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**Strategies for negotiating absent fathers
among young women in Soweto, South Africa**

RESEARCH REPORT

A research report submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Masters of Arts in
Research Psychology in the faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand,
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DECLARATION

I, Prudence Mdletshe, declare that “*Strategies for negotiating absent fathers among young women in Soweto, South Africa*” is my own unaided work and all the sources cited have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references. The academic work is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Research Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other University.

Prudence Mdletshe

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ABSTRACT

The family has been seen as playing an important part in children's lives and their development. This is because families are seen to be the primary sources of individual development and thus should be seen as the building blocks of communities. Families serve as the main source of emotional, social and material support for most individuals. Thus, stable family environments are acknowledged to provide a fertile environment for children's wellbeing and for them to grow up to be healthy responsible adults. Most South African children are raised by a single mother or by their maternal grandparents. Research conducted shows that South African Families face many challenges, and these challenges could be the source for high rates of absent fathers. Poverty has been identified to be one of the challenges that affect families in South Africa. Some researchers argue that poverty and inequality continue to undermine the family as an institution by reducing its effectiveness in realizing the roles of its members in society. Therefore poverty puts a burden on families and specifically on the main providers or 'breadwinners'. Poverty in South Africa is mainly caused by lack of income, which is due to the high unemployment rates with little initiatives to reduce unemployment rates.

The research was conducted qualitatively and specifically used narrative inquiry as a method of gathering data. In-depth, one-on-one narrative interviews were conducted in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the consequences of having an absent father and the strategies that young women adopted in order to deal with the consequences. Eight interviews with females aged from 18 – 21 years were conducted in Soweto.

The findings reveal that the participants adopted both negative and positive coping strategies. Positive coping strategies include, creative writing, keeping a diary, maintaining a positive attitude, living a different life and speaking to others. Negative coping strategies included withdrawing from others, denial of a need of a father, self-blame, silence and defensive humor. More research is needed on how young people with absent fathers cope, paying into consideration issues of personality, culture and socialization.

Key words: absent, fatherhood, young women, coping strategies, distress, Soweto

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1. Introduction

In South Africa the issue of absent fathers has become a prevalent phenomenon that needs to be researched and investigated (Holborn, 2011). According to research conducted by the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR) only a third of the children in South Africa live with both of their biological parents (Holborn & Eddy, 2011). Whereas the rest either live with only their mother; 23% live with someone other than their biological parents; 8% live with their grandparents or aunts; and a mere 3% live with their fathers (Holborn & Eddy, 2011). South Africa has high levels of absent fathers in comparison to other sub-Saharan countries (Posel & Devey, 2006; Eddy & Holborn, 2011). According to research conducted in 1996, 41% of South African maternal orphans lived with their biological fathers in comparison to Zambia where 65% of maternal orphans lived with their fathers (Holborn & Eddy, 2011). In South Africa 80% of paternal orphans lived with their biological mothers (Eddy & Holborn, 2011).

Research conducted by the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR) has found that the proportion of absent fathers for Black South Africans went up from 46% in 1996 to 52% in 2009; the proportion of absent fathers for Coloured South Africans went up from 34% in 1996 to 41% in 2009. For White South Africans it went up from 13% in 1996 to 15% in 2009. However for the Indian population the proportion of absent fathers has not increased but decreased from 17% in 1996 to 12% in 2009 (Eddy & Holborn, 2011). Various historical and contemporary factors have affected the way families are formed in South Africa. Historically Apartheid restricted people's free movement within particular areas in the country and the migrant labor system did not allow men to bring their families to work in mines (Holborn & Eddy, 2011). Therefore, mothers were being left behind together with their children, whilst the men worked in the cities. Current factors which affect South African families include the economic system and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, with the resultant orphanhood. HIV/AIDS has affected South African families by claiming the lives of many adults (Curle, 2009). According to the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) in 2011, 5 700 000 children would have lost one or both parents to AIDS (Holborn, 2011). Despite the fact that the rate of infection seems to be stabilizing, the

number of orphans will continue to increase due to the time lag between infection with HIV and death (Holborn, 2011).

During the apartheid era, Black fathers had to go work far away from their families and were only allowed annual visits to their families (Richter & Morrell, 2006; Madhavan & Schatz, 2007). This was because fathers were not allowed permanent residence in the city, nor could they bring their families (Posel & Devey, 2006). This caused the separation of fathers from their children (Posel & Devey, 2006; Richter & Morrell, 2006; Madhavan & Schatz, 2007). The annual visits were tainted by the fact that fathers spent most of their time working under harsh conditions which in many cases led to them becoming emotionally distressed (Richter & Morell, 2006). In post-apartheid South Africa migrant labour laws have been abolished, however the relationship of spatial employment and family persists and has remained a fact of life for most South Africans (Madhavan, Townsend, & Garey, 2008).

Therefore economic, social and cultural factors all function together to shape the structure of families and the relationship that parents have with their children (Madhavan et al., 2008). According to Posel and Devey (2006) research conducted by international researchers on children with absent fathers often focus on the psychological and economic implications and exclude other aspects such as coping strategies. Other research has shown that children with absent fathers tend to grow up to be deviant members of society as they get involved in crime and gangs (McLanahan, 1998). According to Eddy & Holborn (2011) international research argues that the presence of fathers in the lives of their children is good for their cognitive development, intellectual functioning and their educational life. Girls who do not grow up with their fathers are more likely to have self-esteem problems, high levels of engaging in sexual risk behavior and teenage pregnancy (Eddy & Holborn, 2011). In contrast boys who do not grow up with their fathers tend to be more aggressive and show signs of a hyper masculine identity (Eddy & Holborn, 2011; Spencer, Fegley, Harpalani & Seaton, 2004). Hyper masculinity as defined by Spencer et al. (2004) refers to “the exhibition of stereotypic gendered displays of power and consequent suppression of signs of vulnerability” (p. 234). However, according to Seltzer (1994)

some children with absent fathers do not show any signs of being cognitively or psychologically disabled in relation to children who live with both of their parents. This finding suggests the need to investigate what allowed these children to cope with the absence of their father.

2. Research Rationale

The dominant ideology that mothers are primary caregivers has implicitly led to the assumption that the father-child relationship has little impact on children's development (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000). Research conducted on young people and their experiences or views on absent fathers overly exaggerate the success of children with absent fathers versus children who live with both parents (McLanahan, 1998). In contrast, other research shows that father absence is increasingly associated with poor education levels, teen pregnancy and high-risk behavior (Cabrera et al, 2000). According to McLanahan (1998) there is no difference between the groups who is mostly affected by father absenteeism or undisclosed fathers. Despite the fact that research has shown that an absent father can have detrimental effects on children, little research has been done to investigate how young people with absent fathers have been able to cope with the experience. This study was the first of its kind to be conducted in Soweto, and tried to close the gap in the literature of how young women with absent fathers cope. It was hoped that the study would assist in the formation of interventions that will assist young people with absent fathers to cope and grow up in a more productive way. It was also hoped that the research would assist in the formation of psychosocial services for young people with absent fathers in disadvantaged areas such as Soweto.

3. Research Aim and Objectives

The research strived to investigate the internal and external coping strategies that young women with absent fathers adopted in order to cope with everyday life. These were achieved by addressing the gap in the literature with regards to young women's personal experiences with absent fathers. The research also investigated how culture mediated the coping strategies that the young women adopted.

4. Research Questions

The study aimed to address the following research questions:

- i. What positive coping strategies do young women with absent fathers use?
- ii. What negative coping strategies do young women with absent fathers use?
- iii. What formal resources are available for young women with absent fathers in Soweto?

5. **Literature Review**

6.1 Introduction

The family is important to study because families are seen to be the primary sources of individual development and thus should be seen as the building blocks of communities (Richter, et al., 2004). This is because families serve as the main source of emotional, social and material support for most individuals (Richter, et al., 2004). Thus, stable family environments are acknowledged to provide a fertile environment for children's wellbeing and for them to grow up to be healthy responsible adults (Richter, et al., 2004).

The structure of families in South Africa has never been an easily delineated concept and the term 'nuclear family' has never been fully realized in the South African context (Richter, Makiwane & Rama, 2004; Holborn & Eddy, 2011). The familiar types of families identified in South Africa include some of the following:

- Three generational families i.e. grandparents, parents and grandchildren.
- Skip generational families i.e. grandparents and grandchildren only
- Polygamous parent families.
- Same sex parent families.
- Child headed families.
- Migrant refugee families.
- Unmarried parent with at least one child.
- Married couples with adopted children.

According to Holborn and Eddy (2011), most South African children are raised by a single mother or by their maternal grandparents. Research conducted by the Economic Policy Research Institute in 2008, which used the 2005 general household data for its analysis, found that there were about 13 million families living in South Africa at that time (Social Department, 2011). The research found that the nuclear family was the most common family type in South Africa, which made up 23.25% of the families; single adult families, which comprised 20.40%, (Social Department, 2011), closely followed this. The involvement of biological fathers in the lives of the children has been documented to be of utmost importance (Madhavan, et al., 2008).

According to Makiwane & Berry (2013), poverty has been one of the main challenges that South African families face, this is because poverty and inequality “undermine the family as an institution by reducing its effectiveness in realizing the roles of its members in society” (as cited in Makiwane & Berry, 2013, p. 1). According to Hunter (2006) unemployment has put South African men in difficult positions. For example, when an African man impregnates a woman he has to acknowledge that he has “damaged” the woman and that he does by either paying *lobolo* (bride wealth) or *inhlawulo* (damages for impregnating the woman) to the woman’s family. Due to unemployment many African men are not able to pay these costs. This then forces some men to abandon their children (Hunter, 2006). A participant in a study by Hunter (2006) had the following to say: “...denial of paternity is caused by different things maybe you are in love with someone you don’t trust...sometimes the reason for denial is because you are scared of your family what are they going to say or do about the child? Maybe you are still at school so you have to leave school and work in order to support the baby. Sometimes you don’t deny the baby because you want to but because of the situation” (p. 104). This has left women with the sole responsibility for raising children. The gender divisions in the labor industry exacerbate the burden for women due to the inequality in the labor department, whereby women earn less than men (Makiwane & Berry, 2013). According to Stats SA (3rd Quarterly, 2013) the unemployment rate for women was 39.1% and for men it was 32.8% in the July-September 2013 quarter.

Poverty not only affects women but also significantly affects children. The United Nations Children's Fund (2005) talked about the experiences of children living in poverty stricken places and had this to say: "children living in poverty experience deprivation of the material, spiritual and emotional resources needed to survive, develop and thrive, leaving them unable to enjoy their rights, achieve their full potential or participate as full equal members of society" (as cited in Makiwane & Berry, 2013, p. 2). According to Grantham, Mc Gregor, Cheung, Cueto, Richter, Strupp (2007) research shows that children under the ages of five years will fail to reach their cognitive potential due to poverty, poor health and nutrition and inadequate care. According to Grantham et al. (2007) children's development is influenced by their psychosocial environment, biological factors and their genes. Therefore family stability plays a significant role in the general wellbeing of children.

Fathers in developing countries such as South Africa are not only faced with the challenges of raising children but are faced with high levels of unemployment and poverty and these become inflated by the high levels of HIV (Swartz & Bhana, 2009). The high levels of HIV and high levels of poverty contribute to fathers being absent from their children's lives, which has adverse effects on the young people's wellness (Nduna & Jewkes, 2012). According to Nduna & Jewkes, A survey conducted in the Eastern Cape revealed that 16% of the women interviewed had severe depressive symptoms which required clinical attention. This finding highlights the fact that young people in South Africa are living with psychological distress. Therefore in order to assist young people to grow up into healthy successful adults, interventions need to be made and put in place in order to assist the young people deal with the different stressors in their lives.

6.2 Definitions

6.2.1 Defining stress and distress in young people

Research shows that young people are increasingly suffering from psychological distress (Nduna & Jewkes, 2011). Psychological distress is caused by differing factors such as absent fathers,

poverty and interpersonal relationships (Nduna, 2011). Psychological distress can be defined as “the unique discomforting, emotional state experienced by an individual in response to a specific stressor or demand that results in harm, either temporarily or permanent to the person” (Ridner, 2004, p. 540). Masse (2000) argues that when individuals experience distress it is commonly manifested in the change from “a stable environment to one of anxiety, depression, demotivation, irritability, aggressiveness and self-depreciation” (as cited by Ridner, 2004, p. 540). According to Grant et al, (2003) the stressors in the children’s lives need to be paid attention to as they are the reason for the high rates of behavioral and emotional problems that young people have. In this report stress and distress will be used interchangeably. There are plenty of theories and definitions that explain stress and distress, one particular definition of stress is offered by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), whereby they define stress as a relationship between environment events or conditions, and individuals ‘cognitive appraisals and the degree and type of challenge, threat, harm or loss (Grant et al 2003, pp. 449).

6.2.2 A Young Person

The operational definition of a ‘young person’ is not easy to define because the term young person differs from country to country (du Toit, 2003) and because anyone can choose to identify themselves as a young person (De Boeck & Honwana, 2005). According to du Toit (2003) the definition of a young person is influenced mainly by cultural, institutional and socio-political factors. A young person has generally been referred to as a youth, adolescent or young adult (De Boeck & Honwana, 2005). The general description of a young person as identified by the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) is a person who ranges from the age of 14 to 35 years (NYDA, 2011). The World Health Organization (WHO) defines adolescents as individuals in the age group between 10-19 years and youth as individuals in the age group between 15-24 years (Dickson-Tetteh & Ladha, 2002). The term young person is thus used to combine these overlapping concepts and thus refers to individuals from age 10 to 24 years (Dickson-Tetteh & Ladha, 2002).

The Department of Health in South Africa uses the definition given by the WHO to define a young person. Thus a young person is an individual between the ages of 10 and 24 years (Dickson-Tetteh & Ladha, 2002). The National Youth Policy (NYP) of 2009-2014 defines young people as anyone between the age range of 14 to 35 years (NYP, 2009). The NYP has deliberately taken a broad way of defining a young person mainly because; in South Africa, defining a young person has been mainly influenced by South Africa's history (NYP, 2009). For example, the cohort of black people who in the current year are 35 years old were born during the apartheid era, and thus were deprived of many privileges (NYP, 2009). Thus, the NYP seeks to reverse the consequences done to that age cohort by including them in the young person's definition (NYP, 2009-2014). This research used the WHO definition of a young person mainly because it is more specific and limits the study to a single cohort. This is important, as there are differences in perception between individuals who are 10 years old and those who are in their middle 20s.

6.2.3 Definition of a father

It is important that the term 'father' be defined because it is a concept that can take on multiple meanings (Morrell, 2006). The term 'father' in the Western or developed world is understood simply as the man who impregnates a woman (Morrell & Richter, 2004; Morrell, 2006; Hunter, 2006). This biological definition of father, although true, is limiting. This is because of technology such as *in vitro* fertilization whereby impregnation can occur without a man being present (refer to Morrell, 2006). In contrast, the term father in the African context is more fluid as it does not only refer to the biological father but to the other male members of the family such as grandfathers, uncles and so forth (Hunter, 2006). Thus fatherhood in the African context refers to the kinship ties rather than biological ties and the social role that a man plays in relation to the children regardless of whether biologically they are his or not (Morrell & Richter, 2004; Morrell, 2006). According to Morrell fatherhood can be undertaken in different ways, for example the person can be a social father, an economic father and so forth (2006).

A social father is when a man takes care or even lives with children who are not his own children (Morrell, 2006). This could be because they are his sister's children, grandchildren, or is in a relationship with their mother (Morrell, 2006). This form of fatherhood is the most practiced in the African culture, because in the African culture every man is a child's father regardless of relations to the child. For example a father's younger brother is referred to as *ubab'omncani* (younger father) or elder brother is referred to as *ubab'mkhulu* (older father) (Morrell, Posel & Devey, 2003; Denis & Ntsimane, 2006). Thus the two fathers: *ubab'mkhulu* and *ubab'omncani* have a moral and cultural obligation to take care of their brother's children should something happen to one brother and he is not able to take care of his own children (Morrell et al, 2003; Denis & Ntsimane, 2006; Morrell, 2006).

In traditional African society, whereby people are obliged to be responsive to each other's needs regardless of genetics, means that any person is responsible to care for another person's child/ren regardless whether they are related or not (Mkhize, 2006). This is a process richly known as the concept of *ubuntu*, which is basically defined as an interdependence on other people for survival (Lesejane, 2006; Curle, 2009). However according to Lesejane (2006) it is important to mention that due to the changing social, political, economic milieu the notion of multiple fathers and *ubuntu* is breaking down. What Morrell considers as an economic father mostly provides for the children financially and help to take care of the children's financial needs such as school fees and so forth (Morrell, et al., 2003). Given the complex nature of defining a father in South Africa, this research referred to biological fathers of the children and not to social fathers.

6.2.4 What is an Absent Father?

The word absent implies many facets, therefore a clear understanding of what is meant by an absent father is necessary (Balcom, 1998). Fathers can be absent physically, emotionally and financially (Balcom, 1998). Culture may influence the way that a father is understood, which indirectly affects how an absent father is understood. For example people in a collectivist culture might not know or not be affected much by an absent father because in such contexts children

are practically raised by the whole village. Collectivist cultures can be defined as cultures that encourage strong links amongst the members of the society, thus people have to behave in a way that will benefit the whole community and not only themselves (Caldwell-Harris & Aycicegi, 2006). Thus, people from collectivist cultures tend to express themselves in relation to others and express their identity in relation to social relationships (Eaton & Louw, 2000). In general terms, collectivist cultures tend to be seen in developing countries such as Africa, China, and Eastern countries and individualistic cultures tend to exist in the West, in developed countries such as the United States of America, England and Australia (Eaton & Louw, 2000; Caldwell-Harris & Aycicegi, 2006). Individualistic cultures see themselves as autonomous individuals who are motivated by their own personal goals and aspirations to success (Caldwell-Harris & Aycicegi, 2006).

There are other constructs that define absent fathers such as non-residential fathers, unknown fathers and undisclosed fathers (King & Sobolewski, 2006). According to King and Sobolewski (2006) fathers can be absent from the same household as their children but they can be present in their lives (King & Sobolewski, 2006). Nonresident fathers can thus be supportive of their children, financially, socially and emotionally (King & Sobolewski, 2006). Non-resident fathers refer to fathers who do not reside in the same household with their biological children (King & Sobolewski, 2006). Unknown fathers refers to the fact that the child does not know who their father is (Nduna & Jewkes, 2011a). In other instances the biological father may not only be unknown to the child but may also be unknown to the mother and other people in the family or he may be known to the mother but he does not acknowledge having fathered a child (Nduna & Jewkes, 2011a).

6.2.5 *The role of a father*

Recently there has been increasing literature and research conducted on how to increase father involvement in the lives of their children (Lindegger, 2006). However in order to understand the role of a father in children's lives, it is important to understand that father and fatherhood are social constructions and thus the meaning behind the word father for a particular culture will shape the understanding of the role that a father should play for that culture (Rohner & Veneziano, 2001). Often is the case that fatherhood has been defined alongside its counterpart motherhood, and follows on the trajectories of masculinity and femininity (Rohner & Veneziano, 2001). For instance in most cultures mothers are associated with a caring side and more nurturing and thus have been given the role of rearing and fathers are associated with more power and control and thus are given the role of being a law enforcer and rule setter (Lindegger, 2006). Fatherhood should also be understood in the context at which it is in, thus as society's political sphere changes so too does the notion of a father change (Lesejane, 2006).

Historically, in most South African cultures, fathers were predominantly given power over the entire family, and the eldest son in the family becomes the main leader and person responsible for sustaining the family, for providing financial support, disciplining the children and making sure that there is cohesion amongst the family members (Mkhize, 2006). The father in African culture is assigned the role of being a father, and thus does not have to have children in order for him to be considered a father (Lesejane, 2006). There are certain structures put into place that will assist the boy child in being a good father, such as the initiation schools (Mkhize, 2006). According to Lesejane (2006), African culture adopted a patriarchal system, which gave men power but also obligation, thus ensuring the sustainability of a homestead. Fathers had the role of being a protector in the family, a provider; he is the custodian of moral authority within his family and the broader community. Fathers in the African community are the key deciders of when children should go to initiation schools or not and thus had the final say in the children's lives, this meant that fathers had to be present in the children's lives (Lesejane, 2006). Therefore a 'good' father is one who is responsible and takes up the role of a father and a 'bad' father is one who is irresponsible, does not take care of his home and in most cases is drunk. In this instance, in African culture, such a father can be stripped of his position (Lesejane, 2006).

However as society has changed, so too has the role of a father. Over time, power and authority that were automatically given to the father, is now given according to how well he provides for the family (Lesejane, 2006). Thus if a man does not provide financial assistance to his children he is considered unimportant (Hunter, 2006). According to Hunter (2006) the unemployment rate in South Africa is high and has continued to rise, which has led to more men being unable to care for their families and children, causing more men to be absent in their children's lives. Hunter (2006) argues that fathers are forced to be absent as they cannot do anything about their being unemployed.

6.2.6 What it means to be a young person in South Africa

Young people make up 41.2% of the population of South Africa, with Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal having the highest percentage of young people (NYDA, 2011). According to research conducted by the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) the unemployment rate of young people aged 15-24 years is above 70% (NYDA, 2011). According to research conducted by the South African Institute of Race Relations in 2009 the unemployment rate for young people between the ages 15-24 years was 48% and by 2010 had increased to 51% with young African women having the highest unemployment, at 63% (Holborn, 2011). The majority of young people unemployed are unsurprisingly Black and Coloured people (NYDA, 2011). This could be mainly because of South Africa's historical political economy. Because of the migration labour system many Black children were left with absent fathers and thus absent role models. This contributed to broken families in South Africa (Social Department, 2011).

Studies also show that there is a high mortality rate amongst young people in South Africa. The leading causes of death amongst young people are preventable diseases or unnatural deaths such as violent behavior, trauma and risky behaviours. Disturbingly young people have the highest suicide rate as one in five young people have considered committing suicide and 21.4% have

attempted suicide (NYDA, 2011). This shows that young people are living under considerable amounts of stress (NYDA, 2011). Distress and suicidality may be linked to having an absent father (Nduna & Jewkes, 2011b). Stress has been simply defined as “a responses to an inappropriate level of pressure” (Collins, 2008, p. 1176).

6.2.7 Conceptualisations of fatherhood around the world

Different countries and different cultures have different cultural beliefs and practices, which explain why some men are absent fathers (Chopra, 2001). For example in the Trobriand Islands (a community situated in Papua New Guinea), it is believed that a woman conceives because a *baloma* (a matrilineal ancestor spirit) enters her body (Chopra, 2001). The men are not considered to play any role in the conception and reproduction of the child and thus this excludes the father in the upbringing of the child making him to be absent in their lives (Chopra, 2001). India can be compared to the Trobriand Islanders in respect that their culture indirectly excludes fathers from their children’s lives (Chopra, 2001). India has a strict gendered culture where females are generally responsible for raising the children and doing household chores (Saraff, 2010). The males thus become excluded and become absent fathers because of the gendered roles assigned (Saraff, 2010; Chopra, 2001). Saraff argues that with the changing times and with cultural imperialism from the Western world, Indian fathers are becoming more confused about their role as fathers and their culture. For example, should they follow their culture and risk being classified as an absent father or should they be colonized into the belief of raising the child together and risk losing their culture (Saraff, 2010).

In contrast to the developing countries and the countries governed mainly by traditional patriarchal cultural beliefs, absent fathers in the Western or developed world is attributed to high rising levels of divorce rates and having children out of wedlock (Clarke, Cooksey & Verropoulou, 1998; Irwin, 2000). During the period of 1994-1995 Britain had the highest divorce

rates which meant that nine out of ten single families were female headed, this was mainly due to the fact that custody was given to the mothers and not the fathers (Clarke et al, 1998; Allan, Hawker & Crow, 2001; Irwin, 2000). According to Allan et al (2001) the high number of absent fathers is not only due to the high divorce rates but also reflects the broader change of social and moral constructions of reproductive behavior and interest in children. Patterns of single teenage mothers are strikingly high, as 90% of teenage mothers are unmarried (Allan et al, 2001). Irwin argues that another reason why there is an increase in children living in women single headed families is the fact that there is increase in the growth and breakdown of cohabitating and which is highly linked with young people (Irwin, 2000).

Africa is different from Western countries because father absence is an indicator of socioeconomic status and proximity to the maternal kin (Gibson, 2008). For example, in Ethiopia the divorce separation rates are very low less than 1% however levirate marriages are common (Gibson, 2008). A levirate marriage is when a widow is culturally forced to marry her deceased husband's brother (Gibson, 2008). Thus when a woman's husband dies she will marry her husband's brother and might enter a polygamous marriage (Gibson, 2008). And she usually ends up as a low ranked wife, if her new husband does not treat her and her children well then that's when she will leave and that's when the children will not have a father or father figure (Gibson, 2008). West African culture is similar to Indian culture in that there are entrenched gender roles that take place, whereby the man has great social status in the family with little parental involvement (Engle & Breaux, 1998).

6.2.8 What is Coping?

Coping is a complex psychological concept which involves the cognition, attitude and behavior of individuals (Duhachek, 2005). Coping as defined by Lazarus & Folkman (1984) refers to “the constantly changing thoughts and behaviours in which people engage in, in order to manage, tolerate or reduce internal or external demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding an individual's resources” (Troop, 1988, p. 230; Renk & Creasey, 2003). According to Thoits

(1999) coping efforts might either be problem-focused which refers to attempting to change the environment to reduce stress and emotion-focused which focuses on the emotional aspect of those stressors. The assumption made is that people with high self-esteem tend to adopt the active problem-focused approach and people with low self-esteem adopt the less active emotion-focused approach (Duhacheck, 2005). Ungar (1998) argues that coping should be seen as a context specific activity which is shaped by the particular problems that young people / youth face and is immensely influenced by the social, political and economic situation in which they find themselves in (Skovdal, Ogutu, Aoro & Campbell, 2009).

According to Ramphela (2002) young people adopt various coping strategies when faced with adversity, which include silence, rebellion, alcohol and drug use, gangsterism and disregard for adult authority which might be seen as negative coping strategies. However, it should be acknowledged that young people could also adopt positive coping strategies, such as diary writing and seeking social support (Shiota, 2006).

A related concept to coping is that of resilience. Resilience may be simply understood as an individual being able to cope and survive despite stressful life circumstances (Dass-Brailsford, 2005). Resilience has been mainly studied by theorists from developmental studies (Masten, 2001; Campbell-Sills, Cohan & Stein, 2006). Resilience was first theorized as a rare ability that certain individuals possessed, however contemporary theorists argue that resilience should not be seen as a rare skill or ability, but that every individual has the ability to be resilient (Masten, 2001; Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh & Larkin, 2003). According to Fredrickson et al (2003) resilient people tend to be optimistic and open to new challenges in life, they also tend to have high positive emotions. Fredrickson et al (2003) further argue that resilient people tend to use positive emotions to cope with distressing situations such as the use of humor, creativity and exploration.

However cross-cultural resilience theorists such as Ungar (2004) argue that the Western definition of resilience (as used above) is limited and proposes that resilience should be defined in a more ecological manner (Dass-Brailsford, 2005). Ungar (2004) proposes that resilience is

the individual's capacity to find ways of helping them cope and it's also the individual's social ecology to provide the individual with helpful resources (Dass-Brailsford, 2005).

5.2.7 Types of coping strategies

There are a number of different theories from different disciplines that try to define and explain what coping strategies are, for instance some theorists' argue that coping begins during infancy and others believe that coping is linked with personality traits, and whilst other theorists' believe it is linked in with one's culture (Lazarus, 1993, Schwartz, 1987). According to Schwartz (1987) coping strategies are influenced by the persons' environment such as social support, and thus social support mediates stress levels and coping strategies. Weissman (1986) argues that coping strategies are a set of skills that an individual acquires through their early developmental stages (as Cited in Mashigo, 2010). Therefore coping should be seen as malleable and with the possibility of individuals learning more coping skills (Mashigo, 2010). Coping can be defined as the individual's cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage or reduce the internal and/or external stressor (Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen and DeLongis, 1986). Folkman et al (1986) suggest that there are two major ways of coping: problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping is when the individual tries to deal with the situation; this type of coping is also known as vigilant coping (Folkman et al, (1986), Krohne & Egloff (2005). And emotion focused coping which Krohne & Egloff (2005) define as cognitive avoidant, refers to the individual being emotionally focused on the problem (Folman et al, 1986). According to Schwartz (1987) individuals who use more emotion-focused coping tend to be more vulnerable to getting depressed than individuals who use more problem-focused coping.

Religion and spiritual coping have in the past received less attention but recently there has been an increase in them especially in the health department (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Religious coping has been used by a number of individuals during their times of distress such as illness and death in the family (Pargament, Koenig, Smith, Koenig & Perez, 1998). It should be

understood that religious coping is multidimensional and possesses different methods (Pargament et al, 1998; Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005). Religious coping has been defined by Tix & Fraser (1998) as “ the use of cognitive and behavioural techniques in the face of stressful life events, that arise out of one’s religion or spirituality” (as cited in Thune-Boyle et al, 2006, p. 152). Koenig, Pargament & Nielson (1998) define religious and spiritual coping as “the use of religious beliefs or behaviours to facilitate problem-solving to prevent or alleviate the negative emotional consequences of stressful life circumstances” (as cited in Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005, p. 513).

Pargament, Koenig & Perez (2000) have identified 21 types of religious coping which serve five functions. Meaning – refers to religion offering frameworks for understanding and interpretation for individuals during their times of distress. The second function is control; control refers to religion giving individuals a sense of mastery and control during distress and events that may seem beyond their own resources. The third function is comfort/spirituality – refers to religion decreasing the individuals’ anxiety about living in world where something bad can happen at any moment. The fourth function of religion is intimacy, which helps to facilitate social cohesiveness by offering individuals intimacy with others, and also gives individuals social identity. The last function of religious coping as outlined by Pargament et al (2000) is life transformation, life transformation refers to religion helping individuals in making life transformations such as giving up old values and finding new sources of significance (see also Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005). These coping strategies have often been seen as passive and emotional form of coping. However Thune-Boyle argues differently, that religious and spiritual coping encompasses different forms, such as cognition, i.e. whereby a person appraises their situation as something that is part of God’s plan and religious coping is also behavioural whereby people take action such as going to church and engaging in prayer (Thune-Boyle et al, 2006).

Although it has been generally accepted that religious and spiritual coping strategies are positive, some researchers have suggested that there are some negative religious and spiritual coping strategies (Pargament et al 2000; Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Thune-Boyle, Stygall, Keshtgar & Newman, 2006). Negative religious coping is when the individual sees their situation as punishment from God (see Pargament et al, 1998; Pargament et al, 2000). Negative religious

coping includes punitive religious reappraisals, demonic religious reappraisals, reappraisals of God's powers and spiritual discontent (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

Various theories of coping have been formulated, but according to Banyard & Graham-Berman (1993) the coping strategy theories depict women as less able to cope compared to men, that the theories are biased towards women. Coping strategies theories have often viewed men as adopting more problem-focused approaches whereas women used more emotion-focused approaches and most often in need of social support (Mullis & Chapman, 2000). In a study conducted by Matud (2004) which studied the gender differences in stress and coping styles, found that women tended to adopt emotion-focused and avoidant coping strategies and men in contrast used rational and detached coping styles (2004). In another study by Li, DiGiuseppe and Froh (2006), their study was on why women are more depressed than men, and they concluded that the main cause for women to be depressed was mainly due to their coping styles. According to Li et al (2006) women often used emotion-focused coping styles, and further identified two types of emotion-focused coping which are; ruminative and distractive coping styles. Ruminative coping style refers to an individual constantly worrying and thinking about the problem until they manage their emotions concerning the stressor (Li et al, 2006). The main reason for female to use emotion focused coping may be due to gender stereotypes and socialization (Renk & Creasey, 2003; Matud, 2004; Li et al, 2006). However Mullis & Chapman (2000) found different results from the above mentioned studies, their study found no difference in age, gender and coping styles. Banyard & Graham-Berman (1993), argue that although contemporary literature on coping strategies define coping strategies in a broad manner but what remains a problem is what is labeled as "good" coping and "bad" coping strategies.

6.2.8 Culture and coping strategies

Coping has been mainly defined according to Western ideology and thus has created a certain western bias for understanding coping strategies (O'Connor & Shimizu, 2002). O'Connor and Shimizu (2002) argue that culture influences the individual's coping strategies, for instance people from individualistic cultures often have a self and individualistic view and focused on individualistic goals, whereas people from collectivist cultures are dependent on their family's views, and their community this then often leads them to adopt an avoidance-coping strategy in respect of their elders. Folkman & Moskowitz (2004) stress that it is important for individuals to be aware that within a culture there are certain coping strategies that are more effective and some less effective for addressing distressful situations and for emotion regulation. However research on coping strategies has not paid attention on cultural effects on coping strategies that individuals choose (Chang, 1998). According to Utsey, Bolden, Lanier & Williams 3rd (2007) African Americans' possess a unique set of protective factors that assist in building their resilience during adversity. These cultural resources shape the cognitive and schemata of coping strategies during stressful events. Utsey et al (2007) further argue that there are different types of coping that African Americans adopt, first its cognitive coping which refers to; when the individual actively assesses the risk in order to control the emotional response to the distressing factor. Second is spiritual coping, spiritual coping refers to beliefs about God or a higher power, spiritual coping helps individuals to have an optimistic view when in distress. Thirdly its collective coping, collective coping refers to individuals depending on their family and community for strength during times of adversity. Lastly its ritual coping, ritual coping provides a structure for spiritual expression for acknowledging the presence of ancestors (Utsey et al, 2007). Research shows the role that culture plays in individuals choosing their coping strategy, and therefore no method of coping could be seen or judged to be good or bad. It is also recommended that the coping strategies be evaluated in accordance to the specific stressor that the individual may be encountering (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

6.2.9 Research on coping strategies and absent fathers

Coping is an important concept that should be researched because current research on stress and mental health suggest that the difference between how individuals adapt to their circumstances is

due to the coping strategies that they adopt (Herman-Stahl & Peterson, 1995). Herman-Stahl & Peterson suggest that coping efforts that individuals make have the ability to act as moderators on the effects of negative events on the individual's psychological well-being . Active coping strategies are linked with better adaptation to negative events and avoidant strategies are linked with poorer adjustments to negative events (Herman-Stahl & Peterson, 1995).

The literature shows that more children are experiencing absent fathers and other children especially in the developed world experience absent fathers through divorce, yet little research has been done on how children cope with absent fathers (Abbey & Dallos, 2004). Most research about how children cope with absent fathers mainly comes from the United States of America which mainly focuses on how children with divorced parents cope (Kalil, 2003). This limits any possible inferences that can be made and thus highlights the fact that more research is needed in this area.

There have been documented differences on how females and males with absent or undisclosed fathers cope. Females who grow up without their fathers tend to have low self-esteem, and tend to have difficulties in social relationships (Holborn & Eddy, 2011). These have effects on their attitude to sex, condom use and thus have major implications such as teenage pregnancy and HIV infection (Holborn & Eddy, 2011). Hypermasculinity has been identified as a coping strategy that young males adopt to deal with environmental stressors such as having an absent father or low socioeconomic status (Spencer et al, 2002). This exaggerated form of masculinity often leads to high levels of violence as the individual will most likely get into fights at school (Spencer et al, 2002).

It should also be taken into consideration that there are different approaches to understanding the relationship that fathers have with their children (Morrell et al, 2003). Most of the approaches originate from the developed western world and thus what they hold valuable may not necessarily be valuable in the developing African context (Morrell et al, 2003). This might be mainly because the causes of absent fathers might be different, and thus might have different implications on the approaches that might be taken to deal with the rising absent father rates.

6.2.10 Children of single mothers

There are different disciplines or schools of thought that have researched the topic of single mothers and their children, these include; sociology which focuses on the sociological factors that increase single-parent families, and emphasis is put on the changes to norms and values about families for different ethnic, racial groups (Murray, Bynum, Brody, Willert & Stephens, 2001). The economists are mainly interested in the financial effects that single-parenting has on the individual and in the society and how that affects the sustainability of society (Murray et al, 2001). Family scientists focus on the reciprocal relationship between family characteristics and family structure (Murray et al, 2001). Lastly psychologists are interested in the mother's personality traits and the psychological functioning of the child adjustment and development with focus on intrapersonal and intrapsychic processes (Murray et al, 2001).

To date little research has been done on children with single mothers in South Africa however the literature review shows that there tends to be an interest in researching single mothers and how they cope with their day to day lives, rather than how their children cope. The literature suggests that children who grow up in single parent families are particularly affected by poverty (Alfred, 1996). Poverty forces single mothers to be the main breadwinner, resulting in them working longer hours and spending less time with their children (Magqaza, 2001). According to Magqaza (2001) the lack of monitoring and time spent with children is highly linked with adverse consequences for boys, which includes lower school performance and an increase in behavior problems and an increase in early dating for boys and girls. In a study conducted by Lang and Zagorsky (2001) it is argued that growing up in single parent families puts children at a disadvantage as they are economically and socially deprived and this affects their development and transition into adulthood. A study conducted by Jackson, Brooks-Gunn, Huang & Glassman (2000) argues that single parents often find themselves under financial strain which may lead to depression. This affects their psychological functioning which indirectly may affect their child

rearing abilities. Based on these findings one can deduce that having an absent father will have an effect on the social and economic environments of children.

According to research conducted by the South African Institute of Race Relations, there is a strong link between educational success and growing up in a stable home environment with both parents present (Holborn, 2011). The same findings are also evident in research conducted in America, which also show that having absent fathers is associated with poor education, anti-social behavior and disrupted employment (Holborn, 2011). This is evidence that the young people of South Africa are facing many challenges and whilst one cannot say that these challenges are caused mainly by absent fathers, research shows that children growing up with both parents present can make a difference to their future.

6. Research Design and Methodology

The research was conducted using a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is a method that stresses the socially constructed nature of reality; the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is being researched; and the situational constraints that might influence that inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The study specifically used narrative inquiry as a method of gathering data. In-depth, one-on-one narrative interviews were conducted in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the consequences of having an absent father and the strategies that young people adopted in order to deal with the consequences. By conducting the research qualitatively, this allowed for an in-depth understanding of the lived experience of young women with absent fathers and how they cope with such an experience. Using the narrative approach gave the research participants a voice to tell of their own experiences of having an absent father as opposed to the dominant literature, which focuses on their cognitive development.

7.1 Research Site

The research took place in Soweto. Soweto is a township found South West of Johannesburg. Soweto is comprised of a number of smaller townships. The proposed research focused specifically on the township of Dobsonville, which has extensions structured according to class. According to the 2001 Census Soweto has an increasing population of 1 million people. All eleven official languages are spoken with Zulu being the most dominating language. The people have different socio-economic statuses, ranging from high to low, but with majority of the people falling between middle to lower class.

7.2 Participants

The target population for this study was young women living in Dobsonville, a suburb of Soweto, South Africa. The sample consisted of eight young females. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 21 years. Five were currently finishing high school, one dropped out of school and two had completed Grade 12 but were currently doing nothing due to lack of finances. All of the participants had lived with different family members over the course of their lives. They all came from low to medium socio-economic environments. Five of the eight participants did not know the identity of their father.

The sample was recruited from the main places where young people tended to gather in Dobsonville, namely the local sports club/field, the dance club, two high schools and from the mall. Local NGOs were also targeted as they had information about young people, For example Love Life. The participants were required to have a physically absent father.

7.2.1 Research participants and process of selection

The research used a non-probability purposive sample, a strategy relying on snowball sampling. The key leaders were first identified before any recruitment of participants proceeded. Thus the researcher first identified a gatekeeper who assisted in identifying the key leaders in the community. A gatekeeper is anyone who knows about their town and the right places to go; and it could be any one from the community of interest. The key leaders identified included social workers, teachers and dance leaders. The main reason for seeking key leaders was to help in recruiting potential participants and in the case of a participant becoming distressed during the interview help would be readily available. Meetings were set up to meet the key leaders. In the meetings the study was explained to them and consent forms were shown to them. The assistance of the social workers was requested so that if one of the participants became distressed during an

interview referrals could be made. Permission was also asked to work from the facilities of the NGO's, for safety and convenience of the participants and the researcher.

7.2.2 Data collection

The data was collected through the use of one-on-one narrative interviews with each young woman. The participants were interviewed in English but provision was made for those that could not speak English or who felt more comfortable speaking an African language. The researcher who conducted the interviews transcribed the data; this was done to minimize translation issues that might arise.

Although the use of an indigenous African language during the narrative interview is ideal, it does however have potential flaws, especially during the translation process. For instance, there exists politics in matters of translation, because translation has the ability to raise issues of bias (Temple & Young, 2004). For instance, how people represent other people from a different language is shaped by the way they view their social world (Temple & Young, 2004). Language plays an important role in the production of these representations because language can be considered the gateway to a persons' life, identity and their beliefs (Temple & Young, 2004). It is thus important that researchers, translators and transcribers are aware that there exists a difference in the power of languages, which may influence the translation of meaning (Temple & Young, 2004; Reissman, 2008). For example, there exists certain sayings or words in African languages that cannot be translated into English, and the onus is thus upon the researcher/transcriber to make an interpretive decision on how to best transcribe and interpret the meaning of those words or sayings (Reissman, 2008). The disadvantage of doing narrative interviews is mainly related to the issue of translation. For example, how one will present the narratives in English without losing the African conversational context (Reissman, 2008). The solution to this is if the interviewer is also the transcriber as they are in a position to know and make better informed decisions when translating from an African language into English.

Narrative inquiry was chosen as a form of collecting data as it allowed for large amount of in-depth data to be collected. According to Polkinghorne (1995) Narrative inquiry provides a researcher with methodologies “that retain the complexity of the situation in which an action was undertaken and the emotional and motivational meaning connected with it” (in Maple & Edwards, 2009, p. 34). Narrative interviews in particular allow for the voices of the participants to be heard, from their own personal experiences, the way that the participants or informants interpret the events in their lives (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). Narrative interviews are thus more concerned about the meaning that informants give to the events in their lives (Maple & Edwards, 2009). Narrative interviews are different from the normal and conventional way of interviewing; the latter refers to your everyday conversational way of interacting, your question and answer (Reissman, 2008). Narrative interviews include the use of a single question to start the interview and then the use of prompts from the informants’ stories to explore the issue more deeply or simply for clarification (Maple & Edwards, 2009). One of the main disadvantages of a narrative interview is the uncontrollable nature of the interviews; the informant will make assumptions about what the interviewer knows and what they want to hear (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). This disadvantage is attributed to the fact that the interviewer needs to pose as someone who knows nothing about the stories being told, and has to rely on the participant (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). The disadvantage about narrative interviews is the fact that people are social beings and therefore their stories may be influenced by the society they come from. This may affect the truthfulness of their stories, whereby they might say what they assume to be socially correct (Maple & Edwards, 2006). According to Maple & Edwards (2006) the participant may ‘read’ the researcher and by reading the researcher the information that they get they may use it to shape the story that they tell to the researcher, a story that might be more appealing to the researcher (Maple & Edwards, 2006). According to Bamberg (2006) when people tell stories they rely on a culturally shared symbolic system and their personal memories. Thus the notion of truthfulness will always be in the mind of a researcher using a narrative approach, as it cannot be explored because what might be true for one person may not be true for another.

Interviews are chosen as a method for the narrative inquiry mainly because it is an instrument highly regarded for obtaining empirical data about the social world by asking people about their lives (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004). It also allows for the subject to explore the topic and provide new information that might develop (Fossey, Harvey & Davidson, 2002). One of the disadvantages of interviews is that by seeking to explore the social world, one runs a risk of producing knowledge that is dominant in society and thus not the individuals views (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004). Researchers should also pay attention to the interaction that take place between themselves and the participant as they influence the way that the participants may answer or behave (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004; Potter & Hepburn, 2005). The researcher needs to be aware of such interactions and thus play an active role that will help in making the participant to be open and active (Potter & Hepburn, 2005).

An interview guide (based on the literature review and consultation with the research supervisor) was used in order to ensure that all areas in relation to the research questions are addressed and sufficiently explored. The interview schedule included the following questions:

- A. The participant was asked to tell their life story, including:
 - a. Family life
 - b. Living conditions
- B. The participant was asked how having had an absent father has affected her:
 - a. Emotionally
 - b. Psychologically
 - c. Socially
 - d. Financially
- C. How they have coped without a father?
 - a. Look at positive coping strategies

b. Negative coping strategies

D. What strategies (internal and external) have they adopted in order to cope?

7.2.3 Data management

After the interviews were conducted the recordings were kept in a password protected file on the researcher's personal computer. Only the researcher had access to them. The recordings were transcribed by the researcher and thus the only person who knows the true identity of the participants is the researcher. After 5 years the recordings will be destroyed.

7.2.4 Data analysis

The data obtained from each participant was analysed through structural narrative analysis and incorporated Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zibers' (1998) suggestions on analyzing narrative data. Lieblich et al (1998) suggest that when analyzing, a researcher must look for three dominant patterns of stories i.e. stories of transformation and growth, stories of decline or regression and stories of stability and continuity (1998). Structural analysis focuses mainly on how the story is told, how the informant adopts certain narrative devices to persuade the researcher and make them believe their story (Reissman, 2005). Structural analysis is a method used to identify certain stories in the narrative, for instance in this research stories about coping were identified and from the main story, sub stories were also identified, and coded into themes. The assumption of structural analysis is that the informant constructs a story from a primary experience and interprets the significance of events in clauses and embedded evaluations (Reissman, 2005). According to Polkinghorne (1995) the goal of analysis in narrative inquiry is to "uncover common themes or plots in data, analysis are carried out by hermeneutic techniques for noting underlying patterns across examples of stories" (in Maple & Edwards, 2009. p. 39).

Labov's (1966) analysis framework suggests that stories have a pattern, which includes six things: first an abstract, which is the point of a narrative; second is orientation, which sets the scene in relation to time, place. Third is its complicating action, which is comprised of clauses describing a sequence of events in temporal order. Fourth is evaluation, which looks at the attitude of the narrator, the meaning that they put in their perspective. The fifth is resolution, what finally happened and lastly the coda, which marks the end of the story (Sarbin, 1986). The major disadvantage of this framework is that not all stories follow this pattern and that not all stories have all the points mentioned above (Reissman, 2005). Therefore what constitutes a story may be complex and it is up to the researcher to decide what a story is and what is not.

7.2.5 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is an important aspect in qualitative research, it involves the process of the researcher examining how their intersubjective elements can interfere and even transform the research completely (Finlay, 2002). As discussed earlier, interviews are more than just a conversation taking place but include the processes of meaning making both by the participant and the interviewer (Potter & Hepburn, 2005). Thus issues of power will always come into play during interviews (Wetherell, 1998). As a black woman from a well-known university, I was likely given some sort of status which might have been understood by the participants in a particular way. This might have influenced the interview process as the participants might have answered according to what they thought I wanted to hear, they might have chosen socially appropriate responses. To minimize this effect, I tried to constantly be aware of the participants during the interview process and how they might be relating to me.

As a black woman, and originally from Soweto, I was aware of the fact that I was likely to identify with the participants in one or more instances. The main advantage of this was the fact that I knew the right questions to ask, the questions that would provide me with in-depth data. However one could also see this as myself becoming more involved in the interview interaction and given the fact that this research topic was sensitive it also meant that I knew when to ask and

probe and when I needed to let it go. The disadvantage of this was the fact that I might have misread their interpretations of things; I might have exaggerated or deducted their perceptions, and underestimated the perceptions that they have which are different from mine. Debriefing sessions with the supervisor were helpful in decreasing the emotions that arose from conducting the interviews. With this being said, I was aware that my interpretation of the research findings may not have been entirely objective. However my subjective and active role in the research helped in obtaining in-depth quality data.

7.2.6 *Ethical Considerations*

The research was submitted for ethical clearance to the University of the Witwatersrand psychology department for internal ethics clearance. The ethics clearance number given was MPSYC/12/006IH. This was to ensure that the minimum of ethical considerations were addressed by the proposed research.

The participants were informed that their participation in the study is on a voluntary basis and that should they feel uncomfortable during the course of their participation, they have the right to withdraw. Before the interview took place, a prospective participant was required to sign an informed consent form (see appendix A). The consent form provides information regarding the study, and provides the participant the opportunity to acknowledge their consent to participate in the research. The participants were given a second consent form for the interview to be audio recorded and transcribed for purposes of analyzing (see appendix B), the consent forms are separated to make it easier for the participant to understand. The recordings were accessed by the researcher and the supervisor only, and will be destroyed after manuscripts from this study have been accepted in journals.

All participants remain anonymous to the readers and researchers as no real names were used in the transcripts and in the report; information collected during the research was treated confidentially. Pseudonym names were used when using direct quotations.

Finally, with respect to the interviews conducted, when the interviews resulted in emotional distress, the participants were advised to phone the help lines provided in the information sheet , and were also referred to the social workers (see appendix A).

The report findings will be published in journal articles.

7. Findings

The analysis of the interviews identified three overarching themes: positive coping strategies, negative coping strategies and the psychological effects of having an absent father.

8.1.1 *Positive Coping Strategies*

Five of the participants mentioned positive ways of coping with an absent father. The main positive coping strategies found included keeping a diary, using creative outlets, maintaining a positive attitude, living a different life to one's parents and speaking to others.

Creativity

The findings reveal that the participants have problems communicating with their caregivers about their fathers and this has caused some of form of distress in their lives. The participants noted that due to limited means of communicating with their elders they have opted for other creative ways of coping. Writing poems and songs was one of the means by which participants used creative coping strategies. One of the participants explained that she writes poems as a means of coping with distress in her life. Participant 2 said that she composes her own songs and was an aspiring musician and that most of her songs are about life, her emotions and she uses it as a form of expressing her feelings - *"writing songs often helps me offload all my pain because I am able to pour out all of my hurt and express how I feel at the time"*. Participant 10 said that her poems are her way of coping with life challenges, she put it this way: *"My poems are a method of telling people about how life's challenges affect people, how ones choices could affect almost everyone around, I also write about my pain as an individual"*. Participant 9 had this to say about her poems: *"I wouldn't call what I write poetry but it's similar to it because I offload all my pain through writing."* The findings reveal that the participants often adopt writing as a way of expressing their emotions and the pain that they feel of having an absent father. This finding is

interesting because it highlights the importance of therapeutic interventions that are cost effective and could be potentially beneficial to young women with an absent father.

Keeping a diary/journal

Half of the participants mentioned that they kept a diary and that this was used as a way of expressing their emotions and feelings. This was done because the participants often felt that they could not trust anyone including their friends and family therefore preferred to keep a diary. In this light a diary could be seen as a not only a method of just writing things down, but it's a form of therapy that assists the individuals to bring meaning to their lives. Participant 9 said she offloads all her pain through writing and does not trust any of her friends with anything and cannot share her feelings with them.

Maintaining a positive attitude

Another positive coping strategy that was found is the one of hope for a better future. All the participants envisaged a better life for themselves and their families. For instance one participant described her future goals as *"I wanted to become a fashion designer but as I grew up I noticed that you cannot make a career out of it and it doesn't have money, so I decided to I would do it as a hobby. My dream is to become an auditor because I am good at accounting in fact anything that has to do with money I am good at"*. Another participant said that she wanted to become a pilot. Participant 2 said that she was wants to study child psychology because *"I love working with kids, I'm a good listener and I'm easy to talk to, and through that I have realized that apart from singing I happen to be good in something else."* The participants all had hope, they had future goals that they wanted to achieve for example participant one said *"teaching has always been my biggest dream, if only I could get accepted to study teaching then at least I'll be assured that I have made the first step in securing my future and building a foundation in receiving my diploma"*.

Religion and Ancestral worship

Religion and spirituality is a finding that is closely related to hope. Three participants mentioned a belief in a higher power, such as God or in ancestral beliefs. For example, Participant 7 when asked how she deals with challenges in her life she said the following: *“I’ve come across a lot of problems, in fact I would be dead if it wasn’t for God’s mercy”*. God in this setting is used as a coping strategy. Another participant said that instead of discussing her distress with people she would rather go to her grandmother’s grave and talk with her.

Living a different life

The informants also showed a strong will to not repeat the same mistakes that their parents made and want their children to have their fathers around and have a relationship with them. For example when Participant 7 was asked about her children she became very emotional, and said the following: *“My children are the center of my happiness, they are understanding, loving...Thus, I prefer for them to live with their paternal family so that they don’t lose that father and daughter relationship with their father”*.

Speaking to others

One participant was outspoken and preferred talking to people about her feelings and distress rather than keeping a diary or writing poetry. This finding is important as it highlights the fact that the participants do not trust anyone enough to share their emotions with. Two participants mentioned that they communicate their feelings to a relative; Participant 6 said that whenever she was feeling sad she would either go to her aunt or go to her grandmother’s grave and talk to her grave. The interesting part about this finding is the fact that the participants described themselves as introverts and that they did not trust anyone therefore they do not share their feelings with anyone and preferred bottling things up. Participant 7 said the following *“My grandmother was the only person that I used to open up to and ever since she passed on, I would rather bottle things up or go to her grave and talk to her”*. This should be considered as a negative coping strategy, which is detrimental to the individuals’ health. The findings reveal that one participant

had tried to commit suicide before, she said the following *“A few years back I tried to commit suicide and believe me when I tell you I tried everything to see myself dead.”*

8.1.2 Negative Coping Strategies

While some of the participants mentioned positive coping strategies, there were also dominant themes involving negative coping strategies. Four of the eight participants mentioned negative ways of coping with having an absent father. Negative coping strategies included: withdrawing from others/self-dependence; denial of the need for a father; self-blame or guilt; silence; and defensive humour.

Withdrawing from others/self-dependence

Participants often said that when they were faced with a distressing situation they chose to separate themselves from people and come back only when they were feeling better. For example Participant 9 when asked about how she copes with a distressing situation she said that she often prefers to be alone and sit and think, when asked why she prefers sitting and thinking when sad or hurt she replied *“I’m not much of a talkative person, so I might sit alone and think about what’s hurting me a lot”*. This finding highlights how the participants do not openly communicate with their family members. Instead they either suppress their emotions or finding other means of working through difficult feelings.

Denial of the need for a father

Denial of the need for a father was a strong theme amongst participants. Many of the participants denied that they cared about their fathers but when they talk about their fathers, they more than often became emotional. This is seen from their expressions when they talk about fathers they would cry. An interesting example was from Participant 7 who at the beginning of the interview described her family and environment as a perfect environment but yet later in the interview

opens up and tells the interviewer how she tried to commit suicide. Denial was also seen in the way that they try to bring in humor every time they find themselves emotional. This was seen by making the way that they joked about their fathers; however their body language did not show that. *“From where I am standing a father and daughter relationship is not important because he is like any other person living on this earth. And personally the people who played a huge role in my life happen to be my aunt and grandmother based on the way that they raised me, and not my mother or my father”*. When the same participant was asked how she coped with living with an absent father she replied that she copes really well and it is better to be without a father.

Self-blame or guilt

Self-blame or guilt and heightened sense of self-pity was another emergent negative coping strategy that the participants adopted. The participants seemed to think that their fathers did not love them and that is why they left them. And in other instances, the participants turned to blame their mother's for not being responsible enough and choose a partner who will not run away from their responsibilities, For example Participant 2, who did not live with her mother and had an undisclosed father, had this to say: *“...at times people would ask me, where she was and them asking me would be a constant reminder of how irresponsible my mother was, so that was really painful for me to deal with.”* This illustrates that the participants carry a lot of guilt and shame and these feelings are often followed by a sense of rejection and hostility towards themselves and towards their mothers. This was because they most often felt that their mothers did not protect them.

Silence

Silence was another coping strategy used by the participants. There were different types of silences that could be detected. Firstly, there was silence amongst the participants themselves that they could not openly acknowledge or speak about their fathers. Secondly, there was silence amongst the families. For example Participant 2 said: *“I personally grew without having a father figure in my life so talking about it was something else”*. There was a sense of secrecy amongst

the participants' families about their fathers, and it was seen as a norm to not ask any questions about their fathers. Participant 2 said that when she wanted to find out more information about her father she got a close aunt to ask her mother on her behalf since children are not permitted to ask adult questions, she had this to say about the exchange that her aunt and mother had: *"...my mother was a very arrogant person so whenever she was asked about anything to do with my father she would get angry and ignore all the questions about my father...thus as time went on I learnt to accept that I would not know anything regarding my father and his whereabouts"*.

Defensive Humour

Humor as a defense against difficult feelings was noted when transcribing the interviews. It seemed that the participants often engaged in small jokes whenever they had to speak about something that they perceived as a potential threat or was overly emotional. Laughter was often used as a strategy to control their emotions and move away from a subject that was arousing difficult feelings. For example participant one said that she had a tough childhood and her parents were always fighting. Now that they no longer live with their parents she had the following to say about her childhood, *"we often joke about it, or reflect on what happened to us during our childhood and talk about our best childhood stories with family and laugh about it"*. This is a clear example of how the individuals take a potentially stressful event and turned it into a humorous event, perhaps that is not necessarily a bad thing especially if the outcome of it means psychologically healthy people.

8.1.3 Psychological Factors as Mediators of Coping Strategies

It became apparent during the analysis that there were various psychological factors that served as mediators of the kinds of coping strategies that the participants engaged in. These included identity (personal and cultural), personality types, and level of distress being experienced and in some instance levels of household poverty.

Identity (Personal and Cultural)

Identity is an important mediating factor because the participants identified themselves through their cultural beliefs and background and when they did not know enough about these elements of their identity (due to having an absent father), then it meant that they did not know themselves. This is important because in African culture a child does not belong to their maternal side but belongs to the paternal side and is often than not may get rejected by their maternal family members. For example; at the beginning of an interview the researcher asked all the participants to give a brief introduction about them. Participant 7 had a particularly interesting answer: *"My name is Thandi Mkhize¹ and truly speaking I do not know my roots or where I come from, all I know right now is that I live, and currently living in Zondi"*. Participant 3 noted that she too wants to find her father so that she can know her father's surname which will allow her to know where she comes from. Participant 5 mentioned a similar sentiment: *"At times I do wish as if I would know my father's race, and that his family should perform a ritual for me, and they should pay for the damages, and that they should know me as one of their own"*. Not having a father for the participants meant that they do not know who they are and therefore they feel incomplete. One participant uttered: *"Every child deserves to have someone to protect them...to provide them with something that they need and most of all to make them feel complete. This is what I think a real father should do."*

Personality Type

Another factor was personality type, which could be argued to be linked to identity and coping strategies. The issue of personality delicately brings to consciousness the fact that the majority of the participants described themselves as reserved and quiet people and it could be deduced that their personality types may influence the way that they cope with distressing situations and environments. For example Participant 2 notes: *"I'm not much of a talkative person, so I often keep all of my pain inside"*. Another participant described herself as *"I am a moody person, sometimes I am quiet, yet it depends on where I am that moment..."*. Yet another participant

¹ Name of participant has been changed to protect identity.

described her personality as *“I’m a quiet person, I do talk but not that much and I am friendly”*. Only one participant said something different about her personality *“I like gossiping and talking too much and I constantly want to know certain things...”*

Experience of Distress

Different levels of distress were seen from the participants, More than one participant when they were walked out from the interview room, commented that they have never spoken about their fathers to anyone and the interview was the first time that they spoke openly about their fathers and their feelings towards their fathers. And that the whole experience was difficult for her, because she never knew how it affected her emotionally and most importantly she realized just how therapeutic the process was. There seemed to be a pattern that developed amongst the participants, because all the participants when they initially talk about their families, they tend to say positive things that their families are perfect but when further questioned more particularly questioned about their fathers then they find it difficult to talk as it becomes emotionally difficult. Participant 7 said *“there is a part in my heart that wishes to have a normal family with both my parents living together in one house even if it was just for a day, I would be happy”*. The interviewer could see the distress that the young people displayed during the interviews and to ease their distress the interviewer will ask the participant a question that she knew will move the participant to a more emotionally stable place. For example, one participant when asked about how having an absent father affects her, she had this to say in a brittle way *“it does hurt because there are certain things that you want to share with your father and that you wouldn’t share with anyone else...like watching a soccer match together. These are the things that make ones relationship with their dad stronger; this is what I am most eager to have in my life as well”*

Poverty

Poverty affected most of the participants and one of the consequences is that many of the participants had to be moved from one family member to another family member who could afford to take care of them. For example, Participant 5 lives with her grandfathers brother,

because her grandmother in the Eastern Cape could no longer afford to take care of her after her mother passed on. Findings also show that the participants who have completed high school often end up staying at home or taking “gap years” as they put it. For example Participant 1 when asked what made her decide to take a gap year she said the following: *“I didn’t apply because I didn’t have money to pay for my studies, my older brother is unemployed and my older sister is busy paying for her son’s school fees so there is no way any of them could afford to take me to university”*. This is consistent with literature that children with both parents have more chances of succeeding in their lives, versus children from single households. Children with both parents’ present succeed more due to the fact that the parents can put their money together and afford to give their children a better education. Participant 7 dropped out of school and became suicidal due to poverty: *“Poverty lead to that because I couldn’t get anything I needed, I remember my classmates used to laugh at me because my school shoes were worn out. More over when I asked the people at home they told me they didn’t have money”*.

Formal coping strategies

The participants displayed different levels of distress; however the results reveal that the participants have little or no access to psychological help. Only two participants mentioned that they received in some measure psychological assistance. The one participant received counseling through a social worker after she tried to commit suicide and another participant received help from a social worker in a form of subsistence such as food parcels. This finding then highlights the lack of resources that are available for young people in the Township of Soweto. One participant reported being admitted to hospital because of anxiety yet no follow up visits were made for her and a psychologist or a social worker. The participants never mentioned services from a psychologist but mentioned services from a social worker.

8. Discussion

The findings show that in order for young women to cope with absent fathers in their lives they have adopted different strategies which could be seen as either negative and or positive. The coping strategies include, silence, denial and self-blame. Coping strategies according to Cramer (1998) can be simply defined as an individual consciously and purposefully adopting a strategy to avoid or cope with the perceived danger. The first positive coping strategy that the participants used is creative writing. The participants claimed that creative writing was one way that they used to cope with distress.

Creative writing has been identified as a method for coping with distress as it forms a therapeutic environment by allowing individuals to engage with their emotions, and express their feelings to an imagined audience (Wright & Chung, 2001). This form of therapy has been recognized by psychologists and has been found to be a great therapeutic tool to use to relieve distress. According to McNiff (1981) creative writing has been used as a form of rehabilitation and to assist with mental health. Wright & Chung (2001) define writing therapy as “client expressive and reflective writing, whether self-generated or suggested by a therapist” (in Wright, 2002, p. 286). Creative writing as a form of therapy has existed for a while but it is only now that it’s been recognized as form of therapy and way to help people deal with their distress. And it has helped people deal with their emotions and distress without the need of seeking professional help from a therapist. For example Participant 2 described herself as an introvert and always bottles things up, but when the researcher probed and asked how she deals with things she said “*writing songs often helps me to offload all my pain...*”. Not only should writing as a form of therapy be encouraged for people who more often than not choose to withdraw and not be open about their emotions, but it should be encouraged for disadvantaged places, that do not have the means or access to seek professional assistance like psychologist and or psychiatrist (Campbell & Murray, 2004; Saracenco, Ommeran, Batniji, Cohen, Gureje, Mahoney, Sridhar & Underhill, 2007; Saxen, Thornicroft, Knapp & Whiteford, 2007). Diary writing is also about the individuals trying to capture personal thoughts and experiences or record an event (Hiemstra, 2001; Boud, 2001). According to Gilbert (2001) personal narratives are not about individual describing themselves

but are a way in which they bring order to their lives by organizing information and experiences that they encounter in their lives. This then “provides structure in the lives of individuals and assists in bringing order where there is disorder, thus bringing meaning in what can seem a meaningless situation (Gilbert, 2001, p 223).

The second positive coping strategy that was found was the one of hope and maintaining a positive attitude. According to Clayton, Butow, Arnold & Tattersol (2005) when individuals have hope, it becomes the most important coping strategy they could have for their general well-being. Clayton et al (2005) further describes hope as a “confident but uncertain expectation of a good future that appears realistically possible and is personally significant to the individual” (Clayton et al, 2005 p. 1966). According to Lewis & Kliever (1995) hope can be defined using two concepts i.e. agency and pathways, agency refers to the individuals beliefs that they can achieve their goals and pathways refers to individuals being able to perceive the strategies in place for them to use to achieve their goals. According to Glass, Flory, Hanklin, Kloos & Turecki (2009) research conducted on hope found that people with higher levels of hope tend to experience higher levels of association between social support and coping strategies, which in turn have a greater effect on the level of psychological distress that is experienced by the individual. Hope was a strategy seen from all the participants this is evident through the way that they described their future goals and aspirations.

Speaking to others

Only two participants mentioned that they were open about their feelings and these they shared with either relatives or friends. According to Kawachi & Berkman (2001) researchers assert that social relationships could be seen as positive mediators to promoting psychological health and general wellbeing. According to Prati & Pietrantoni (2009) research shows that social support is a positive moderator for people to adopt positive coping strategies. Social support helps to decrease psychological distress by buffering the effects that distress may have on the individual , this is done by either minimizing the importance of the stressor or by promoting more healthy behavioural responses from the individual (Crockett, Iturbide, Stone, McGinely, Raffaelli &

Carlo, 2007). The fact that only two participants mentioned that they were open about their feelings to their relatives and friends, meant that only two participants were receiving some form of social support. This means that more young people are choosing to be silent about the distress that they are experiencing which will make it difficult for interventions to be made and for them to get the necessary help. According to Holbon & Eddy (2011) young people are at high risk of committing suicide because of mental distress, 1 in every 20 young people who has been sad and depressed has considered committing suicide, about 46% have attempted suicide and 32% have tried to commit suicide more than twice (see also Patton, Coffey, Sawyer, Viner, Haller, Bose, Vose, Ferguson & Mathers, 2009). Therefore social support is an important aspect in moderating negative coping strategies, young people need to be encouraged to talk to their peers, relatives or any trusted person and generally seek social support.

Silence

Silence was a strategy that six of eight participants chose to adopt. Research in South Africa reveals that young people often adopt silence as a strategy to avoid confronting distressing situations, and to avoid any conflict that may arise amongst family members particularly their mothers (Nduna & Sikweyiya, 2013). According to research conducted by Langa (2010) both mothers and children have admitted that it's difficult to discuss the issue of absent fathers. African culture forces young people to be silent this is because young people are not expected to ask elders any questions, and no younger women is allowed to ask men any questions (Nduna & Sikweyiya, 2013). Silence was a coping strategy that the participants adopted, which could be seen as both negative and positive. It could be seen as positive in a manner that the young people deliberately adopt silence to avoid conflict and to bring peace in their families. And it could be seen as negative in the manner that the young people are denying themselves the opportunity to find out the truth. Silence was the main strategy that the participants adopted and was used as a strategy for acceptance and to normalize their situation, as often some of the mothers and grown-ups in the families did not want to speak about the young people's fathers and some refused to disclose information about the young people's fathers. Silence was also used as a strategy to

often hide their distress and emotions. These findings are similar to the findings found in a study conducted by Nduna and Jewkes (2011). According to Nduna & Jewkes (2011) young people often resort to silence as an attempt to bring harmony to their home environment, and therefore silence is not a choice. Culture is a major contributor for young people to adopt silence as a strategy, because in African cultures high value is placed on conformity and respect of elder people (LeBaron, 2003). These cultural values add to the young people's decision of adopting avoidance as a coping strategy, resulting in them becoming more distressed. Therefore interventions that are sensitive to young people's culture are needed.

Defensive humor

Defensive humor was a coping strategy that the participants used. According to Abel (2002) there are a few theorists who support the anecdotal view that humor and laughter may be therapeutic in relieving stress and anxiety. Humor may act as a buffer against the effects of stress and anxiety on the individual (Abel, 2002). Humor is a coping strategy that implicitly showed itself during transcription and discussion with supervisor. Research conducted on humor has revealed that humor has a way of relieving distress (Abel, 2002). Humor is a multifaceted concept which involves cognitive, emotional, behavioural, psychophysiological and social components (Abel, 2002; Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray & Weir, 2003; Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 2005; Erickson & Feldstein, 2007). In the health field humor is viewed as a communication tool as well as a coping strategy (Wanzer et al, 2005). For instance patients tend to use humor during times of embarrassment, anxiety, pain and uncertainty, humor was also used to hide their true feelings (Wanzer et al, 2005). However Martin et al (2003) argue that humor does not only possess the ability to promote good psychological health and wellbeing but also possesses the ability to be detrimental to the individual's psychological health and general wellbeing. For instance, humor such as sarcasm and avoidant.

Denial

Denial was a coping strategy found amongst the participants. The participants used it as a form of suppressing their feelings about the distress and emotion in relation to the topic of absent fathers. Denial is one of the most common strategies used by most people, it allows for people to hide the true effect that a stressor has on the individual therefore protecting them from anxiety and any form of distress (von Hippel, von Hippel, Conway, Preacher, Schooler & Radvansky, 2005). According to Pittner & Houston (1980), individuals who have a Type A personality, that is, people who are more competitive and aggressive, tend to adopt denial as a coping strategy.

Poverty

Poverty is a major stressor in young people's lives and has adverse effects on society as research shows high levels of homicide have been reported amongst young people growing up in poverty stricken environments (SAIRR, 2013). Poverty is also one of the reasons for causing fathers to be absent from their children's lives (Morrell, Bhana & Shefer, 2012), as they feel ashamed of not being able to take care of their children and as a result choose to run away from their children (Swartz & Bhana, 2009). According to Swartz and Bhana (2009) young fathers in South Africa are faced with many challenges which often leads them to become depressed and negligent in raising their children, for example in the research that they conducted on young fathers, one participant said: "...it took me two weeks to tell someone. I was stressed; I didn't know how I was going to do it. But at the end I had to tell my mom... I knew it was my child but I didn't know what to do, I didn't accept it" (p. 22). This finding reveals that the issue of absent fathers is more complex and should not be explored in a solitary manner but requires a multi-dimensional approach. Therefore research on absent fathers must look at the reasons for fathers being absent as well as look at how that absenteeism affects the young people involved. Poverty is closely linked to the issue of education, in a sense that six participants mentioned that they are either taking "gap years" or will take gap years that is due mainly because there is no money to send the young people to further their education. Literature also showed that young people who grew up with both parents tended to do better at school than children who grew up with one parent Holborn & Eddy (2011). This is not consistent with the literature because the participants did

not have a problem with their marks at school but had a problem with the money and how they are going to further their education.

Literature and findings

The findings revealed that the participants experience different stressors in their lives and these contribute to their general wellbeing. The stressors in the participants' lives are highlighted in the findings which include identity formation. Identity is an important aspect in young people's lives, as they are constantly searching for who they are where they belong (Nduna & Jewkes, 2010). This proves to be a stressful event and becomes amplified in traditional African cultures. This is due to the traditional expectations for one to be included into a particular culture and family. For example, if the parents are not wed, the father needs to pay damages, known as *inhlawulo*, to the mother's family. This simply means that the child is introduced to the ancestors as their child (Kaufman, de Wet & Stadler, 2001). *Inhlawulo* becomes the main indicator for establishing paternity which allows the child to have a cultural and social connection, and a recognized identity in the particular community (Kaufman et al, 2001). Therefore the child does not belong to the mother's family but to the father's family. This becomes distressful to a child, who has an absent father,

Although little research has been conducted on the effects of absent fathers on young girls in South Africa, research conducted in the United States of America reveals that there is a positive relationship between young girls growing up with absent fathers and their engagement in risky sexual behaviors (Kaufman et al, 2001). Kaufman et al (2001) note that absent fathers may not be the main cause for risky sexual behavior but the effects of having an absent father such as poverty may lead young girls to engage in risky sexual behaviours. For example two participants in the study had children at an early age and one was forced to drop out of school, due to pregnancy. This is not consistent with research (Holborn & Eddy, 2011; McLanahan, 1998) investigating young girls growing up with absent fathers. Most participants have chosen to restrain from any sexual activities, and one participant said the following when she engaged in a risky behaviour: "*My friends came to me with the idea of drinking alcohol because we were all*

bored after having a Christmas feast at my place. I am honestly ashamed of what I did that day and that's why I don't like talking about it". In a study conducted by Operario, Pettifor, Cluver, MacPhail and Rees (2007) young people who have experienced parental death become vulnerable to getting infected with sexually transmissible diseases, HIV, unplanned pregnancies and health risk behaviors. Although the Operario et al (2007) study focused on young people with parental death, the results are useful because in this study some of the participants have experienced parental death, resulting in having an absent father.

Research shows that coping strategies differ according to gender. Males cope differently to stress in comparison to women, who adopt an emotion-focused approach (Tamres, Janicki & Helgeson, 2002). According to Tamres et al (2002) women tend to use, denial, self-blame, anger humor amongst other emotions. These findings are consistent with the findings of the study that because the coping strategies mentioned above were exhibited by the participants in the study.

9. Conclusion

Literature has shown that young people are suffering from different levels of distress (Nduna & Jewkes, 2011). This distress is caused by different factors, including family instability, poverty and absent fathers. This research focused on how young women who have absent fathers cope.

The findings show that young women adopt different strategies, both positive and negative, in order to cope with having an absent father. The positive coping strategies found were: keeping a diary, using creative outlets, maintaining a positive attitude, living a different life to one's parents and speaking to others. The negative coping strategies found include: withdrawing from others, denial of the need for a father, self-blame or guilt, silence and defensive humor. There were also psychological factors found that mediate the coping strategies adopted. These include the level of distress experienced by the young people, personality traits and poverty.

Keeping a diary and creative writing were the dominant positive methods that the participants used. These methods were used as a form of therapy as they expressed their feelings and wrote down how they experienced certain events in their lives, therefore forming some form of a therapeutic relationship with an imagined audience. The participants chose this method mainly because they were not comfortable with talking to someone about their distress, whether it was family or friends. Diary keeping and other creative outlets should thus be encouraged as a form of self-help for young people who have an absent father. The participants also showed high levels of hope for their future. This was motivated by the fact that they wanted to live different and better lives than their parents.

Silence was a major negative coping strategy that the participants and their families adopted. As it is accepted and normalized that absent fathers and fathers are topics that are not to be discussed in the family. This was highlighted by the fact that the participants mentioned that they have siblings who have absent fathers themselves but they did not discuss how they experience not having fathers in their lives. In African culture, as a sign of respect, young people are forced to not pursue and probe their elders with questions about their fathers or anything else, therefore forcing them into silence. Thus young people, as a sign of respect and to keep harmony in the family, do not ask their elders questions about their fathers.

There are different reasons why young women are distressed about having absent fathers and their distress is mediated by other factors, such as poverty. Poverty is an important mediator as its effects were felt through the lack of resources. Some participants had to take 'forced' gap years as their mothers could not afford for them to further their education.

The research highlights how young women with absent fathers cope. It was found that although some had positive coping strategies, others adopted negative strategies. The research also found mediating factors that might influence the coping strategies that young people adopt. Based on the findings, it is suggested that interventions need to be made to help young women with absent fathers find more constructive strategies for dealing with their problems and to decrease the high levels of distress they experience. Through the promotion of keeping a diary or hoping for a better future, young people with absent fathers might be able to adopt positive coping strategies, resulting in less distressed and less suicidal young people.

10. Study Limitations/Challenges of the research

Recruiting participants proved to be an unexpected challenge, for instance the researcher was seen to be an intruder in the participants' personal lives and they were skeptical of the research project and what it was for. Three participants who were approached had initially agreed to do the study, follow up phone calls were made and the prospective participants and the researcher agreed on the time and place for the interview. However when that time came they never arrived and switched their phones off. They later explained that they did not understand why I was so interested in their relationships with their fathers and found it very strange to open up and to talk to someone about such a personal matter and especially when it was a topic that they hardly spoke about. This can be argued to be a potential finding, one that raises interesting questions as to why some people were willing to participate in the study and why some were not. This should be further explored.

Due to time constraints and the urgency to finish the research the researcher relied on a snowballing technique to recruit participants. However that meant the researcher had to compensate the participants for travel costs, as most of the participants lived far from the interview venue and the ones who lived close to the interview venue were not compensated. This then erases the money as a reason to participate in the study.

Implications for future research and interventions

The issue of absent fathers should be taken seriously by the government and more laws need to be put in order to decrease absent fathers, such as making men to be more present in their children's lives this could be done by making it compulsory for men or fathers to be listed on the children's birth certificate. The complex nature of families in South Africa should be considered, and structures need to be put in place to support the complex nature of families, therefore families in South Africa should not be seen as nuclear but be seen as complex and when doing research on South African families more attention should be paid on the structure of families in South Africa. Poverty has emerged to be one of the major stressors in the young people's lives, and having an absent father moderates the level of distress that the young people experience. Therefore policies on poverty need to have a more holistic view of poverty and consider how poverty affects young people. The findings showed that women carry the burden of the children while the fathers are absent, the women becomes the only person responsible for carrying for the child, however the mother gets affected by the unequal nature of the labour system women most often than not get less than their male counterparts. Therefore government needs to develop policies that will enforce equality amongst men and women. Therefore more funding is needed in providing resources for young people such as social workers.

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12. Appendix A



School of Human and Community Development



FACULTY OF HUMANITIES, University of the Witwatersrand

Participant Information Sheet

Study Title:

Strategies for negotiating absent fathers among young women in Soweto, South Africa

Good day,

My name is Prudence Mdletshe, and I am doing research for the purpose of obtaining a MA degree at the University of the Witwatersrand. My area of focus is on how young women with absent fathers cope with everyday life. The research will explore young people's personal experiences about having absent fathers. The research will discuss the dominating views regarding absent and thus will require you to give your personal opinion on the topic.

Participation in this research will entail you attending an interview which will last approximately 1 hour. The interview will be conducted by me. You can choose whether or not to participate in the interview and stop at anytime. Although the interview will be tape recorded, your identity will remain anonymous in the report and no names will be mentioned in the final report.

Pseudonym names will be used. The information collected will only be viewed by my supervisor and me.

Once the research is collected, analyzed and written up, after five years the tapes will be destroyed.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be required to sign a consent form, requesting permission to be taped. I will be in contact with you via SMS, in order to organize time and day to meet in order to conduct the interview. This will be in a time which is most convenient to you.

Your participation in this study will be greatly appreciated. This research will contribute to a larger body of knowledge on personal experiences of how young people with absent fathers cope.

Should a person become anxious after the interview you can contact the following numbers and get assistance:

LifeLine: 0800 055 555

SADAG: Suicidal emergency : 0800 567 567

Kind Regards

Prudence Mdletshe

(Researcher)

Prudence.Mdletshe@student.wits.ac.za

Gareth Mitchell

(Supervisor)

Gareth.Mitchell@wits.ac.za

13. Appendix B

Consent for Recording:

I _____ consent to my interview with **Prudence Mdletshe** for her study on Strategies for negotiating absent fathers among young people in Soweto.

I understand that:

- ❖ That the tapes and transcripts will not be seen or heard by any person in this organization at any time, and will only be processed by the researcher and her supervisor
- ❖ All tape recordings will be destroyed after the research is complete.
- ❖ No identifying information will be used in the transcripts or the research report

☐ I agree to the use of direct quotes in the final research report under a different name

☐ I do not agree to the use of direct quotes in the final research

Signed _____

14. Appendix C



Consent for interviewing:

Consent Form:

Why do this study? - I am interested in investigating the strategies that young people with absent fathers adopt in order to cope with that ordeal. I need to collect data from young people with absent biological fathers.

What will participation involve? - This research involves one semi-structured interview with the researcher, which will be tape recorded.

How long will participation take? – The one on one interview will take approximately 1 hour.

As an informed participant of this study, I understand that:

- ❖ **My participation is voluntary and I may cease to take part in the interview at any time, without penalty.**
- ❖ **I am aware of what my participation involves.**
- ❖ **There are no risks involved in the participation of this study.**
- ❖ **All my questions about the study have been satisfactorily answered.**
- ❖ **All information will be kept between me and researcher, except in the final report, where I will not be identified.**
- ❖ **That the tapes and transcripts will not be seen or heard by any other person in this organization at any time, and will only be processed by the researcher and her supervisor.**
- ❖ **No identifying information will be used in the transcripts or the research report.**

☐ **I agree to the use of direct quotes in the final research report under a different name.**

☐ **I do not agree to the use of direct quotes in the final research.**

I have read and understood the above, and give consent to participate:

Participant's signature:_____ **Date:**_____

I have explained the above and answered all questions asked by the participant:

Researcher's signature:_____ **Date:**_____

15. Appendix D