perhaps reflective of a wish for patterns to be broken. A part of the wish to rewrite history was a desire to repair severed connections and make right the wrongs of the past. All of the fathers had initially been connected to their children at birth. This seemed to add a sense of joy and pride in varying ways, thus part of the motivation to try and reconnect was to heal and mend broken connections with themselves and extended family. Jabu felt that it was important for a child to build relationships with their extended family members:

> *I'd like him to have that, that, that, uh, that, um, being active with the tradition where I come from. Um, and yeah introduce him to… and also his family men. [The mother of the child] is not denying me only the chance to, to, to be a father. She's denying my mother a chance to be a grandmother… You know, she's denying us all a relationship with him… Like he doesn't know his people* (Jabu).

Jabu felt that it was important to recognize that there are two sides that make up a child's identity, and that active fatherhood could facilitate the building of this identity. He expressed unhappiness for what his family members were missing out on as a result of this this disconnection. The desire for his child to know his paternal family and have a relationship with siblings from his father's side also motivated Andile to want to reconnect with his child:

> *And he does have siblings… Because more than for my sake, I'd just like for my kids to know each other* (Andile).

Reflecting on his status as an absent father, Wandile seemed to carry a lot of shame with regards to having more than one child:

> *My grandfather would be disappointed that I had two different baby mamas. I never wanted that. Yes, it was a mistake, that… that I'm living with now. She caught me with, I have a child with someone else, yes, she was a side person, but I learned to love that person. Not for the sake of my child, but for the sake of loving a family* (Wandile).

It seemed that he perceived reconnecting with his child would be a way to try and redeem himself from his past mistake of not doing things the 'right' way and perhaps remedying the shame that he carries. Jabu described having had hopes to for a corrective experience through fathering his child.

> *And another thing is like even my story with my father, I never really got to know him. Um, partly because he passed away…But I never really got to know my father…. So I was pretty determined that, um, I have a different… I'm gonna be around for my son's life. And yeah so, when that happened, I was really happy about it* (Jabu).

Connecting again with his child would mean that his child would not have to wonder about him or not know about him, and for Jabu, that he would not have another 'lost opportunity' at a relationship.

4.4.1.3 To alleviate painful affect.

This group of fathers experienced a range of emotions that they struggled to process, and what appeared to be implied in some of their explanations for wanting to reconnect with their children, was a hope that reconnection may alleviate some of these painful affective experiences:

> *I'm angry. To be honest I'm angry. It saddens me. It's, it's, I feel like it's just unfair, so unjust, unnecessary. Um, I've never put [my son's] life in danger. I've never put [my ex-partner's] life in danger. I've never done anything that warrants this…I still want to do the things I want to do. It's just, there's an element of guilt. There's an element of guilt and, and, and, and being ashamed…you can't help but feel guilt when you see other men actually actively being a part of their kids' lives doing the things* (Jabu).

Jabu mentioned anger, sadness, guilt and shame in response to not having a relationship with his child. Wandile also mentioned experiencing fear as he wondered whether he could recover time lost with his child:

> *I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I don't know if I'm gonna be able to fill the gap…lost the drive actually. I lost the drive to, to, to, to live for my, my two kids that I have got now* (Wandile).

He also expressed a deep sense of hopelessness and felt demotivated with regards to his father role. Some of the fathers described experiencing an intense preoccupation about their absence in their child's life, from which only reconnection could relieve them:

> *… I can't reconcile with it. It, it upsets me. I'm like, "Oh, shit." I understand that I don't know if he's cold or if he's… I don't even know if he's sick. I don't know what condition he has* (Jabu).

Jabu described an inability to come to terms with not knowing anything about his child, including his child's well-being. Wandile also expressed feeling constantly preoccupied with thoughts about his child as well as the awareness that he missing out on important parts of her daily life:

> *And there was no day that would pass without missing her. Actually she used to… when we go to work, my mom would take care of her at home. So I, I, I miss lot and I feel that I'm missing a lot* (Wandile).

Many of the fathers' narratives contained expressions of distress about loss and absence that lead them to fall into depressive states. In some instances, these depressive states triggered thoughts of taking extreme measures to try and gain access to their children:

> *I hadn't been able to reconnect with him for years. I mean, I will… look, um, it's easy to, to, to, to make commentary when you regard a subject as… a subject as remote. Like, just off topic, but an example about it. When you hear issues of suicide and so forth, you think, "What's wrong with the person? Why would they kill themselves?" You don't understand until you are in that mental state. So wanting to reconnect with him almost got to a point where I went mad. Even got to a point where I wanted to kidnap him, you understand? I don't know to explain that it. It's almost like a part of you is no longer there, you know? That this is the only thing that could nourish that aspect to me. So I wasn't fully alive in a way. So, it's not really reconnecting with him. It's like I'm disconnected myself without him. So I'm trying to just realign in a way from something that's missing from me* (Andile).

Andile described experiencing severe depressive symptoms when he could no longer reconcile his child's absence in his life. He expressed having to negotiate a serious conflict within himself in order not to endanger himself or his son. Reconnection would mean that Andile would no

longer experience this hardship. Similarly, Jabu shared the sentiment of desperation to see his child:

> *Because I probably just try and abduct him or something just…* (Jabu).

Reconnection for Jabu would mean relieve him of the feeling that the only way he could be an active father was by forceful measures. Bandile described the loss of a relationship with his child as 'torture', and he had also had thoughts of resorting to drastic action to relieve these feelings:

> *I was happy, then I was hurt for a long time to the point where my pastor could see that I'm not okay, as I said my children would just pass away, premature but [this one] was the first born alive, and when he was born he was taken away, and it was torture, like torture torture torture. It was as if I could just run away with him and take him overseas (*Bandile).

Fatherhood had come with so much loss and depression that these feelings led him to consider acting out in extreme, even illegal ways like kidnapping, to gain access to his child. Reconnection was understood as something that could potentially end his misery. Fathers who had not managed to reconnect with their children appeared to feel like failures, and in two interviews it was noted that they used defensive positioning of themselves as 'still having value' or being capable of being good fathers:

> *Um, like I said, I feel ashamed. I feel like a loser sometimes. I feel like a loser. I mean, no amount of... no amount of... not to brag or anything, I'm quite… I'm quite popular around here, and I do a lot of stuff. I've been an editor of a newspaper. I've hosted the biggest gigs and so on and so on. I'm friends with very high profile people, you know. I'm cool… I would have loved to have my son around me to experience, you know. To grow with him as well* (Jabu).

When talking about the loss and pain of his fatherhood journey became too much to bear, it seemed that Jabu had to quickly remind the researcher and himself that he still had value and purpose in the world. Andile's positioning of his own father as idealised and present in the beginning of his interview, only for it to emerge that his father had died early on in his childhood, was mirrored by his positioning of himself as the preferred parent by the two children with whom he lives, with no mention of his first child with whom he has no contact. His inconsistent and contradictory accounts of fatherhood seemed to suggest shifts between

idealised and disappointing versions of fatherhood that he could not hold in mind simultaneously:

> *I like the fact that both my son and daughter when they cry, I'm the first person they call. You know, it's sad, but from, from infancy the only time they go to their mom is for milk. But, uh, to this day, my daughter only cries when she's laying on top of me. She… like the bond with my kids is so strong. It's… yeah. So, right now, I'm actually… we speak of defining my identity* (Andile).

Andile painted what seemed like an idealized version of his second chance at fatherhood.

4.4.2 Experiences of successful and unsuccessful reconnection

Out of the seven fathers who were interviewed, two had managed to reconnect with their children. The other five had attempted to reconnect but explained that the process had been impeded upon in various ways that prevented them being able to be present in their children's lives again. A successful reconnection was defined as a father managing to be in contact with their child, gain physical access to their child, and be able to foster a consistent interpersonal relationship with them. An unsuccessful reconnection was defined as a father who attempted to gain contact and physical access to their child and was unable to achieve that. In this section, the fathers' experiences of these two processes are discussed, including the positions taken up by the fathers in response to the difficulties as well as the things that made the process easier.

4.4.2.1 Experiences of successful reconnection

The two fathers who had managed to successfully reconnect with their children were Thato and Mabena. Thato's son initially lived with his mother [child's mother], where Thato was absent until the age of two. His son then intermittently lived with Thato's mother, where Thato had partial access. He felt that his own mother acted as a gatekeeper during this time, denying him access to his child:

> *So he moved from his mother and went to my place and stayed with my mom. I think the reconnecting from my mother's side it kind of created a lot of sour tension. So, I think my mother was under the impression because it's my son and he's a child out of wedlock,*

she felt she was obligated to adopt him and make him hers without consulting the original parents who were still alive. So, I felt, she felt that he's now her child and is not allowed to have an emotional relationship [with his father] (Thato).

. His child then left his grandmother's home and returned to his mother and Thato had no access at that time. As an adolescent, Thato's son came to live with him. Then he had fully reconnected with his child. His son lived with him for three years before returning back to reside with his mother [child's mother].

Thus, Thato alternated from complete absence and partial presence between birth and pre-teen years, to having access to his child in his teenage years even though they no longer lived together. He seemed to attribute many of the difficulties to the involvement of others. His own mother had limited his access to his child when she had cared for her grandson. The presence of a new partner in his life had also complicated the situation and it appeared that he had found trying to please both his new fiancé and ex-partner impossible. There had been conflict between his ex-partner and him and his new partner. His new partner had felt unsafe due to the behaviour of his ex-partner:

…You would ideally think that once a baby is created by two people, then the two people are the ones that need to have a controlling say, over the kid's life... I think the two parents are the ones that need to be solely involved. I mean, directives need to come from the mother or the father. So, I think the challenges come with involvement of third parties from both ends. It can be from my side, and can be from her side. So, I think my main challenge is having to take directive about your kid from someone else and they probably think they can override whatever decision that you've made for your kid. I think for me personally, the challenges come in that form (Thato).

One of the challenges that Thato experienced in his reconnection journey was feeling like he did not have a say so or power to make decisions over his child's life. The conflict between him and his child's mother had been a precipitating factor in his teenage son's decision to move back to his mother's house.

Some of the challenges that Thato experienced after reconnecting entailed having to be self-aware as well as aware of his child's emotions. Both parties had to adjust to the change in environment, as well as how it felt to be in one another's presence again. They had to get to know one another again. Thato was faced with various feelings and emotions arising within

him that he had to manage. Thato feared that he could not fully take up his fatherhood role and simultaneously maintain his new romantic relationship:

> *Like I'm still faced with the challenge, how do I jump this last hurdle of saying, can I be a fulltime dad? Can I be a dad? And I know my son's habits now. I know everything about him. Before he can say anything, I know this one is lying. I know this one is telling the truth. For someone to grasp that, they need to chill with him and understand him on that level. No other guy can fulfil that. That's my only concern and my only fear. But my fears are filled with a whole lot of uncertainties that if I pursue this, I'm going to lose my woman* (Thato).

His narrative introduced the challenges that accompany reconnecting and introducing a child into a blended family context:

> *It was easy. From this side. From him and I in respect of the process. The process is all about me and him reconnecting. The other parties made it hard for us to reconnect. The process was easy between me and him it's an easy vibe. But the process now of reconnecting, people around us watching it happen and the way it's happening, it even went to a point where it affected the relationship, with my current [fiancé]. To a point she [fiance] moved out last year. On the basis because It was tiring. It gets tiring. It gets tiring for any woman any smart woman to endure dealing with bitterness from all angles. Because it was bitterness from all angles. From my mother's side* (Thato).

On one hand, Thato felt that his reconnection process with his son was easy, however, it was made challenging by outside forces. In this case he is referring to how multiple incidents regarding his son that took place between him, his mother and his fiancé. These disagreements placed enormous strain on his romantic relationship:

> *We went to court and I have every right to have him with me. But if I can tell you the sad and most painful part, it's very frustrating…his mother during COVID last year, because he was still staying with me, he test positive. After testing positive, and then the mother went ballistic and she lost it. Straight to depression. Depression and started calling me and confessing and she was declaring things, now I would look and listen, it was a mental condition. It was more of, I want you back kind of situation. No matter come rain, some shine, I'm going to make sure I win you back. So, like it's a threat* (Thato)

Thato explained many instances that placed a strain on his current relationship that he felt ultimately contributed to the difficulty of his reconnection process with his son. One being that his ex-partner had unresolved feelings towards the dissolution of their relationship. The other being that his ex-partner and his own mother influenced his son going back to live with the mother of his child.

> *So, we kind of found out, okay, they [ex-partner and Thato's mom] were the ones that are plotting, my son needs to go back and stay in (location). So, yeah, it got to a point where, he left. He left without saying anything. At first, I thought maybe it's because of the TV that was broken, and I thought maybe because he lost his phone and he was scared. I wanted to find out, no he wasn't scared. We spoke over the phone. But eventually I found out it has been involvement from all parties that are surrounding* (Thato).

While he appeared to blame the ex-partner and his mother for moving the child back to live with his mother, where he has less access to his child, for his absence in the child's life, later in his narrative it emerged that he feels ambivalent about pursuing involvement in his child's life. He appears to feel torn as he realizes that his son needs him, but he also fears that his current partner won't stay with him were he to have his child live with him, as there had previously been conflict between them:

> *Like I'm still faced with the challenge, how do I jump this last hurdle of saying, can I be a fulltime dad? Can I be a dad? And I know my son's habit now. I know everything about him. Before he can say anything, I know this one is lying. I know this one is telling the truth. For someone to grasp that, they need to chill with him and understand him on that level. No other guy can fulfil that. That's my only concern and my only fear. But my fears are filled with a whole lot of uncertainties that if I pursue this, I'm going to lose my woman. Because I'm not backing my woman. Because she feels like she's threatened, and her whole livelihood is threatened. If that's the case, I need to protect somebody. Who do I protect? If I go for my son, you know what happens (*Thato).

Thato felt that he was put into a position of having to either choose between fathering his child as a full-time, present dad, and protecting his fiancé from harassment. He felt that before his son moved out, they had bonded so well that he was confident in his part-time fatherhood, but what came with full-time fatherhood was a threat to his romantic relationship. However, this

particular explanation appeared to dismiss or ignore other contributing factors that made his reconnection process difficult. Thato described his struggle with learning how to emotionally regulate his feelings as he experienced full-time parenthood for the first time. Having missed out on his son's early childhood, he had not had the experience of living with a child. He reported having to tone down his expression of anger and aggression:

> *Having to learn, okay let me control my anger. Okay, I was angry with him and I need to go back and try and explain to him that I was too aggressive. Because we do make these mistakes* (Thato).

> *November, December. And when it happened, he decided to leave and the question, 'why did I speak to his mother the way I spoke his mother with the mental condition'. Because I had to. I knew that I had to. Because my woman now is moving out because she feels threatened. She feels unsafe. She can't sleep. It messed up with her head to a point where she kind of believed in things that I never thought she would believe in [witchcraft]. As a Christian we're talking there's someone who has power over us, I knew and they can actually do things to you that you would never… but it was kind of weird for me. I would say it was very challenging emotionally, mentally. To a point where for me to have a relationship at the end of the day with my woman, 'what do I do?' Like I'm still challenged* (Thato).

Thato was able to reflect on how being harsh and insensitive to his ex-partner had negatively affected his son, however, ultimately, his romantic relationship had overshadowed his reconnection process with his son.

On a more positive note, however, Thato felt that his reconnection journey came with an emotional reparation:

> *But emotionally I think I recovered, because we managed to reconnect… because emotionally we were not connected. So we were forced to have a physical relationship so that we can achieve the emotional relationship which kind of created in the long run* (Thato).

Thato felt that during the times that his son lived with his ex-partner and his own mother [Thato's mother], he considered himself physically present as he would sometimes provide financially and sometimes see his son. However, he felt that there was an emotional disconnect between him and his son. At the point of residing with his son, he felt that he was able to

establish their emotional relationship. Thato emphasised the significance of residing with his son:

> *I think I've learned a lot over the past 3 years of staying with him…like I've learned a lot of things that I never thought I would… because I think when you portray something, or when you tackle or it happens, it's different. So when we spoke about it, which I wanted to reconnect, I did not know that I was going to be the coach now. I'm going to be a soccer coach. I'm going to be a trainer, a physical trainer. I'm going to be a teacher. I'm going to be a friend. I'm going to be a brother. We're going to speak about him hitting up on girls, and him making moves. Because I kind of connected. So, it kind of gave me… I'm a true dad. I actually erased whatever my dad… no actually wrote top of whatever, my dad could not right. So, I connected with him on the highest level* (Thato).

Once Thato and his son experienced living together on a full-time basis, he described undergoing a rich process of growth and bonding with his child. His relationship with his son shifted in a positive way that allowed him to not only feel like a true father, but to also take on different and important roles in his son's life. He felt that he was able to facilitate his child's development and milestones as well as teach him life lessons. This experience also offered Thato a corrective experience from his own experience of having had an absent father:

> *Like we're friends. He's my rival. He supports Manchester. I support Arsenal. He supports Pirates. I support Kaizer Chiefs. So that kind of vibe. We can actually stay at home and chill. We played PlayStation, he's my rival. Those kinds of things. I mean, it's little things that an absent father would never get to enjoy and comprehend to the highest level. When I say comprehend. Like it lights up my day. I know that I woke up for somebody. I know I have to be a better person. I mean, I even took a break for four years just to become a better person* (Thato).

> *The difference is immense. Like it's huge. it's me saying to the boys, "Gents, see you later, I need to go cook for you because there's somebody at home." "Gents, I need to check up on him, that is he sorted because he lost his phone I can't communicate with him". Being a father, you can't take a break. You can't take a break* (Thato).

Reconnection allowed Thato to really take on a role as father, which he seemed to enjoy, despite it feeling intense without a break. This experience made him feel that there was a difference

between fathering from a distance or his previous absent and intermittent experience, to being fully present. Active fathering motivated him to want to better himself as a person, and interestingly, he appeared to try to make sense of his previous absence through reframing this as time he had taken in order to better himself. This was, as opposed to it being time that was now lost. Having close proximity to his son allowed him not only to father from a close range but also it gave him a sense of purpose and joy. He enjoyed being a protective father:

> *Automatically I could look at him and say, "Okay, you are wearing sneakers. Why are you wearing these fancy sneakers? Where are you going? Why are you coming back late from school? Okay, why did you… okay why would your… those kinds of smaller things that don't mean anything to anybody but they mean a lot to somebody who has never explored and experienced those avenues* (Thato).

Once Thato was able to reside with his son, he felt that he was able to offer him guidance and be more involved in shaping his child's life. Being able to engage with his son was meaningful for him and an experience he reported having longed for, for many years:

> *To answer your question, I get goose bumps when I think about it. Because it's an experience no one can never express to it into words I can't explain it. But I'm free. I'm not looking at walls. I can see a bird. You know when you see a bird, I see them daily. But for someone who is locked up, can never get to understand what it's like to hear the sound of a bird, hear the sound of whatever sound that is. For me, it was like I'm visiting a foreign world, where everybody likes me, because I'm… it's like coming from South Africa and you're visiting Asia or wherever you go. They can see that you're not from there, but they like you. They don't hate you. It's that kind of feeling. That I can't put into words, but it's a very overwhelming feeling to reconnect and be a dad fulltime not part time* (Thato).

Reconnecting with his child seemed to free Thato from a psychological and emotional entrapment that he experienced absentee fatherhood to be. He had not yet consolidated his experience however, he felt that present fatherhood was uncharted territory for him. An area where he was still new and had a lot to learn but where he was wanted and pleasantly welcomed.

Mabena's reconnection with his child took a different route, and in this case the initiative towards reconnection came from his daughter. While he had attempted to reconnect with her previously, these attempts had not been successful:

> *We used to like fight over the phone. I used to call her and ask, "Why you don't allow me to see my daughter now?" She told me if I put it, uh, stupid, uh, reasons. At first, they did not give us a valid reason or a valid answer. Up until, I've tried, and nag and nag and nag up until they gave me access to my daughter* (Mabena).

therein his descriptions of previous attempts from him to reconnect that were unsuccessful, the phrasing of his understanding as to why they were unsuccessful at points felt dismissive and disrespectful towards the mother of his child's feelings. This interpretation is taking into consideration that he had a standing protection order against him for being violent towards his ex-partner during pregnancy. However, when his daughter was old enough to contact him, she reached out to her father:

> *Now she's got a, what can I say? A cellphone. She's got my number. She tried by all means to… we chat every day. Hi, daddy. How are you? Voice recording, such things… She pushed her mom that she must come to… over to my place… At first it was so, so sad for me. It was very sad to see my daughter taking the first initiative to come look for me. But as time goes on, we've connected. It's like every weekend on Friday, Saturday, Sunday, she's here. Sunday she goes back to her mom. She stays with her* (Mabena).

> *To see my daughter cry after a long while me not seeing her. It was very sad* (Mabena).

The sadness that Mabena felt was partly about his daughter having to take the initiative to reconnect, and partly about her expression of her own sadness and witnessing how much of a toll his absence had taken on her. He described how they negotiated these feelings:

> *I was angry. Before for me not to see my daughter… After, once I've reconnected with my daughter, we forgot about such things. I was like, let bygones be bygones. We forget about such…No hard feelings. I'm happy that my daughter is happy too* (Mabena).

Whilst absence and reconnection brought upon anger and sadness, reconnection made it possible for Mabena to process and let go of his difficult feelings. At a point in his process, having contact with his daughter took precedence over anything else and the happiness that

they both experienced seemed to be enough for him. Mabena felt some reassurance that he had a strong connection with her:

> *Uh, we have a very strong connection with my daughter. She knows who her real father is irrespective of the situation that's occurring or that's going through. But she clearly, clearly knows who the father is. Because she has grown up. Probably now she's about 10 to 11 years. But in most cases she wants to be here. She wants to… she wants to come and visit time and again, time and again. She wants to visit* (Mabena).

Mabena felt that despite his daughter not residing with him, as well as the mother of his child being in a new relationship, his connection with his daughter felt solid. He felt reassured by his daughter's consistent desire to spend time with him:

> *For me, when I go to see my daughter without something like previously before, I feel less of a man or less of a father, okay? I'm not saying that money buys love, but nowadays, a child will ask you a simple [thing] you cannot even provide. I'm unemployed. So there are things that you cannot do or push them or push the situation away and so on. Not that I'm relaxed, or I'm not doing anything. I do try to provide where I can. But if I can't, there's nothing I can do* (Mabena).

After reconnecting, during the times that Mabena could not financially provide for his child, it took a toll on his sense of manhood. Part of the legitimacy of his fatherhood was connected to what he could financially offer his daughter especially in the times that she made a direct request. Financial provision was an important factor for Mabena in him feeling like a father. However, so was his emotional presence in his daughter's day to day experiences:

> *Whenever she cries, I'm there. Whenever she needs help, I'm there* (Mabena).

Mabena felt guilty about how his reconnection process started. It seemed that now that he knew how much his daughter wanted to have a relationship with him, he regretted not having reached out first. During the period that he had had no contact with his daughter, he had feared that another man may have taken over his fatherhood role or replaced him:

> *When she wasn't there, I've lost hope in most of the things. You ask yourself questions that you'll never answer yourself. You might never know the mother was dating. Probably the child is seeing another man in her… in her life. Such things might harm*

the child. But when we reconnected, I was overjoyed that my child is back in my future (Mabena).

Mabena expressed his loss of hope and feelings of helplessness with regards to his daughter's life. Previously he had been concerned about not being able to protect her due to not knowing what was happening in her life, and a sense of relief pervaded his talk about having her back in his life.

Mabena described having felt a great deal of anger and resentment towards the mother of his child for preventing access to their daughter:

We used to like fight over the phone. I used to call her and ask, "Why you don't allow me to see my daughter now?" She told me if I put it, uh, stupid, uh, reasons…I was angry… the mom's child…It was until she did not allow me to access to my daughter. For… if I can say… if I can… and I say so, for no reason because I had to provide like I used to before (Mabena).

Mabena downplayed the fact that he was violent towards his partner during pregnancy. Earlier in the interview he had said:

…protection orders, and everything. I end up, uh, overrunning the protection order. I ended up getting arrested. I got arrested. Went to prison for a few months. After that few months I got released. I was working before I was… before I got arrested. When I came back, I lost my job. Few months down the line I got a job. I have worked and the child got born and everything. Up until the child was six years old, I was still working. After that six-year period, I lost the job again. From then it started going backwards and forward, backwards and forward. That's the story (Mabena).

He struggled to recognize that his violent behaviour and inability to provide for his child were the reasons the mother of his child had prevented him access to their daughter:

So, I asked them to go and find out what seems to be the problem ? Because I want to be there for my daughter…they did not give us a valid reason or a valid answer (Mabena).

The fact that he had gone to prison suggests that there was evidence of his violence. There seemed to be very little reflection about how these significant events could have affected his pregnant partner, the pregnancy and the unborn child. Furthermore, there was an insinuation

that the responsibility for his unemployment lay with his ex-partner because she pressed charges. He felt like he was victimised despite clearly having had a part to play in his situation.

Notably, he had emphasized the importance of financial contribution in child rearing, and I wondered if his emphasis on financial provision as function of fatherhood and his subsequent inability to provide had led to feelings of shame for him. Perhaps these, together with the rejection he experienced from his ex-partner had overwhelmed him, necessitating a denial of the contributing factors or any feelings his ex-partner could possibly feel, and cutting off emotionally from his child. His avoidance had then meant that his child had to be the one to reach out. The reconnection with his child, however, appeared to have prompted a shift in his relationship with his ex-partner. Having his daughter back in his life appeared to allow him to let go of his anger and he now appeared to be invested in his daughter's happiness. Although I was left wondering how much his daughter would need to keep him happy for their relationship to continue, as I harboured doubts about his capacity to sustain a relationship in the face of anger or rejection from the other.

4.4.2.2 Experiences of unsuccessful reconnection

Fathers either felt that they didn't have agency to foster reconnection, or when they did try to reconnect, they were met with discouraging responses. This in turn impeded the process of getting connected.

> *And I intentionally didn't move, thinking that at some point, she'd just feel, let me do the right thing. I haven't moved for that reason… I know where she stays. I don't know if I should say this, but I've stopped. I… like it's… yeah, but that's where also I'm not okay mentally, you understand* (Andile)

Andile made the decision to be passive with his agency, in the hopes that the mother of his child would foster the reconnection.

On the contrary, when Bandile tried to reconnect. He felt he was met with intimidation which made him resort to giving up.

> *I haven't reconnected with my child, what stopped me, I get blackmailed always, so in order that things don't become worse from here, cause it's painful when a person punishes you using your child* (Bandile).

In his giving up, Bandile seemed to rationalise this as him protecting himself from constant pain.

Sipho felt that his efforts were just simply not enough:

> *The thing is, I've always been trying… Like, even though they were making it difficult, there would… there would be squabbles, there and there but then I've always… yeah, I've always… the issue here was that me coming to see her broke or with no money or no whatever, whatever, uh, I, I need to provide, or I'm able to provide. Just, just coming by myself as I am, I think that's, that's, that's where the problem lies. And then because even during* the *period, um, that transcended into me disconnecting from her, but then when I had maybe a bit of money to give or clothes or whatever, that's the only time I would get a chance to see her. But other than that, if I, I, I just come by myself, like I am, and I'm trying to see her, it, it, uh, it became a problem* (Sipho).

He felt that his journey was intentionally made difficult and that he tried his best to resolve this issue to no avail. Additionally, he felt that his inability to financially provide made his efforts easier to reject.

Jabu told his story differently and admitted that his own lack of effort with regards to attempting to reconnect with his child contributed to their estrangement. Jabu felt that he made an effort to reconnect with his son, however, at the same time, he was too focused on his new relationship and his career endeavors to really focus on fathering his child:

> *…it went from me seeing him every week, to see him once a month to… you know, um… And, and, and not so just to put the blame. I, I also was careless. When that was happening, I was just focused on my own thing. I was in a new relationship. I was just engrossed in it, and, uh, my, my, my career I started doing like gigs in the hood was taking off and I was focused on that. My ego [chuckles] my ego was on another stage. You know, I, I thought I was that guy, you know. And I lost focus of what was important at the time. Because I always thought, I, I can always go back. I can just get some money then go back and just fix everything. But it got so long* (Jabu).

Additionally, Jabu tried multiple avenues trying to reconnect that were met with outright rejection, and ultimately him feeling discouraged and defeated:

Oh, so many times. Oh, I've had everybody involved [friend]. Um I tried to suck up to the father. I tried to suck up to the mother. I tried to suck up to the grandmother. Uh, I spoke to the grandmother. She told me point blank that she doesn't want to get involved. She… uh, as far as she's concerned, this guy is the new father therefore I had no place. You know, I've tried. And the thing is… the biggest thing, the one thing that gets me is that I don't know, where he lives. I know, it's somewhere in [location]… Um, I asked this friend of hers. She's a very close friend. So I asked her. She was drunk. So I was like I'm going to take advantage of the situation. And I was like, "Yo man, tell me where does your friend live?" And she told me point blank. She's like, "Yo, what's happening to you is really messed up. But it's none of my business. It's your business. It's your struggle. So if I get involved, I know, we've been told this, like, you should not know where this kid lives. Because you will show up." After that, maybe I'm not also doing much about it. Like, I don't know… I don't know what to do (Jabu).

Whilst his ex-partner's family and friends made it difficult for him to reconnect with his child, it seems Jabu felt that he could pause his fatherhood whilst establishing other parts of his life and return once he felt ready, which was met with rejection that made his reconnection unsuccessful. the time that passed seemed to make reconnection even more difficult.

Wandile approached the legal system for assistance to reconnect, however, this was still an unsuccessful option for him:

I went through the courts. To, be granted access to her. That's when I was referred to family courts. I was granted access But the next weekend that I was supposed to see my daughter, she was… apparently there was a party that she had to attend. I couldn't see her. And after that, the next weekend I was promised to see her. During the week I was sent an email I need… I owe her 1,400. Before I pay that money… I will see my child. If I don't pay it, I will never see my child (Wandile).

I went straight to, to court. Because during the breakup a lot has happened. And there were monies involved, taken, everything. I didn't… my ID was taken, my clothes were burned. I lost a lot, and I was confused. And I didn't go through the uncles. I went straight to court. But in court… but in court they sent us to family court for mediation. I went through court. I didn't involve my, my family, our family and my uncle. She's the one who involved the dad. Her dad, is, was more involved. He's the one who would

attend the family court. When I'm on my own, the dad will be on our meeting. Then I'll, I'll ask [her father], "Why are you around? Because she's yelling at me while you're here and I can't do nothing." All those things, you know. So, yeah I went through courts, and after I was not given the, the chance to… and she said in front of the mediators that no one wants to deal with me in their family. So she'll drop the kid at the police station. A two-year old. On the day that I need to go and see my daughter, imagine, she's like, "You'll find her at the police station." I'm like, "Okay, it's fine." And that never happened (Wandile).

Wandile's experience seemed to be layered with financial disagreements, family interference as well as his claim that the mother of his child did not comply with the courts' ruling.

Overall, the fathers expressed a variety of reasons for unsuccessful reconnections. For one father, it seemed like it was too much hard work and too much to handle. He had an expectation of the mother to one day remedy the situation in some way and 'do the right thing'. Others simply felt defeated by their attempts being met with undesirable responses. Lastly it also seemed that in one instance, the legal route was not powerful enough to implement and enforce a reconnection, despite the fact that a magistrate ruled in favour of one.

4.4.3 Defensive positions assumed in relation to unsuccessful reconnection

Being unable to reconnect with their children brought up various feelings in the fathers. These difficult feelings necessitated the use of a number of defensive positions, in order for them to hold onto narratives they had constructed with regards to the reasons for their unsuccessful attempts at reconnection. These included rationalising the outcome, managing appearances, and shifting blame. Others seemed to hold onto an identity of 'a father fighting for access' to manage guilt about their own ambivalence and lack of action. Some fathers managed the disappointment of their failed attempts by remaining hopeful for the future.

4.4.3.1 Rationalisation

Despite his earlier protests against his absence, Andile rationalised his absence as a better end result:

> *Because I would just have been a horrible dad. Where, um, it would have been… it wouldn't have been a pleasurable experience, uh, for him witnessing his parents not getting along or anything. So, I just accepted that, look, the world doesn't always turn out the way that you want. That you have both parents in your life* (Andile).

He seemed to conclude that it was better for his child to experience an absent father than to experience a strained co-parenting relationship.

4.4.3.2 Managing appearances

Contrary to the excerpt above, at times during the interview it felt like Andile was defensively presenting an image of himself as 'the good guy':

> *We were back together, you know. And after some time, I mean, sonogram appointments, all of that. I mean, but we had distance between us. She's from the south of Joburg. Me being in [his location], so I would… not that it marks my dedication. I don't want to be applauded for doing what I'm supposed to do* (Andile).

> *So I paid damages which was 10,000 at the time and I was a student. But I made sure all of that happened because I… I, I didn't even question paternity further after the child was born. There was just something inside of me. You know, I got to a point where I don't even care if it's not my child. Just a feeling… all of that provoked… just, uh, I got to a better place as a person* (Andile).

> *Because me trying to reconnect… I was made aware that the mother will always be considered the primary, you know. And that just made life very difficult for me. Because I was willing to take care of him myself* (Andile).

I wondered whether there was indeed a need for acknowledgement of his dedication and affirmation that he had done 'the right thing', perhaps to ease the guilt he felt in relation to not having been able to sustain a relationship with his child Throughout the interview I felt as though Andile was very invested in painting a picture of having to fight very hard for his child:

> *So I, I, wasn't even fighting for custody. Just to see him, you understand?* (Andile).

He painted a picture of desperately wanting to be part of his child's life, yet, as described in the section above, he has not made any attempts to reconnect for five years.

Jabu also presented with the appearance of a father fighting to be in his child's life:

> *I don't want anybody feeling sorry for me. I want… I wanna be a part of my son's life. It's as simple as that. Yeah* (Jabu).

Jabu's statement that he did not want sympathy from others stood in stark contrast to the rest of the interview, in which he had spent a lot of energy painting a picture where he was mostly helpless. Throughout his interview, Jabu spoke a lot about his intentions as opposed to focusing on actually taking action, and moving past the intent:

> *Um, the only way we can change is like, prioritize, put our families first. Uh, and just have the intention, you know, have the intention to be good people* (Jabu).

Bandile also seemed to want to portray an image of a father who was trying to be with his child and 'making a plan', but he had not seen his child in almost seven years, which felt too long of a time to still be setting a plan in motion:

> *So my silence is not because I don't love my child or that I am neglecting him. It's because I'm planning a way of being with him and win him so that I can be with him, and I need to work on that so that I can reconnect with my child for a lifetime* (Bandile).

In all the accounts above, a passivity was evident.

4.4.3.3 Shifting the blame.

It seemed difficult for Wandile to accept that his ex-partner left because his actions. While he tried to acknowledge that his ex-partner may have denied him access in order to protect their child, it appeared that he also harboured suspicions that his ex-partner's father had influenced his ex-partner's behaviour in order to deliberately hurt him:

> *So, I know that… I pray that whatever decision she took, it was not because of her dad telling him… telling her to hurt me. It was because of benefiting the kid. I believe… I'd like to, to… to believe that. I would like to believe that* (Wandile).

In contrast to the power he affords the maternal family in the above excerpt, Wandile had previously spoken about a time when he had defied custom and described having the confidence to exercise his parental rights despite being discouraged by family members to do so:

> *…to be part of giving birth, even though I didn't cut the, the umbilical cord. But it was a great feeling for me. It was a great feeling. I remember my, my elders didn't want me to be… to go and to go inside. But I didn't tell them. I came back here. I don't know if… then out of nowhere I drove back to [the hospital]. When I got there, the mother was already inside. I demanded to come in and yeah, it was… I took… it was a nice experience* (Wandile).

This demonstrated the agency that fathers have when it comes to presence and absence. He chose not to stick to the rules constructed by others, as these rules did not suit how he wanted to start his fatherhood journey. If in this instance Wandile was able to locate and exert his agency and sense of power, it begs the question of what made it difficult for him to do so in other moments of his co-parenting relationship.

Bandile also blamed his ex-partner's family and believed that it was them who did not allow him access to his child:

> *…but since her family didn't like me they didn't allow me, because she grew up the very same life of having a single parent. So we need to avoid the mistakes that our parents went through, we should not do things that are wrong, that's a choice* (Bandile).

Sipho blamed his ex-partner and during his interview, shifted between blaming his ex-partner for a lot of his struggles, and painting himself as trying his utmost to reconnect with his child. He positioned himself as being unfairly denied access, and took very little responsibility for his possible contributions to the situation:

> *…like I'm denied the privilege. Because I still care. I still provide now and again. Because it's difficult to… it's really difficult. Because, like I was saying, I, I don't wanna, I don't wanna like paint myself as this perfect, perfect father, that's like, you know, a saint and everything. Because, like I said, it's difficult for me to like send money to the mother of my kid when I'm not being able to see the kid. So, I would… I would… I would provide now, time and again. And then I would like, distance myself a bit because like, it hurts, you know. As much as it's unfair, because it's really unfair. But then it hurts sending money or buying clothes, or food or whatever. And then I'm not seeing that person that I'm feeding or clothing. Or, like maybe I may send money, I'm not even sure that the money is getting to her. Or, you know, yeah, it gets difficult* (Sipho).

Furthermore, Sipho seemed to externalize a lot of accountability which prognostically felt like it would yield poor outcomes for his situation that requires a lot more introspection.

> *Because my intentions have always been pure intentions. So, I know, there're just like obstacles or bad energy or bad… or whatever it is that's like keeping me away* (Sipho).

Sipho expressed a hope that his daughter would one day believe his version of the story to be her truth:

> *And then I also hope that she will grow up one day and learn the honest truth. So like, my conscience is clear above everything. Like it's, it's purely clear* (Sipho).

He appeared to position himself in a manner that made it possible for him to not feel any feelings of guilt about his absence.

4.5. Experiences of the interview process

Reflections on the first interview suggested that it was a generally meaningful process for most of the participants. They had clearly come to the first interview with some expectations about the process. For some of the other participants, a notable sense of relief was noted – both in relation to a fear of being judged in the interview that had not occurred, and with regards to having had a space to talk about their experiences. Bandile had been surprised at the sensitivity of the interview:

> *It [the first interview] was great and what I can say is it was more sensitive than I thought. Before I planned it, I never thought it will be more deep and touching like that. Then there after that I understand the importance and the major role that my son plays in my life…* (Bandile).

Notably, Bandile appeared not to have expected sensitivity from the researcher. Perhaps, like some of the other participants he had expected to be judged or made to feel less than. Wandile had also appreciated being listened to and appeared to have found it especially helpful to encounter a woman who had not made him feel judged:

> *The fact that, uh, you never judged me, instead you listened… another side of me that you know what not every woman or lady out there, is, is out to, to make us, uh, guys, uh, feel less of ourselves* (Wandile).

This process seemed like an important corrective experience for Wandile. This comment also highlighted the role that women or partners consciously and unconsciously play in how men view themselves. Mabena expressed a sense of relief with regards to having spoken to a stranger.

> *…for me to talk with someone that I do not know it was a relief. Unlike revealing… revealing my personal life to someone that I know. You get what I'm saying?... it's all about judgment* (Mabena).

It seemed that sharing his story with someone he did not know and who did not know him offered him an emotional safety. He felt that he wouldn't be labelled or stigmatized. Thato also expressed having had an enjoyable experience of the interview:

> *It was actually dope…it was kind of refreshing. Because there were a lot of things that were kind of an eye opener. The minute you speak about that that's when you kind of deal with them. So, it was refreshing for lack of a better word. I can say refreshing…I was like, no, it was the therapy that I thought I never needed, but actually deserved* (Thato).

Despite taking care not to allow the interviews to take the form of a therapy session, there are overlaps that naturally occurred. Therapy entails a great deal of non-judgemental listening that in itself can be highly therapeutic (Harrod et al., 2023). Thato's experience of the interview as therapeutic highlighted just how much men, in circumstances similar to the participants, are in need of therapeutic spaces. It also highlighted how men don't often know that they need to access resources such as psychotherapy. His use of the word 'deserved' was also especially poignant, as it suggested that perhaps many of these men may not feel worthy to receive help. When reflecting on how he had become emotional at points in the interview, Wandile also mentioned how difficult it is for men to be vulnerable:

> *Because we men, hide our tears. We hide how we feel at times. But, after those tears, it made me… it made me believe again* (Wandile).

I was pleased that the interviews had offered Wandile a safe space that gave him back his sense of hope. However, the comment drew attention to how men need spaces where it's acceptable to be vulnerable and not feel emasculated. With regards to Bandile's initial surprise at 'sensitivity' of the interviews, I wondered if my attempts to provide a non-judgemental space

had allowed Bandile to abandon his 'plan' not to go 'deep' and to allow himself to speak about things that 'touch' him.

With regards to the expectations that participants had held about the interviews when agreeing to participate, for Sipho, I wondered if he had perhaps hoped that the interview process would change things for him. Although his interview had revealed a struggle to express himself and a sense of still having a lot to process and a great deal of overwhelm regarding his fatherhood experience, his reflection had carried a note of slight disappointment, or perhaps even a mild chastising of the interviewer:

> *From the interview's perspective, it was okay. It was… it was… it was… it was okay. It was really okay. It was… yeah it felt good to talk. But yeah, things have, have just been the same honestly. But then yeah, it was… it was good to talk. It felt good to talk about it…Uh, the, the whole interview as a whole I can say, it was yeah… it was really… yeah, it was… it was… the whole interview was… I don't know how to put it, but I cannot pick anything in particular. But then the interview as a whole was… yeah, it was okay* (Sipho).

I had wondered if his comment, 'things have, have just been the same honestly' suggested a wish for change that perhaps he had hoped the interview might provide. Andile had also expressed a similar wish:

> *So me actually agreeing to do this is hoping that eventually there, there is some intervention* (Andile).

For many of the participants the interview had appeared to offer some change. The interview had provided time to reflect on their relationships with their children, and for some of the fathers, this seemed to provide motivation to continue attempting to reconnect and be more present in their children's lives. Bandile expressed that the interview process had made him realise how deeply connected he would like to be his child:

> *I see the importance of my child and the way I love him because when he's not in my presence I know that I love him, and someone like you who asks when last did I reconnect with him, what have you tried, is when you realise that you really need this child in your life, more than you could imagine* (Bandile).

For Thato, the process of being interviewed seemed to have fostered an opportunity for him to start conversations with regards to remedying his situation:

> *A change when you look at how you wanted to do things and how you plan on doing them… There were new communication channels that was kind of created ever since the last interview* (Thato).

Despite the participants' comments on having appreciated the opportunity to talk about their experiences, and valuing not having judged, I did wonder, however, about my influence on the process. As mentioned previously, having been the daughter of an absent father, whom I had wished had tried harder to reconnect with me, it was inevitable that my experiences would influence the process. Despite not sharing my experiences or opinions, it was clear that some of the participants had left the first interview feeling more motivated to try again to reconnect with their children. It was interesting to note how with some participants, my mostly non-conscious influence on the process had clearly resonated with their own wishes, while for others it had perhaps been experienced as threatening, and elicited defensive reactions. Jabu felt that the interview made him introspect and it made me wonder whether it would prompt him to make a change:

> *I thought that it's okay. So, it's, I guess, to, to, to be able to talk about it with someone else, it helps. And it also made me… made me question some of the things. It made me question like what were really my mistakes. Because I thought about it, and I… I felt like I was just like shifting the blame or something. So I was like, let me think about what could have contributed to this thing happening, you know. It made me reflect on it basically* (Jabu).

He was able to feel some relief in sharing his story. The process made him interrogate himself and the way things had turned out. Mostly, however, it seemed that it made him really get in touch with his sense of accountability. Additionally, the interview made Jabu reflect on how much time had passed that he could not recover with his son. Time that was lost:

> *…this conversation with you about time, like so much time had lapsed, you know. Like that, because now you asked me this question. It made me think about it. I had been thinking about it, but I had not really deeply thought about it. So, the, the, the, the time between me seeing him and not seeing him, it made… that's what stayed with more than*

anything to say, wow, I've actually let so much time between this thing happened, go around. I'd say that, that is the one thing that kind of stayed for me (Jabu).

The time that had passed was a significant factor for Jabu. It felt like something he wished he could get back. Similar to Jabu, Wandile seemed to introspect about his fatherhood position and the factors that he would need to work on in order to be a fit parent:

…it made me believe again actually. It brought me back to the day… uh, it made me realize that I need to step up, and, and do something about my life. And, yeah, and, and be able to, to get the right… get the right, uh, physical appearance whenever I meet my daughter… it made me to want to work on myself (Wandile).

Wandile seemed very inspired from his experience of the interview. It appeared to have allowed him to reflect on his past behaviour and decisions and to take a little more accountability; he seemed to have been able to let go of some of the resentment and animosity he carried in relation to the mother of his child. He seemed hopeful about a new beginning and implementing practical steps that could get him closer to gaining access to his child again, such as looking for a job:

Instead of hating the mother. It made me just wanna start again, start again and it made me positive so to say, in short…Uh, I think revisiting the history. Revisiting, um, the past, about the things that happened that led to me losing my family or my daughter. Um, they, they, they pushed me. It made me believe again in life. That I still got a chance to, to be a better person. As I said, uh, during our relationship with the mom then, uh, it was not… it was bit toxic and I used to… I ended up being an abusive person. So yeah, it made me rethink my decisions in life again. It made me, um, it made me believe when I made that call, or when I send those CVs, that you know what, anything is possible (Wandile).

Bandile had seemed similarly inspired to take responsibility and be accountable:

It prompted me to pull up my socks in order so that I can be with my child and see the major role he plays…The best plan is that I need to do things in a traditional way. I need to pay damages and then so that I can be able and have access to him because of like there are some things you cannot force. but you need to do some things according to tradition and tradition can stand on your behalf. I can say that if you go according to traditions I'm a traditionalist. I did have a child I haven't paid damages for (Bandile).

Mabena also seemed to have made a shift with regards to his thinking about the mother of his child. While Mabena had initially judged her for moving on romantically, perhaps linked to his wish for him and her to have worked through their difficulties, he had shifted to a position where he seemed to be more focused on the well-being of his child, whom he realised was being impacted by the conflictual co-parenting relationship:

> *I think it's important for the mom, and the father to stick together for a child to grow up in a good environment, if I can put it that way. When the child has got both parents, they do understand, they do concentrate. They do… they do well in life* (Mabena).

Mabena seemed to realize that he could still have a positive influence on his child's life through attempting to improve the co-parenting relationship with the mother of his child, even if they were not going to reconcile.

While many of the fathers appeared to have realised that they had perhaps not exercised enough of their agency to reconnect with their children, and now felt more motivated to do so after the reflection that the interview had prompted, not all the fathers had a clear plan as to how to do this. Bandile was still at the same place as he was in the first interview, which was knowing that something needs to change, but not being clear about how this would happen. His reflection felt restricted:

> *…you covered everything in the interview. yeah I can say you covered everything. It just showed me I need to push more . I need to push. I need to push. so that I can be with my child* (Bandile).

In some conversations, the reclaiming of agency through taking accountability was short-lived and blame was shifted from themselves to others, and positions of having been unsupported were resumed:

> *Uh, to be honest, you know, I, I actually thought maybe you would have like… because I should go to, to, to the… to the… to the court. And maybe also another thing is like, because like I said in the interview with you, uh, what is the role that my family has played? I don't know if you asked me that question, or I just forgot it. But I felt like, it's just not only my responsibility . It's also like family responsibility to help in these kind of things. From both sides. From [the mother's] side, and my side as well. So, I don't think we really touched on that. And the feelings about it really*? (Jabu).

Despite his sadness at realizing how much time had past, Jabu's resolve to go to court to get access to his child was not strong - it seemed like he wanted to be persuaded. He shifted to a position where responsibility was diluted as he positioned the problem as being a 'family responsibility'. While the involvement of family in these issues is common amongst Black families, and it may indeed be a fair ask from fathers that family members help when things go wrong, Jabu did not seem hopeful. Rather, the comment above felt defensive and angry at family members for not having helped. It seemed as though his anger with his family for not having stepped in to help was now directed towards the interviewer for not having asked about the family's role and not made space for his feelings about this.

In conclusion, despite my attempts to empathize with the positions of these fathers, it is likely that my own feelings as the researcher did exert some pressure on the participants to 'try harder' as fathers to reconnect with their children, which may have been experienced by some of the fathers as subtly blaming or accusatory. Notably, however, this was most pronounced in the men who had felt significant rejection in relation to the mother of their child and unsupported by the respective extended families. Overall, however, the interviews appeared to have allowed space for these fathers to realize how deeply they had been impacted by the absence of their children in their lives. The novelty of this for the participants was significant. This suggests that these feelings are usually hidden and defended against – as they are painful and entail engagement with loss, shame and regret – and perhaps because they challenge current narratives in society about Black masculinity and fatherhood as emotionally detached and distant.

4.6 Conclusion

Fatherhood absence is a complex issue to explore. The results section has yielded various themes and sub-themes that are very important in their own right. The difficulty at points has been how contradictory the factors that have come up have been.

The significant themes were centred around the constructions of fatherhood and how fathers carried ambivalent feelings around their transition into parenthood. Fathers expressed feelings of excitement, joy as well as overwhelm and a feeling of not being ready for the onerous responsibility. Whilst at points some of the fathers recognised the value of emotional, physical and psychological elements in the father-child relationship, this was often countered with a

focus on what it means to be masculine. The sub-theme of masculinity was largely centred around financial provision. Financial provision was discussed as an expectation from both society and the fathers themselves, which linked to the theme of societal discourses and how Black fathers are positioned in society. Black fathers felt that they are still living in a society that views them as deficient, unwilling and unable to bring stability to their families and children. They felt that their struggles as Black men and fathers are misunderstood, unheard and do not receive adequate space and efficient resolution.

There was a link between men's own painful experiences of not being fathered and the unconscious repetition of them becoming absent fathers. Fathers dealt with these experiences in different ways. At points fathers completely disowned their fatherhood positions by removing themselves from the parenting function entirely. Fathers seemed to struggle to think of and internalize themselves as a primary parent. At times, some fathers did not view themselves as a parent at all. There was a tension between the theme of being victimised and agency, where fathers felt that they were secondary parents with few rights and even fewer responsibilities, and viewed themselves in this way.

An additional point of disconnection for fathers was brought on by the ending of their romantic relationships with the mothers of their children. It seemed that when the relationship ended, fathers struggled even more to be present in their children's lives. Linked to this was them feeling that their need for facilitation of their fathering from their ex-partners was not met, the financial disagreements they encountered which some felt were exploitative, and lastly, some of the fathers felt displaced by the presence of a new romantic partner in the life of their exes and children. Some fathers seemed to feel that they were replaceable once a new partner was introduced into their children's life. Furthermore, fathers also did not exercise the full might of their agency by not following through fully with the legal proceedings available to them. It is at these points that the participants appeared to distance themselves from their fatherhood identities.

In the end, only two of the fathers managed to have physical contact with their children. These fathers described this process as tedious and requiring a lot of negotiation with the mothers of their children and maternal families. The sub-theme of gate-keeping was prominent both with fathers who were able to reconnect and those who attempted but were unsuccessful. It would be simplistic to state that the difference between the two fathers who were successful and the five that were not boiled down to agency. However, agency and perseverance played a major

role. Whilst every situation had its own unique elements and blend of contributing factors as to why a reconnection happened or not, the fathers who did reconnect seemed to have kept trying. The fact that the reconnections were not smooth processes to this day, demonstrated that some of the difficulties that fathers experience and influence their initial absence, does not become easier to navigate later on in life as they reconnect or continue to try to reconnect.

Chapter Five - Discussion

5.1. Introduction

This study is concerned with the experiences of Black South African fathers who were once absent from their children's lives, who either attempted to reconnect or successfully reconnected with their children. Literature is scarce in the area of reconnection, and it is not clear whether this is due to the lack of interest or research on the topic, or whether father-child reconnections are few and far between. Rather, it was found that most of the literature in this area addresses issues such as father absenteeism, or the effects of father absenteeism, but little to none has addressed the father reconnection processes (Fagan, 2023; Mndende, 2021; Mavungu, 2013). Most of the research that is published has focused on reconnection between incarcerated fathers and their children (Charles, Muentner, & Kjellstrand, 2019; Edin, Nelson & Paranal, 2001; Jones, 2019; Turney and Marín, 2021).

Statistics show that father absenteeism is the highest amongst Black men in South Africa where it has been reported that 70% of Black children have absent fathers which suggests that according to these studies there had been no change in statistics over time (Khunuou, 2006; Mndende, 2021; Ratele, 2012; Stats, 2021). Thus, this research topic concerning father-child reconnection is important, in order to explore whether these fathers manage to shift their absenteeism, and the factors that aid or prevent this.

In this under-researched area, this study took a qualitative, psychosocial approach and focused on the narratives of a group of Black, South African fathers in order to gain an experience-near, subjective account of the many factors that shaped and impacted their reconnection processes. The psychosocial understanding of fatherhood identity that was used in this study was one which understood fatherhood as "a prevalent and constitutive discourse coexisting in a dynamic nexus with inter-generationally situated biographies and wider social and relational contexts, out of which assimilations of traditional and modern styles of fathering gain their momentum, meaning and currency" (Finn & Henwood, 2009, p. 548). The use of a qualitative approach was useful as it helped the researcher to capture and make sense of the contradictions, nuances and complexities of the father's subjective human experiences. This method gave space for these Black fathers to have a voice, as their opinions are often marginalized in society (Duncan, Stevens & Canham, 2014). The use of a psychosocial approach allowed for a novel, in-depth

perspective, and an exploration of patterns in the unique interplay between intrapsychic factors and societal narratives around fatherhood in the participants. This approach focused on psychodynamic influences on the participants' personal experiences of fatherhood, and how they negotiated and positioned their father identities in relation to societal discourses on fatherhood and absent fatherhood, accounts of which are currently scarce in the literature.

It was found that socio-political factors, cultural influences, socio-economic factors and the intergenerational transmission of past relational patterns to their relationships with their children, interrelated. Unfortunately, for this group of men, only two of the seven participants managed to reconnect with their children successfully, whilst the other five made attempts but did not manage to gain access and reconnection. This highlighted how challenging the reconnection process is for these fathers to initiate and to attain.

Although shared ideas were found with regards to fatherhood, such as notions of responsibility, financial provision, and guidance, the participants also had individual constructions of their fatherhood roles based on cultural expectations and experiences with father figures when growing up. Most also had some hands on experience of fathering, either in the early part of their child's life or with subsequent children. These experiences, alongside class shifts, appeared to have previously held constructions of fatherhood for some of the fathers. Some appeared to have grown into a realisation that they can, in fact, be a present father, when previously they had felt unprepared, while others appeared to have found the overwhelming, relentlessness of parenthood too much and now held feelings of ambivalence about taking on this responsibility. How fathers perceived fatherhood was found to influence their reconnection process. The men that had attempted to reconnect, but were not successful, expressed a continued desire to be part of their children's lives in the future. For some, this desire appeared authentic and was followed up with action toward re-establishing contact, while for others, at times, 'longing from afar' appeared to be the preferred position to actually being involved.

The discussion below uses the themes presented in the results section above to answer the research questions posed by this study, in the following three sections: Motivations for reconnection; Fathers' subjective experiences during attempts at reconnection; and Fatherhood identities: Psychosocial positionings in relation to present and absent fatherhood discourses.

5.2. Motivations for reconnection

There were various reasons that fathers wished to reconnect with their children. All the fathers had initially been connected to their children, and the desire to reconnect came from wanting to repair those severed bonds. In some instances, the motivation to reconnect appeared to be driven by a wish to give their children a chance at healthy development, which they believed could come from reparation and healing of their relationships with their children. They wished for this to be extended to the rest of the paternal family with whom their children did not have a relationship. Like Makusha et al. (2012), who found that one of the most significant resources for a child's well-being is the presence and involvement of a father figure in their life, the participants in this study emphasised the importance of a father and a relationship with the paternal family for a child's identity formation. Some of the fathers expressed sadness that, at that point, it was one-sided towards the maternal family. The fathers in this study appeared to harbour hopes that one day they would be able to repair their severed parent-child relationships and be accepted by their children.

For some fathers, the motivation to reconnect appeared to be linked to a wish to undo what they felt were 'wrongs' they had committed. One father expressed a feeling of shame for having more than one child with different partners as he shared beliefs about what 'right' fatherhood looks like. Reconnection for him represented righting his wrongs, freeing him from shame and allowing him to do things the 'proper' way.

Some fathers wished to reconnect in hopes that their side of the story or subjective experience could be heard and understood. This wish emerged in relation to their children 'knowing' them, it also seemed to articulate with their struggle at having been rejected by the mother of their child, and feelings of shame more broadly that have been linked to Black masculinity (Govender & Cartwright, 2021). Their wish to be seen and heard also resonates with current critiques noted in the fatherhood literature. Khunuou (2006), Panter-Brick et al. (2014), and Ratele (2012) comment on how few research studies are focused on engaging with fathers from the viewpoint of Black males. Many fathers felt so misunderstood throughout their fatherhood journeys, and it was significant that the overall comment on their participation in this study was a sense of surprise and relief at having been heard and not judged. This wish to be 'seen' and recognised was a strong motivation for reconnection. These fathers also felt that they had

life experiences that were valuable and they wished to share their learning with their children. This feeling of needing to be heard and understood support critiques of the fatherhood literature that comment on the tendency of the literature to overlook and inadequately capture father engagement and motivation to participate, and fathers' willingness to learn (Connell, Sanders, & Markie-Dadds. 1997; Frank, Keown, & Sanders, 2015; Sanders, Markie-Dadds, Tully and Bor, 2000; Webster-Stratton, 1992). Often the literature approaches the topic from a deficit point of view that tends to perpetuate an all-too-common perception about fathering: that it is a social role that men generally do not perform adequately or are not interested in their father roles (Cornille, Barlow & Cleveland, 2006). What the men have shared above says the contrary.

Most of the fathers had experienced absent fathers growing up and this meant that they were able to empathise with and resonate with their children's experiences. Studies have shown that fatherhood patterns are transmitted intergenerationally; and that having an absent father can translate into becoming an absent father (Davids, 2002; Devaut, 2008; Hofferth, 2000; Matee, 2016). The fathers imagined that what they had to manage and endure as children may be similar to what their children were going through as a result of their absence. One of the things that fathers mentioned was that as younger children, they had always longed to know their father's history and story, and so reconnecting with their children would be a way to provide that for their children. Because some of the fathers in their adulthood still had no details about their fathers' histories, this made them fear that the same fate would be true for them and their children. There was a fear that they would cease to exist in their children's minds. Some fathers wondered whether their children remembered them or even knew of them as their last contact had been when their children were very young. One father wondered if his child had been told that he was dead.

The concept of genetics also emerged as a motivating factor and appeared to carry symbolic meaning with regards to being a way to be seen and to leave a legacy in the world. There aren't many studies that speak directly to the importance of genetic continuity for biological fathers, however a study that evaluated the experiences of donor offspring found that there was little to no socioemotional wellbeing difference between donor offspring, adopted children, and children conceived normally and through IVF (Turner & Coyle, 2000). This lack of significant difference could however have been due to their age and not having developed abstract thinking in order to reflect on their parental relationships and psychological wellbeing (Turner & Coyle, 2000). What has been found in adult adoption studies, are reports of identity assimilation

difficulties, ‘genealogical bewilderment’, low self-esteem triggered by not being able to answer questions about biological origins that made adopted children find genetic continuity significant (Turner & Coyle, 2000). In these studies, some parents reported feeling shame and struggling with the stigma related to not being able to conceive ‘normally’ and fathers speaking about their lack of genetic connection to their children (Turner & Coyle, 2000).

The idea of family lineage and continuity was very important to the fathers. They were invested in the idea that their genetics were passed down from one generation to another and the desire to reconnect appeared to be a way to check for this (see themselves in their children), as well as somehow guarantee that genetic continuation had occurred. It was important to fathers that their children were familiar with their paternal attributes. There was a deep desire to confirm that children carried some part of them in their physical attributes. Some fathers felt that being able to procreate was a gift that they offered to the world. They valued the idea of passing down parts of themselves and for some fathers, not being able to witness this felt like a loss.

Most of the fathers spoke about struggling emotionally and psychologically with the idea of not being able to reconnect, expressing feelings of grief, frustration, anger and desperation. They related feelings of depression and despair at the thought of missing out on the formative years of their children’s lives. This was to a point where some participants expressed ruminating about taking extreme measures such as kidnapping their children, in order to gain contact. They hoped that reconnection would offer them some psychic relief from these intrusive thoughts.

Research indicates that fathers have a consequential impact on their children’s nutrition, exercise, play, and, eventually, their own parenting behaviour, physical and mental health (Charles et al., 2019; Turney & Marín, 2021;Yogman & Eppel, 2022). Some fathers referenced their experience of having been in the same circumstances when they were younger. They were aware of the repeated cycle that needed to come to an end. Fathers seemed to be motivated to want to protect their children from the same psychological pains and traumas they felt and still battled in adulthood. Fathers hoped that reconnection would allow them to teach and guide their children how to navigate through life and growing up, so that they could avoid making the same mistakes that they made. They seemed to hope that reconnection would give them the opportunity to not only correct history, but also a chance to live vicariously through their children’s corrected experiences.

Only one father mentioned how he recognised that reconnection would alleviate the strain that he imagined his ex-partner experienced as a single parent. He was able for a moment to introspect, take responsibility and empathise with the other. In general, however, the motivation to reconnect had to do with reparation and restoration of something once disrupted. Perhaps this disruption referred to both their current fathering, and their experiences of having been fathered.

5.3. Fathers' subjective experiences during attempts at reconnection

Out of the seven fathers who participated in the research, two managed to successfully reconnect with their children. These fathers described having to go through a process of becoming self-aware and aware of their emotions, in order to adjust to the shift that their children's presence brought on. They spoke of a process in which they and their children had to get to know one another again and how challenging this was for them. Much of this experience supports findings of studies on family reunification. Some studies that have looked at reconnection processes with previously absent fathers are mainly concerned with incarcerated fathers, fathers who have been estranged for employment purposes such as being deployed in the military, or fathers reconnecting after their authoritarian or abusive parenting style had been questioned (see Birch, 2022; Blankenship, 2023; Charles et al., 2019; Daniels, 2023; Rocker, 2022; Sabey, 2022; Storer, 2023). However, there is still little to no literature on fathers who have been absent and estranged from their children for other reasons and have attempted to reconnect or successfully reconnected with their children. Studies that discuss fathers' re-entry process as a parent, and their father involvement with their children after prison, describe these reconnections as not being well understood (Charles et al., 2019). However, it has been identified that the quality of father-child relationships maintained during a paternal incarceration are a key predictor of relationship quality upon the father's re-entry (Charles et al., 2019; Turney & Marín, 2021). The second predictor was whether there were caregivers (mothers and grandmothers) playing a role in facilitating reconnection; where they either serve as a gatekeeper in maintaining an ongoing relationship between fathers and children or prohibiting contact all together (Charles et al. 2019). The issue of gate-keeping was found to be equally significant in this study. For the fathers in this study, successful reintegration was dependent on leveraging positive relationships with the mother of their child

and the maternal family, however these appeared to be confounded at times by previous IPV, familial disputes, and/or substance use.

One father struggled to manage the effort it took to balance his fatherhood as well as his new romantic relationship. He experienced it as emotionally challenging and expressed difficulty in knowing how to blend his family in a manner that was satisfactory to all parties involved. As a result, he expressed himself aggressively – in most instances with his child. He described having to learn how to regulate his emotions as well as adjust to how it felt to have a child in his presence again. These difficulties are supported by findings of studies that have explored blended family dynamics and the particular tensions these evoke (Portrie & Hill, 2005). Studies on blended families have found that families from this dynamic do not fit into a single developmental process or communication style, thus the mold for success differs (Portrie & Hill, 2005). Some of the main challenges that blended families experience are to do with communication, parental monitoring, boundary management, conflict, relationship interaction, role definition and solidarity (Portrie & Hill, 2005). It was also found that a step-parent's demand for conformity was dependent on the biological parents involvement in the stepchild's life (Portrie & Hill, 2005). The more involved the biological parent, the less a child was likely to accept authority from a step-parent, which lowered the quality of the step-parent-child relationship, and in many cases affected the romantic relationship (Portrie & Hill, 2005). What was found to be helpful was when blended families openly communicated and addressed struggles dealing with these aforementioned issues, as this helped to transition into a blended family more smoothly (Portrie & Hill, 2005). In relation to the father mentioned above, most of these factors played a role in his family's challenge to blend smoothly and they seemed to struggle with how to communicate and navigate through these.

Additionally, the often-ongoing conflict between the father and the mother of his child was found to play a role in the fathers' experience of reconnection. One father in this study managed to reconnect with his son, but this did not last as it seemed that he was unmindful of how the treatment of his ex-partner was significant to his father-child relationship. At a point after reconnecting, his son made the decision to have a distant relationship with him as a result poor treatment towards his mother. Cases such as these can be understood by looking at the term parental alienation which describes "a process involving one parent (the alienating parent) teaching a child to reject the child's other parent (targeted parent), to experience fear when they are around that parent, and to avoid having any contact with them" (Templer et al., 2017, p.

104). This usually results in the breakdown of the relationship a child has with a parent or damages that relationship (Bernet, 2023; Darnall,2011). There is currently no conclusive set of behaviours that categorise parental alienation, however, the defining feature is an attempt by the alienating parent to eradicate the relationship between the child and the targeted parent without reasonable justification versus a child rejecting a parent on reasonable grounds, such as in response to parental abuse or neglect (Bernet, 2023; Garber, 2011; Meier, 2009). Whilst the extremity of the concept of parental alienation may have not been this father's intention, he displayed some features of it and sadly struggled to acknowledge the role of his treatment of his child's mother, and instead shifted blame onto his child. The irony is that many of the fathers feared that they were being alienated by the mothers and the maternal families, this particular father could not see the effect it was having on his son, who clearly felt the need to be protective of his mother as a result.

Many of the fathers were found to harbour fantasies that one day their children would seek them out and that they would then be given the opportunity to tell their version of events. The second father who managed to reconnect with his child had had this fantasy realised; the reconnection had been initiated by his daughter. However, interestingly, he had experienced significant guilt in relation to this process. It seems that although he wanted to initiate a reconnection process, and had tried once and failed, it was ultimately his child who managed to find a way. Perhaps the guilt was driven by a part of him who thought or knew that if his child could manage to figure out a way to reconnect despite all the challenges that were present, that he had obviously not exhausted all his options. It appeared that in order to manage his guilt this father focused rather on his anger and resentment towards his co-parent. It was evident that he had not managed to engage the situation holistically. He minimised the severity of his violent actions towards the mother of his child, as well as the role that his imprisonment may have played, and resorted to projecting blame. This meant that he was unable to process or resolve his negative emotions with regards to his absence. He talked about feeling fearful that he was replaceable and that the only way he was able to think about and conceptualise his fatherhood, was when he reconnected with his child. Physical access to his child is what made him feel like he was a father, however, the fact that he had now gained access to his child appeared to aid him in supressing, as opposed to engaging with, his previously absent status.

Fathers who did not manage to reconnect successfully had different subjective experiences. They expressed feeling a lack of knowing how to operationalise their reconnection, as well as

feeling that they were met with discouraging responses when they did try. They felt that their process was intentionally made to be difficult by others. As a result, some remained passive, waiting for mothers to initiate the reconnection or 'to do the right thing'. Others expressed feeling rejected and intimidated by the responses that they received, and that this discouragement led them to give up on the process. Giving up seemed to be one of the ways that fathers protected themselves psychologically from the onerous process.

The common theme amongst the fathers with regards to the overwhelm of fatherhood was linked to a stated 'not knowing how to father', even amongst those who struggled less with their fatherhood identities. It seemed that all of these fathers felt that they needed some sort of facilitation for their fathering transitions and roles. Fathers expressed a need for this from their fathers, which many admitted to not having had. Solid and supportive structures that African cultures provide, for men to be able to transition into fatherhood, though less formal in the present day (Hunter, 2006; Langa 2010), were felt by many of the participants to have been lacking in their lives.

It was also expressed that the guidance that most of the men received from their mothers as single parents fell short by virtue of them being female. Literature has found that the significance of the role of being fathered is often minimised in society by both men and women (Awunti et al., 2019; Ncayiyane & Nel, 2023). Many men who grew up without fathers or father figures often report not knowing how to navigate their fatherhood journeys, which speaks to the importance of men having father figures in their lives (Awunti et al., 2019; Ncayiyane & Nel, 2023). Interestingly, however, a recent study has found that the kind of mothering received by men tends to exert more influence on their parenting style when becoming a father than the kind of fathering received (Ncayiyane & Nel, 2023). This suggests that the fantasy of a template that would have been provided by their own fathers, may in fact reflect a more generalised sense of sense of inadequacy at having had an absent father, rather than an actual lack of knowing how to parent. This appeared to be supported by the finding that some of the men in this study expressed feeling envy towards other men who had experienced a present father.

It also emerged that fathers had an implicit wish for facilitation into fatherhood to come from the mothers of their children. 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). To some extent, it could be said that there was an unconscious

sense of envy towards the prevalent facilitation and focus that mothers tend to receive early on in their development. Taking this topic of facilitation into consideration, it linked to the fathers struggles to reconnect with their children as that process seemed to need facilitation from mothers because fathers perceived them as more competent.

When facilitation from mothers was not received, many of the fathers reported conflict in the co-parenting relationship and feeling unfairly treated. High levels of distrust towards their ex-partners were reported. This was significant as it caused the co-parenting relationship to be extremely strained and, in most cases, so much so that it was the direct cause as to why reconnections did not happen. Much of this conflict centred around money. Some fathers felt that they could not trust their ex-partners with their financial contributions in the moments that they could contribute towards raising their children. Others could however admit that they used the withholding of money to express their anger, despite being able to financially contribute towards the upbringing of their children. Dawson (2023) makes reference to the conflicts and tensions that characterise men's relationships with the mothers of their (nonresident) children. He found that it is at least in part, an expression of a general reluctance on the part of men to give money to women they are no longer in a romantic or sexual relationship with for their children's upkeep (Dawson, 2023). This reluctance was observed to be especially acute after a bitter break-up and when the mother of men's children was in a new relationship with another man (Dawson, 2023). In many instances, these fathers used retaliation as a defence against their feelings of rejection. For some this manifested as revenge against feeling extorted. Significantly, all the participants had identified financial provision as a characteristic of a good enough father, and all of them expressed feeling more connected to their children or imagined that their future reconnection with their children would be more meaningful when they could offer financial support. This suggests that the disruption of financial provision by conflict in the parental couple could exacerbate absentee fatherhood through the resultant heightening of shame at not meeting the criterion of good-enough fatherhood that is financial provision.

Facilitation into the fatherhood required by these fathers appeared to extend to the maternal family. Recognition of their father status by the maternal family seemed vital. When fathers felt unwanted and unsupported by their ex-partner's maternal family they often expressed feeling disconnected and had little hope of reconnecting at all. Fathers seemed to feel that they experienced gate-keeping at the hands of maternal families. One of the ways that fathers felt this was operationalized was through making what they felt were unnecessary and for them

unattainable cultural and financial requests before they could be allowed to reconnect with their children. These requests were personalised and experienced as intended to keep them away from their children. Interestingly, the two fathers who had reconnected with their children made very little or no mention of the maternal family, which suggested that they had not experienced resistance from the maternal family. This appeared to highlight the potency of gatekeeping.

In some cases, the relating of their experiences of reconnection entailed revisiting difficult topics such as their history of being emotionally and physically violent towards their ex-partners, and having to consider how and why this made their attempt at reconnection difficult or impossible. At first, these particular men tended to deny the idea that they acted in ways that were harmful towards their ex-partners. This meant that when they attempted to reconnect, they experienced the rejection of their attempts as unjustified personal and vengeful attacks. These situations can be understood by looking at the concept of reflective functioning (RF) which has been defined as "the capacity to understand and interpret one's own and other's behaviour as an expression of mental states such as feelings, thoughts, fantasies, beliefs, and desires" (Fonagy et al., 2018, p. 36). The absence of RF is at the core of several kinds of psychopathology, including anxiety, depression, personality disorders, and relational problems (Fonagy & Target, 2002; Suchman et al., 2010; Stover et al., 2023). Reflective functioning (RF) has been found to be associated with mother–child interactions, and although less is known about the association of fathers' self and child-focused RF and father–child relationships, fathers who have histories of intimate partner violence (IPV) have been found to have poor RF, which may impact their father–child interactions (Stover et al., 2023). During the course of the interviews, some of the participants were able to acknowledge how their own behaviour may have disrupted their fatherhood journeys. One of these fathers was able to understand that it was his violence that had caused a lot of push back from his ex-partner and the maternal family when he attempted to reconnect with his child. It is likely that his recognition of this helped in the reconnection process. Some of the others , however, were not able to reflect on their own contributions to the breakdown of relationships between themselves and the their ex-partners and children.

Lastly, fathers expressed feeling fearful of how they were viewed or represented in their children's minds and wondered whether their children would one day be able to view them as fathers. They expressed feeling a deep sense of shame during this process and were preoccupied about what their children felt about them being alive and absent. Fathers feared that if they did

manage to reconnect, that their children would reject them. It is possible that these fears may have contributed to avoidance or what appeared to be a 'passivity' in the reconnection process that the researcher perceived.

5.4. Fatherhood identities: Psychosocial positionings in relation to present and absent fatherhood discourses

The definition of fatherhood was found to be broad and, at times, difficult to define across participants. Some of the fathers grappled with how to capture this idea for themselves. It was felt to be an identity that developed over time and a process of growth. As with Berman and Long's (2022) study, these fathers also found fatherhood to be an intense transition that required maturity.

Of the fathers who were able to define fatherhood, mixed definitions were given. Some described a generalized definition that was not specific to their cultural background; the notion that 'a father is just a father'. Others felt that having had the experience of being fathered had instilled in them particular qualities of a father, and that their identities were developed and passed down from one generation to another. This definition was most notably located in the passing down of cultural practices that specifically offer belonging for their child(ren), as well as offering a child the experience of being grounded and providing them tools that assist them to navigate life.

According to some of the participants and relevant to these definitions and constructions of fatherhood, men felt that their identities transitioned from being boys to men when becoming fathers. Fatherhood has been defined as powerful, and the process of becoming a parent as one of the greatest transformative experiences in adult life, that may generate a significant reconfiguration of priorities (Parker & Wang, 2013). These entail important physical, emotional, and psychological adjustments that sometimes lead to new rewards, but also to new conflicts and tensions (Cooklin et al., 2016; Harrington et al., 2011). Fathers in this study felt that the vast responsibilities placed upon them, such as financial provision, shifted them into manhood. This transition was experienced as both positive and overwhelming; that while taking on this responsibility of another's life gave them a sense of purpose and meaning, it also felt heavily loaded. Spiteri et al. (2023) highlighted how new fatherhood tends to present itself with many contradictions as most men struggle with the idea of their expanding roles and their changed lives and worlds. They found that many men have felt that new fatherhood was a

difficult experience, and one that required endurance and patience (Spiteri et al., 2023). Various studies have discussed the topic of paternal ambivalence, and the tensions that exist within fathers and their fatherhood identities (Matee, 2016; Raphael-Leff, 2010; Robb, 2004). These studies have also elaborated on father readiness and the difficult nature of the transition to fatherhood (Matee, 2016; Raphael-Leff, 2010; Robb, 2004). Some of the fathers in this study described an initial experience of fatherhood that was a mix of shock and excitement. For others, their fatherhood experience was purely negative. Fatherhood not only took them by surprise but seemed to be experienced as unfulfilling, consuming and entailing too much responsibility. Part of this pressured responsibility was connected to what it meant to have to set a good example for a child, a role which many of the men in this study did not feel ready to assume. In this sense, fatherhood appeared to be positioned in many of the men's minds as an idealised, unattainable set of standards, against which they found themselves failing.

Fatherhood was thus found to be linked to notions of culturally-embedded masculinity, the role of father as provider, and to motherhood and the relationship with the child's mother. These were interrelated and the men positioned themselves as fathers in relation to these factors.

5.4.1. Changing notions of masculinity

Notions of masculinity influenced the father's positioning of themselves in relation to discourses of fatherhood through their beliefs of what it means to be a man. For some fathers it seemed that there was a tension between an identity that upheld purely traditional and patriarchal principles, and an identity that was constructed of more modern ideals. For these fathers, there was a belief that manhood had evolved and was nuanced, and this influenced their fathering and how they viewed their fathering. This was in line with Davies and Eagle (2013) who have noted that the paternal function is an idea that is different from the role of the father in a child's life. They have taken the standpoint where they believe that stereotypical gender-roles and thinking have shifted and that either gender is able to perform both maternal and paternal functions (Davies & Eagle, 2013). The tension that these particular fathers experienced was that this evolved representation of fathering did not appear to be stable or fully integrated. At points, they spoke about the importance of a father's caregiving presence in a child's life and at other times they reverted back to traditional perspectives of fatherhood identity that were grounded in the ability to provide financially. Scheibling (2020) speaks about

how scholars highlight the ways in which fathers use hegemonic masculinity to (re)frame their parental involvement (e.g., Brandth and Kvande 1998, 2018; Jordan 2018). This has been seen in how caregiving as 'manly' and 'masculine' have been redefined (Brandth & Kvande 1998; Scheibling, 2020). Furthermore, scholars speak about how fathers can also de-gender their parental identities and practices, resist and denounce some elements of hegemonic masculinity (see Chesley 2011; Doucet 2006; Finn and Henwood 2009; Miller 2011; Scheibling, 2020; Snitker 2018; Steinour 2018). Put differently, fathers can construct 'hybrid' versions of fatherhood based on a composite of older and newer ideals about gender, work, and family (Finn and Henwood 2009; Randles, 2018). As Doucet (2006) puts it, by "simultaneously embracing and rejecting both femininity and hegemonic masculinity," involved fathers are "radically revisioning caring work, masculine conceptions of care, and ultimately our understandings of masculinities" (p. 238). The men in this study appeared to hold a wish to be able to embody this new version of fatherhood, but when the couple relationship collapsed, reverted to more traditional representations of fatherhood, where care of the child was left to the mothers or grandmothers. Some of the men attempted to continue the role of provision, but for most of the participants in the study, this commitment slowly petered away. For some men, the loss of the opportunity to be the version of a father they wished to be appeared too difficult to bear, and seemed to result in defensive physical and psychological disconnection from their father roles.

These fathers felt that it was difficult to have a positive experience as a father due to the narratives that exist in society. Some participants felt that fathers in general were not being 'seen' or respected, thus their experiences go unacknowledged or are viewed as less than. They felt 'set-up' and that they did not or could not meet the societal standards of what it means to be a good enough father. Feeling that they had been unfavourably positioned this way made them fear that their children had also positioned them this way. Jabu went as far as referring to Black fathers as 'trash' in his explanation of how he perceives and feels society perceives Black men, Black fathers and their shortfalls. He felt that this was directly caused by most Black men being raised by single mothers who naturally have a limited experience about maleness. He felt that this caused Black boys and fathers to seek examples, which more often than not, are not from the best people or places as they teach and endorse unhealthy and toxic fatherhood identities. This cycle of the unfathered boy who becomes a man who is unable to father has pervaded Black fathers' stories and experiences (Awunti et al., 2019; Freeks, 2017). Identification with these negative stereotypes was evident in some of the participants'

narratives, sometimes overtly, as in Jabu's case, sometimes implicitly – fearing they were not ready, or 'man enough', or through the significant use of defences against acknowledging themselves as absent fathers, or through enactment where their positioning of themselves as victims to unfair treatment seemed to perpetuate their feelings of worthlessness and shame (Govender & Cartwright, 2021).

Other negative narratives and stereotypes that fathers felt shadowed Black fatherhood was the opinion that Black men are incapable of meeting the standards of presence, stability, emotional availability and financial provision. Alongside internalised shame carried by Black men as a consequence of decades of racial oppression (Govender & Cartwright, 2021), Ratele (2013) speaks about the view of hegemonic masculinities among Black men as hegemony in marginality, which gives rise to a recognition that Black masculinities are constructed within contexts of patriarchal privileges that are tied to maleness yet also shaped profoundly by race- and economic-based marginalization. A demonstration of this is how fathers in this study felt that Black fathers were viewed as not wanting to participate in fathering or seen as failing when they do. This view does not consider the factors that Ratele points to. Sikweyiya et al., (2022) argue the importance of highlighting 'masculinity in crisis', which involves recognition of the structural conditions that destabilize assumptions of hegemonic masculinity and contribute to men's failure to fulfil masculine ideals. They go on to discuss the issue of how in many cultures, men are ascribed the roles of head of households, protectors and providers and how the current South African social and economic conditions characterized by high levels of unemployment or precarious job opportunities make it difficult for many men, particularly Black men, to achieve local forms of hegemonic masculinity, including securing jobs, marrying, fathering children, and establishing their own households (Sikweyiya et al., 2022).

Furthermore, in temporary spaces of work, in which men are deprived of external symbols corresponding to ideal masculinity (like having a family and livestock) that are present in the 'real home' context, men have described a reconfigured masculinity (Sikweyiya, 2022). This reconfigured masculinity has been shaped by the demonstration of monetary prowess and behavioural performances strikingly akin to the concept of hypermasculinity, such as spending money publicly (e.g.in bars/taverns), having sexual relationships with multiple women, drinking alcohol, and similar performative gestures that gained admiration and recognition by women and other men in mining environments (Sikweyiya, 2022). While we cannot say the directionality of the causal relationship - it is significant that not having families around appears

associated with the performance of hypermasculinity - this could also be observed in some of the fathers after their relationships with the mothers of their children ended. Although it is possible that it was existing hypermasculinity that contributed to the end of the relationship, the absence of the family from the father also appears to have the potential to interfere in the construction of alternative, more nurturing father identities. These factors are often ignored when opinions about Black fathers are formed.

5.4.2. Financial provision: Shame and power

Financial provision being tied to men's fatherhood identities was linked to men feeling worthy or unworthy to take up their positions as fathers. Dawson (2023) found that fatherhood remains closely linked to financial provision despite persistently high levels of unemployment and economic insecurity. He found that the fathers in his study associated 'good' or 'real' fathers with those who provide material support for their children's maintenance and upbringing (Dawson, 2023). In this reconnection study, fathers who struggled or could not provide had trouble in identifying themselves and others as fathers. In South Africa, unemployment is endemically high, and it is linked to a fragmentation of the social fabric and the perceived 'crisis of paternal responsibility' (Bray et al. 2010; Hunter 2006; Morrell and Richter 2006; Seekings 2008). The literature has tended to view unemployment as a major contributing factor to the high numbers of Black children who live with their mothers or maternal kin and have limited (if any) physical contact with their fathers or paternal kin (Bray et al. 2010; Mavungu, Thomson-de Boor, and Mphaka 2013; Sikweyiya et al. 2017; Malinga 2015).

For some of the fathers in this study, their father identity and masculinity were solely tied to whether they could provide financially and nothing else. They felt that society did not offer any other alternatives, and that their coparents would only 'see' and respect them if they were financially contributing towards their children. There is literature that speaks about how some cultural and social aspects of fatherhood are changing in many societies, such as the substantial changes in fathers' participation at home (Altintas & Sullivan, 2017; Grau-Grau, (2020); Sandberg & Hofferth, 2001). Empirical evidence using data from 'values surveys' suggests that traditional gender-role attitudes have "uniformly declined" towards greater egalitarianism (Knight & Brinton, 2017, p. 1485). This, however, did not appear to resonate with the personal experiences of the fathers in this study.

Rather, the strong links in their minds between fatherhood and provision meant that their inability to provide, as well their inability to take up their fatherhood identities caused a lot of shame for these men. The group of men who struggled to take up their fatherhood roles, were the fathers who also struggled to reconnect with their children. This group felt that the only way that a successful reconnection could happen was once their financial circumstances changed. Interestingly, and contradictory to the above sentiment, was the experience of one of the fathers, Bandile, who was able to take up his fatherhood role with his second child despite not being able to financially contribute towards the child's needs. He attributed this to the quality of his coparenting relationship with the mother of that child. Wang et al., (2023) found that fathers' involvement in their children's lives was more strongly affected by coparenting relationship as well as fathers' perceptions of coparenting. This demonstrates how the relationship with the child's mother is an important factor alongside financial means, that influences the father's ability to take up his role as a father. This is discussed further below.

Overall, however, financial means were situated as a source of empowerment in the participants' narratives and a sense that if a father cannot provide, he has no power. It was significant to note, however, that when some of the fathers did become financially empowered, this was sometimes wielded as a tool to communicate their anger and resentment at feeling excluded and rejected. A few of the fathers admitted to withholding funds when unhappy with decisions made by the child's mother.

5.4.3. Marriage and legitimacy

Various cultural processes mediate men's ability to practice fatherhood (Hunter 2006; Mavungu 2013; Morrell & Richter 2006; Morrell et al. 2016; Malinga & Ratele, 2022). Under the customary system, contributing biologically to the conception of a child does not necessarily make a man a father (Malinga & Ratele, 2022). The customary practice of paying ilobola (bridewealth) or 'damages' if the child is born out of wedlock are important processes in some ethnic groups for men to be recognised as the father and gain access to their children. This notion of legitimacy with regards to their fatherhood was deeply rooted in the power that the institution of marriage held for these men. In the isiZulu culture and similarly for other African cultures, fathering and fatherhood are embroiled in the concept of building a home (Hunter, 2006; Langa, 2010; Ratele, 2012). Malinga and Ratele (2022) highlight how historically

marriage did not merely bring two people together but functioned to legitimize a man's position within a cultural world and earned a man a particular kind of value. Some fathers felt that because they were not married to the mother of their child, they lost legitimacy in their identities. The participants felt that men who were married gained respect from society and were also seen as part of a family.

Although some fathers in the study had tried using the legal system to help give them rights over their children, this had not been successful, as in practice, the enforcement of legal rulings was not followed up. Rather, the mother and the maternal family were positioned as those with the power to grant access to the children. Not being married meant not having any decision-making power. Andile, later in life, made the decision to marry his new partner and identified this as helping him in his fatherhood journey with his subsequent children. In some instances, it seemed that having a child with someone and getting married were expected to go hand in hand. In Jabu case, he felt he lost access to his child, as well as feeling displaced, when the mother of his child married someone else. The man who married the mother of his child automatically received claim to the child despite not being the biological father.

As mentioned above, Andile's experience demonstrated the importance of the coparenting relationship with regards to the assumption of a present fatherhood identity. He expressed initially struggling to define his fatherhood identity as well struggling to take up his fatherhood role with regards to his first child, but being able to define and perform fatherhood when it came to his other two children that he was raising with his new partner. Despite being somewhat able to provide financially for his first child, he had not been present, and his relationship with his first partner had soured. Despite attempts at reconnection, he had eventually moved on to create a new family. The findings of this study suggested that when a man had a positive relationship with the mother of his child, and could financially provide, they struggled less with their fatherhood identity. Thus, supporting Wang's (2023) emphasis on the coparenting relationship for fatherhood, the mothers of their children were positioned by participants in this study as highly influential in their fatherhood journeys, as either gatekeepers and a source of rejection, criticism and shame, or as facilitators of the transition into fatherhood.

Over and above the rejection experienced by these men upon the breakdown of the couple relationship, the introduction of a new romantic relationship also played a role in whether these men felt that they could hold on to their fatherhood identities. Fathers seemed to feel a sense of rejection when their romantic relationships ended and as a result disengaged from their role

as fathers. This disconnect was exacerbated by their ex-partners starting new relationships. When their ex-partner started a new relationship, fathers felt replaced and threatened by the presence of another man in their children's life, thus they further disengaged from their fatherhood roles. Bandile, who had taken on a primary caregiver role for his infant, appeared to experience this as shaming when his ex-partner began a new relationship. While his caregiving of his child had been tolerable while the mother was studying as opposed to mothering, it became intolerable when she was romantically involved with someone else. He then appeared to disengage and associate fatherly or present parenting as 'motherly'. It was as though he could not experience himself as a father without the existence or hope of the romantic relationship, and felt resentful when the relationship was clearly over, and he was required to take on an identity as a single parent. He then left the child with his mother for a year, gradually losing contact with his child, before the child was passed to the maternal family and he lost contact altogether.

5.4.4. Disrupted fatherhood identities

Whilst there are few studies that investigate the reconnection process between fathers and their children after a period of absence, have found factors that disrupt paternal roles in ways similar to what occurs when there is a break down in the relationship between the child's mother and father, as described by the men in this study (Mapson, 2013). The experience of incarceration often acts as a barrier to parenting due to fewer interactions with children, information being given through third-party sources such as coparents or other relatives, and severed ties between family members (Mapson, 2013). Charles (2019) discusses factors such as difficulty coordinating logistics and financial barriers that disrupt the father-child relationship when the father is imprisoned. The above challenges are highly reminiscent of those experienced by the participants in this study. In incarcerated men, these barriers and factors have been found to negatively affect the paternal identity of fathers, often destabilizing men and leading to the reprioritizing of roles and shifting of identities while incarcerated (Clarke et al. 2005; Dyer 2005). Interestingly, a similar reprioritization was found in the participants of this study. When denied access to their children, fathering appeared to become less of a priority; absence led to further absence. With this said, however, research has also found that despite fathers' forced separation from their families while in prison, some incarcerated fathers retain parenthood as a key facet of their self-identity (Meek 2011). In many of the narratives, mothers were

positioned as holding the power to either allow or disallow fathering. In these instances, fathers left it up to women to position them as fathers, as well as help them reconnect with their children. Some fathers knew the whereabouts of their children, however, because they felt or were made to feel that their fatherhood claim lay in the hands of their ex-partners, they waited on someone else to initiate their reconnection process, either the mother or their children.

Cecil et al., (2008) discuss how caregivers play a pivotal role in facilitating this contact, serving as a gatekeeper in maintaining an ongoing relationship between fathers and children or prohibiting contact all together. Tasca (2016) elaborates and states that mothers and grandmothers are most likely to facilitate the bond between fathers and children, although the extent to which they do so also depends on paternal involvement prior to incarceration, parental rights termination, type of offense, sentence length, geographic distance, and prisoner security level. These examples point out that father absence is loaded with significant factors that makes identity and reconnection multilayered.

5.4.5. Defensive positions of victimhood

Positions of victimhood were pronounced in some fathers' narratives and more subtle in others. In many instances, these were founded in relation to the lack of efficacy with regards to the enforcement of legal rights by police services and courts, and gatekeeping on the part of mothers and maternal families. However, the tendency to shift blame onto mothers, that was evident throughout the narratives, was suggestive of defensive psychological processes in action. As mentioned in the rationale, "Victimhood is not a topic which lends itself to a unified account" (Jeffery & Candea, 2006, p. 291), and the use of victimhood as a defensive position is explored in the literature, albeit not in relation to fatherhood (Jeffery & Candea, 2006). In some of the participants' narratives, difficulty taking responsibility for their contribution to the breakdown of relationships, both with their coparents, as well with their children, was clear. The shifting of responsibility to position their absence in their children's lives to be as a result of something outside of themselves could be considered as a defence or psychic shield against having to introspect as well as to aid them to withstand feelings of loss and failure.

At points, these fathers seemed to disown and distance themselves from their identities as absent fathers. Some did this completely and others partially. Andile went as far as initially denying father absenteeism as a problem in the Black community. He positioned himself and

other Black fathers as being misrepresented by society and the media, despite what statistics have produced. This could be understood as his inability to tolerate what it meant for him to be absent from his child's life. He psychologically and defensively achieved this by focusing on his presence in his other children's lives, which may demonstrate his wish to escape his absent father identity. Bandile demonstrated his struggle with his absence by making his coparent complicit in the absence. This seemed like the only way that he could bear acknowledging himself as absent and take responsibility. In another instance, Mabena disowned both the experience of him having experienced an absent father as well as his own absence in his child's life. This father could not make the psychic links and see that a generational repetition had occurred.

The need for this defensive stance was due to the immense emotional pain that was associated with absence, most notably in relation to many of the participants having had absent fathers themselves. Significantly in many of the narratives, their own fathers' absence was downplayed and rather the focus was on the alternative father figures they had experienced as present in their lives when they were younger, such as their grandfathers. By solely focusing on these figures, it helped them deny experiencing absence and identifying the direct impact of this on their current fatherhood journeys. These defensive approaches were a way to keep their experiences of being fathered idealised as it seemed too painful and difficult to bear the full reality. When fathers were able to get in touch with their holistic experiences of not being fathered and not fathering, they were filled with an overwhelming sense of loss, longing and envy. They could express that they wished they had received guidance as children and new fathers. Acknowledgement of their fathers and their own absenteeism put a lot of pressure on fathers to try to attain a different outcome for themselves and their children, which they struggled to achieve. The depiction of their own fathers as 'bad' or having failed them would mean acknowledging their own failures as fathers to their children. Taking on the role of the victim appeared to be more palatable than taking on the role of the perpetrator.

A victim-perpetrator dynamic was evident in the interplay between fathers feeling disempowered to claim their fatherhood identities, and mothers being experienced as abusing their parenting powers. However, by positioning themselves as victims and mothers as perpetrators, mothers were given the power, and it seemed that fathers then felt that they needed permission to have claim over their fatherhood. marriage appeared to grant fathers the same power. While marriage is a legitimately controversial issue in many Black cultures and

families, at times it appeared to be used as a defensive tool to further distance oneself from absent father identity. Two of the fathers married new partners and were able to have a different experience with their other children from these relationships, and this was used defensively to position their fatherhood identity as only positive. These fathers focused on their positive experiences and relationships with their other children and suppressed their negative experiences with their estranged children. The implicit argument being made appeared to be that if they had not been married to the mother of their child, their absence as a father is to be expected since they have no power in this position, and that only married men who do not take responsibility for their children can be accused of absence. This was evident in their positioning of themselves as responsible when given the opportunity to be.

5.4.6. The role of mentalising in reconnection

The various fathers' capacity for reflective function differed in this study. Many of the fathers in this study demonstrated blind spots with regards to their contribution to the breakdown of their relationships with the mothers and in their lack of connection with their children. While some were able to engage with parts of their stories that they had suppressed for years, but others simply could not. It was common for some of the fathers to be so consumed by their resentment and rivalry with their ex-partners that it prevented them from fully being able to take on their identities as fathers who were trying to reconcile with their children. Even though these fathers knew the whereabouts of their children, some even having general details of the quality of their lives, the fathers seemed stuck in their absent 'helpless' father identities. Although this study briefly focused on the fathers' backgrounds, most of their responses about their upbringings could lead one to assume that in addition to growing up with absent fathers, they also may not have secure attachment styles with their primary caregivers. Thus, they perhaps did not always receive empathic reflective mirroring on their inner experiences which would have equipped them with the capacity to develop effective reflective function capacities for them to experience stable and mutually satisfactory interpersonal relationships (Lingiardi & Bornstein, 2017; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2018; Tanzilli et al., 2021).

For all the fathers, having the opportunity to reflect on their reconnection process increased the fathers' desire for meaningful connections with their children. For those who had reconnected, the research process appeared to make them more appreciative of their fatherhood roles,

presence and relationships with their children. In the end, even though fathers who had not reconnected successfully still desired to reconnect, none had managed to formulate practical concrete plans on how to execute this process, suggesting that the process of unsuccessful reconnections would continue. Most fathers could only go as far as stating that the process of reflecting made them introspect even more. It caused them to realise how much time was lost and how that felt irretrievable. Some fathers were able to finally take accountability and not project blame, and let go of the negative feelings that they felt towards the mothers of their children. These fathers felt a sense of relief from being able to share their stories and one father in particular credited this process to helping him find a job. Fathers felt heard, seen and validated by just being given the opportunity to share their thought and stories. Sadly, for a few of the fathers who seemed less able to mentalise their own feelings and behaviour, this research process appeared to evoke emotion that required them to defend harder and psychologically retreat. At times fathers disowned the negative parts of their fatherhood identities and wanted to be seen as all good. They shared idealised views of themselves and fatherhood, and in some cases, this presented in how they shared about their relationship with their other children that they were present for. It was in these moments that fathers demonstrated tensions between their actual father identities and how they wished to be viewed and experienced as fathers. Contradictory statements about their fatherhood identities in their narratives demonstrated this internal tension.

Fathers who did not reconnect with their children made different meanings from their unsuccessful attempts. Some fathers felt hopeful about the future and further attempts - andthere was a hope that their children would one day positively receive their version of the story, which helped fathers to temporarily alleviate themselves from feeling guilt.

Some others took up victim positions. A few fathers seemed to disconnect entirely and it was these fathers that stated that their absence was the best result for all parties involved. According to Desmond and Desmond (2006), Denis and Ntsimane (2006), Richter, Chikovore, and Makusha (2010) households that have a father figure in them are better off than those without, and so the above conclusion would be challenged by these scholars. In these instances, these fathers disowned and minimised their feelings and seemed to completely emotionally and mentally shutdown.

When fathers were able to acknowledge that how mothers ultimately handled things was at times justified, even though not ideal, they were able to express that in those moments, that

their own behaviour had contributed to the disconnections in their relationships. These fathers could express that they were not ready to be fathers, as they either compromised their child's safety, or were too young and immature to manage the responsibility of fatherhood. This often allowed for reflection on areas for improvement that contributed to repair of ruptured relationships.

Chapter Six - Conclusion

6.1 Summary of findings

While the disruption and absence caused by the separation of the couple appears to contribute to difficulties with reconnection between fathers and their children, it would be simplistic to merely state that absence causes fathers to struggle to reconnect with their children or to stay rooted in their father identities. Rather there are factors that exist prior to and during this process that influence this, as demonstrated by the experiences of the fathers in this study and those in the Charles et al. (2019) and Turney and Marín (2021) studies on incarcerated fathers. It appears to be a combination of both personal and contextual factors that determine which fathers manage to form positive fatherhood identities and forge reconnections and which do not.

The social factors that appeared to discourage reconnection were an unsupportive legal system, financial disempowerment, gatekeeping by mothers and maternal families (sometimes for protection from violence and substance use, but sometimes due to anger), cultural customs that were perceived as being used to gatekeep, and the mother of the child finding a new partner. All of these have also been found in previous studies (Charles et al., 2019; Dawson, 2023; Hunter 2010; Posel et al., 2011). These posed significant obstacles to many of these fathers achieving reconnections with their children.

A number of personal factors also complicated reconnection with their children, and these often determined the positions that these fathers took up in relation to the social factors. What appeared to keep some of these men stuck in their absent father identities was difficulty taking accountability for the consequences of their actions, due to defensive processes and mentalising deficits. These defensive processes served to manage shame at feeling like they had failed, shame at having been rejected, and shame at having become a stereotype of Black fatherhood

that they resent. The defences utilised included rationalising, denial, splitting and projection. This inability to acknowledge and understand the role they play in their absence, which is usually accompanied by defensive projection of all blame onto others, seems to result in these fathers remaining preoccupied with what was lost and what they felt that they are being denied. Unfortunately, this preoccupation then means that some of the fathers do not have the insight to process what it would mean or look like to identify as a present father, nor the capacity to fully engage with what the process of reconnecting would entail.

The combination of societal narratives and childhood experiences that minimise the significance of fathers and at times, even associate Black fathers with inadequacy, appear to leave these men feeling not good-enough. When reflecting, some fathers expressed that they identified themselves as secondary parents. This contributed to them relinquishing their right to identify themselves as equal in terms of their parenting identities; the mother was identified as primary. These fathers' internal struggle to perceive themselves as important created a tension within them. On one hand they deeply wished and desired to take up their fatherhood identities, and for these identities to be acknowledged and considered important, but on the other hand their fear of not being good enough, insecurity and lack of agency appeared to make them disown their own claim to fatherhood.

6.*2* Strengths and limitations of the study

A strength of this study was the depth that two interviews was able to achieve, as it allowed for a first-hand experience and authenticity that provided valuable and meaningful data. Increased quality of data is linked to more researcher-participant time spent together (Carr, 1994). The researcher's personal investment in the topic and her constant vigilance regarding her own counter-transferential responses added to her understanding of these fathers' experiences (Carr, 1994). The individual interview format allowed participants, as well as the researcher, to feel more comfortable and less intimidated or afraid to express views that otherwise may have been more intimidating in a group setting. Conducting two interviews offered an opportunity to gather more subjective data as well as analyse whether there were shifts in the fathers' reflective capacities between interviews. The psychosocial approach taken to the study was also a strength, as it allowed for consideration of both personal and social influences on the participants' experiences. A strength of qualitative psychosocial approach is that it was able to

capture more nuanced aspects of the research material (Boyatzis, 1998; Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012). Parker (2015) speaks about the potential of research running the risk of 'oversubjectification' but that a psychosocial approach can minimize this.

However, the study also had a number of limitations. The difficulty with finding participants meant a smaller sample, hence generalization of the findings to a greater population is not possible. However, this study aimed to examine the experiences and understandings of this small sample and did not seek to be generalizable. Rather the aim was to document a particular set of participants' subjectivities or experiences as documented by a particular researcher with their own particular set of subjectivities (Elliot, Fischer & Rennie, 1999; Flick, 1998). A further limitation of the study is the fact that the fathers may have held back particular aspects of their experiences or opinions, given my gender and the fact that I was visibly pregnant at the time of the interviews. While every effort was made to ensure that participants felt at ease, as attested to by their comments on their experience of the interviews, my clear identity as a mother may have influenced their responses to me.

6.3 Implications of the study and recommendations for further research

This research has demonstrated that although a lot of work and progress has gone into the topic of absent and present fatherhood, there is still more that is needed. There are many studies that have highlighted and brought to the fore reasons for absenteeism amongst Black fathers (Enderstein & Boonzaier, 2015; Khunuou, 2006; Lobaka, 2022; Mndende, 2021; Ratele, 2012; Richter et al., 2010; Theron, 2016). This study's findings have supported the arguments made by these previous studies, but has also extended them with regards to identification of the fact that many Black men appear to need a lot of support in finding ways to reconnect with their children after having been absent. The participants in this study demonstrated an overall wish and willingness to be present but struggle with how to navigate their various situations and emotional responses. Lastly it has reiterated how systemic and structural changes are required for the trend of absentee Black fatherhood to change.

One of the reasons why this study was necessary and relevant was the lack of studies investigating father-child reconnections, thus it would be beneficial for more studies like this one to be conducted. The development of programmes and investigation into their effectiveness are required. These programmes should focus on creating dialogue, addressing shame and

ambivalence, creating safe spaces for Black men to be able to address their fatherhood challenges from their own perspectives and voices, and empowering men to challenge gatekeeping that masquerades as culturally endorsed practice. Delaying contact with a parent post couple separation generally results in more negative characterization, anxiety and polarization and is generally not recommended (Katz et al., 2020). Programmes could promote awareness of damaging factors in such situations, and begin the process of desensitization for families to have basic skills of coping with and managing distressing thoughts and feelings, once disruption has occurred in order to combat gate-keeping. Fostering more reconnections in order to start constructing safe, structured repaired contact between parent and child would assist fathers in positions similar to the study participants (Katz et al., 2020). Studies that investigate the association between men's difficulties in forming a successful relationship with the mothers of their children, and their defenses against their possible contributions to the relationship breakdown and these men's childhood relationship with their mothers would be useful. A different racial and age profiling of the participants for example the findings from a study that included older men, 50 to 60 years old, would be helpful to see whether the same challenges or results are yielded. One could also consider the utility of different psychoanalytic approaches and theories such as Erik Erickson's conflictual psychosocial stages. Studies and programs that target socioeconomic factors that are specific to the Black community such as cultural practices, financial disempowerment, interpersonal relationship difficulties and traumas between partners and extended families, Black identity and masculinity, offering free or accessible therapeutic services all contribute to successful and unsuccessful reconnections that are unique to South Africa. Practitioners across the discipline of psychology need to identify, name and assist in creating conversations and thinking spaces to problems with individual's and families in their practices.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

Father-child reconnection experiences: Perspectives of previously absent Black South African fathers'

By Hopolang Matee

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Dear potential participant

I am a PhD student in the Department of Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand. My PhD research is focused on the experiences of absent Black South African fathers who have attempted to reconnect as well as reconnected with their children successfully or unsuccessfully. I am aware that this may be a sensitive topic to discuss but will endeavour to make you feel as comfortable as possible. I am interested in your experiences and your understandings of the decisions you have made.

Should you agree to participate in this research, you will be interviewed by me for approximately 60 minutes on two different occasions. The interviews would be spaced out by a week each. The interviews will take place at a mutually agreed time and place where privacy and confidentiality can be assured. Where interviews will be face-to-face, both the researcher and participant will be required to sanitize, wear a face mask throughout the interview, and be seated at least 2meters away from one another in a well ventilated room. If needs be, the interviews will take place via telephone call, whatsapp audio call or online app. At all times, your right to confidentiality will be respected.

During the interview you will be asked to tell me your fatherhood story and I will ask questions about issues pertaining to fatherhood which will involve your personal experiences on this topic. You are able to refuse to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering and may choose not to continue participating in the study at any time until publication and reporting of the findings. There will be no repercussions should you decide to withdraw from this research.

Confidentiality will be maintained by ensuring that no personal identifying information is disclosed in the research by the use of pseudonyms (made up names). With your permission, each interview will be audio recorded so that it can be transcribed (typed up). In the case of online interviews, the interview may be videorecorded for the purposes of transcribing the conversation. Only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to the anonymised transcripts. All recordings will be saved in a password secure folder and only I will have access to the recordings. The data will be archived in the form of anonymised transcripts on the researcher and supervisor's computers for potential future research use, with the participants' permission. If participants do not give permission for future research use, raw data and transcripts will be deleted after examination of the researcher's PhD.

This research may be published in academic journals and excerpts of transcripts (direct quotes) will be included in the published material. There will be no monetary compensation for your participation in this research. If the participants disclose any risk to themselves or children, the researcher will ethically be obliged to help them gain assistance. Participation in this research is not a therapeutic endeavour, however, should a participant require therapeutic intervention, the participant will be offered psychotherapy. Given the sensitivity of this topic, if anything that has been discussed evokes any unsettling feelings for you, Dr. Esther Price can be directly contacted on Esther.Price@wits.ac.za or 011 717 4517. Dr. Esther Price is the supervisor at the Emthonjeni Community Psychology Clinic which is a free service for counselling. Please notify her that you have been referred as a participant in Hopolang Matee's PhD research for counselling.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. Should you have any further queries or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Contact details:

Hopolang Matee (Principal Investigator) telephone no. 073 044 2123, or by e-mail at Hopolang.Matee@wits.ac.za

Katherine Bain (Supervisor) on telephone no. 011 717-4558, or by e-mail at Katherine.Bain@wits.ac.za

Should you have any concerns about the ethics of this study: University of the Witwatersrand Human Research Ethics Committee

Tel: 011 717 1408

Email: Shaun. Schoeman@wits.ac.za

APPENDIX 2

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE:

Father-child reconnection experiences: Perspectives of previously absent Black South African fathers'

By Hopolang Matee

1. **I have been given a Participant Information Sheet which explains the nature and processes involved in this study, which is attached here to. Yes ___ No ___**
2. **I was given time to read it, or had it read to me, in the language I best understand.**

   Yes ___ No ___
3. **I was given time to ask any questions I wanted to and found any answers given to me to be reasonable and satisfactory. Yes ___ No ___**
4. **I believe I fully understand why the study is being conducted and what the intended outcomes will be. Yes ___ No ___**
5. **I understand that there will be no immediate benefit to me, should I agree to participate, nor will I receive any payment conversely, participation will not cost me anything but my time.**

   Yes ___ No ___
6. **I understand that, even if I initially consent to take part in the study, I may subsequently withdraw at any time before publication of findings or submission of the thesis and would not be required to give any reasons; if that happened. Any data collected about me for the purposes of the study would immediately be destroyed, unless I give consent for it to be retained.**

   Yes ___ No ___

7. **I have been given a range of contact details, listed below. If I require further information or become concerned about any aspect of this study I am free to speak to any of these contacts. Yes ___ No ___**

Name of Participant: _____

Date: _____

Place: _____

Signature or mark _____

<u>Witnessed by</u>:

Name of Witness: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

CONSENT FOR AUDIO-RECORDING:

I understand that:

- **The interview will be audio-recorded by the researcher, or in the case of an online interview video-recorded for the purposes of transcribing the conversation. Yes ___ No ___**
- **The recording will be transcribed and any information that could identify me will be removed . Yes ___ No ___**
- **The recordings and transcriptions will be stored in a secure location (a password protected computer) with restricted access – only the researcher will have access to the recordings, while thye researcher and her supervisor will have access to the**

transcriptions..

Yes ___ No ___

- **The recordings will be deleted after examination of the researcher's PhD.**

  Yes ___ No ___

- **The transcriptions will be seen by the researcher and her supervisor and with your permission, will be archived on the researcher's and her supervisor's computers in password protected files for possible future research use. Yes ___ No ___**

- **Direct quotes from my interview, without any information that could identify me, will be cited in the research report or other write-ups of research.**

  Yes ___ No ___

Name of Participant: _____

Date: _____

Place: _____

Signature or mark _____

<u>Witnessed by</u>:

Name of Witness: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX 3

Father-child reconnection experiences: Perspectives of previously absent Black South African fathers'

By Hopolang Matee

SOCIAL MEDIA PARTICIPATION REQUEST

My name is Hopolang Matee and I am currently conducting research towards my PhD in the Department of Psychology at Wits University.

The aim of my research is to explore experiences of Black South African fathers who have attempted to reconnect with their children, or reconnected with their children successfully or unsuccessfully, after previously not having contact with them. The study wishes to explore the meanings that men who were previously absent fathers, and now currently present in their children's lives, make of reconnecting with their children, and their understandings of fatherhood in relation to this.

This is a sensitive topic, and I am aware of the societal judgments and criticism that surround this issue. I am interested to hear your experience and your understanding of this. I would like to invite you to participate in the study, which will entail three approximately 60 minute interview with me. All the contents of the interview will be strictly confidential and no personally identifying information will be used in the publication of findings.

Please email me Hopolang.Matee@wits.ac.za if you or anyone you know is willing to participate in the study and I will contact you to arrange a convenient time to conduct the interview.

Regards

Hopolang Matee

APPENDIX 4

Father-child reconnection experiences: Perspectives of previously absent Black South African fathers'

By Hopolang Matee

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Interview 1: Fatherhood story

This will include appropriate responses and prompts from the interviewer to ensure that the story and the participants' meanings are understood.

Prompts as necessary, if not answered before:

Interview 1: Fatherhood story

- **Please tell me what it has been like for you to become a father?**
- **What does it mean for you to be a Black father Black [participant's culture e.g. Xhosa, Pedi etc.] living in South Africa?**
- **What made you want to reconnect with your child?**
- **How would you define 'taking up an active parenting role in your child's life'?**
- **How old was your child when you reconnected with them?**
- **How many children have you attempted/reconnected with? why this child/ren?**
- **How did you make initial contact with your child?**
- **How was the process of reconnecting with your child?**
- **What feelings did you feel before and after reconnecting with your child?**
- **How has the relationship with your child been since reconnecting with them?**
- **What challenges did you encounter during this process?**

- **What was your definition of fatherhood before reconnecting with your child?**
- **What is your definition of fatherhood now that you have reconnected with your child?**
- **How long were you not present in your child's life?**
- **What was the reason for not being present in your child's life?**
- **Please could you tell me a bit about your upbringing and your relationship with your own father.**
- **How do you think this may have influenced your experience as a father?**
- **What changed in your experience of yourself as a father from before to after the reconnection?**
- **Did anything change in how you felt about yourself?**
- **How did you define your identity as a father before reconnecting with your child/ren?**
- **How would you define your identity as a father now?**
- **Did anything change in others' responses to you?**

Interview 2: Detail around the reconnection process

- **What was your experience of the first interview?**
- **Did anything that we spoke about stay with you?**
- **Did you have any thoughts or feelings after our interview?**