

Fathers' Experiences after their Exposure to a Fatherhood Intervention Programme

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Abstract

Fatherhood intervention programmes seek to redress fundamental issues that prevent men from succeeding in their fathering role. An understanding and evidence of the influence of fatherhood interventions on the role of the father in the family are thus required. This study, conducted in South Africa, explored the perceptions and experiences of fathers and their partners after the fathers' exposure to a fatherhood intervention programme. A qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews was utilised to this end. A thematic analysis was used to analyse the data and three main themes emerged from the analysis. The study found that fathers and their partners perceived and experienced the fathers to be more involved, responsible, and sharing in parenthood after exposure to the fatherhood intervention programme. This led to an increase of father involvement with children – childcare activities, schoolwork, the well-being of the children, and an increase in involvement in the home.

Keywords: fatherhood; father involvement; fatherhood interventions; fatherhood programmes; parenting; parenting programmes

Introduction

When men transition into becoming parents they embark on a journey that is physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual; this transitioning requires them to relook at themselves as fathers (Palkovitz 2007; Sansiriphun et al. 2015). However, as custom would have it, fathers are not always included in the pregnancy and birth process; therefore, the needs of new fathers are often overlooked in comparison to the needs of



new mothers (Ozgul and Grochulski 2005). Sadly, too, the rate of fatherlessness, father absence, and father non-involvement in their children's lives is high in South Africa (Idemudia, Maepa, and Moamogwe 2016).

The General Household Survey of Statistics South Africa (2017) indicates that only 36 per cent of children live in the same home as their biological father, and 35 per cent live in a home with a male who is not their biological father (Stats SA 2017). This proves that families are redefining themselves and making room for non-biological fathers to engage in fatherhood (Walker 2005). Taylor et al. (2013) are of the opinion that when a man becomes a father it is not only a physiological occurrence, but includes a new identity, role, and responsibility.

The concept of fatherhood brings together an array of new characteristics and child-rearing activities, which develop and evolve and are supported by specific systems within a culture and society in a given setting (Taylor et al. 2013). The meaning of a man who has children changes as time passes; it also differs among cultural and social groups (Taylor et al. 2013). Previous research that focused on the diversity and background of fatherhood (Lamb 2000) found fathers as either “providers and disciplinarians or absent, irresponsible fathers” (Datta 2007, 97). More recent investigations into fatherhood have focused on understanding the diversity and complexities of fathering and fatherhood, and challenging racial stereotypes of fatherhood (Miller and Maiter 2008; Williams et al. 2013). Fathers are thus expected to perform certain tasks and fulfil certain obligations and responsibilities that extend far beyond their biological role (Taylor et al. 2013). Fathers, also whether as individuals or as groups, establish their fatherhood based on both common and standardised beliefs, and on their own personal convictions of what it means to be a father (Ramphela and Richter 2006).

Background

Reflecting on fatherhood from a historical South African perspective, Rabe (2018) explains that before the 21st century, even though patriarchy in the family context had been considered, social science research did not pay too much attention to fatherhood. However, over the last 15 years or so, there has been increased interest in and a great deal of research devoted to the topic. In 2003, the Human Science Research Council (HSRC) launched the first-of-its-kind Fatherhood Project to give specific focus to the fatherhood discourse. Numerous significant publicised works on the topic of fatherhood emerged, including *Baba: Men and fatherhood in South Africa* (Richter and Morrell 2006), which emphasised the diverse facets of fatherhood, followed by *Teenage tata: Voices of young fathers in South Africa* (Swartz and Bhana 2009), which expanded the landscape of studies on fatherhood to include younger men.

First steps to healing the South African family (Holborn and Eddy 2011), a report by the South African Institute of Race Relations, focused significant attention on fathers and fatherhood. The involvement of young mothers and fathers in parenting was later publicised in *Books and babies: Pregnancy and young parents in school* (Morrell, Bhana, and Shefer 2012). *Men's pathways to parenthood: Silence and heterosexual gendered norms* (Morison and Macleod 2015) later became the first book to explore the factors that men take into consideration when they decide to become a parent; it also looked at men's gender identity and gender roles. In *Young families: Gender, sexuality and care*, Mkhwanazi and Bhana (2017) expanded the role of fatherhood by combining it with family structures. This gave rise to a number of research studies on an array of aspects related to fatherhood, all of which ensure that the research on fatherhood remains pertinent (Rabe 2018) and up to date.

A number of studies have contributed to improving outcomes for children through parenting programmes, for example those by Kaminski et al. (2008) and Sanders et al. (2014). Unfortunately, these studies have focused mainly on the mother, neglecting the pivotal role of fathers in the life of the developing child (Lamb and Lewis 2010; McWayne et al. 2013). Further, there is a dearth of research evaluating parenting programmes focused on providing fathers with parenting skills, making it unclear whether the same parenting programmes that are highly effective for mothers would be as effective for fathers (Wilson et al. 2016).

Widespread father absence or non-involvement has damaging consequences not only for families but society at large (Eddy, Thomson-de Boor, and Mphaka 2013). Additional barriers that inhibit the father's involvement, as some studies suggest, include unemployment, imprisonment or the reoffending of the father, committing of offences such as murder, matriarchal families, and the mother's expectations of the father's role and involvement (Connor and White 2011; Fleck et al. 2013; Nelson et al. 2012).

While non-involvement has damaging consequences, the benefits of active paternal involvement in their children's upbringing are countless (Lamb and Lewis 2010). For example, according to Lamb and Lewis (2010), these children are found to be more socially competent, are able to display empathy, have higher self-esteem, possess the capacity to exercise self-control, the child-father relationship is positive, through their acquired social skills they are able to cultivate positive relationships with their siblings and friends, excel scholastically and academically because of their cognitive capacity, they are in a position to experience minimal difficulties in adjusting to school, and they exhibit less behavioural problems. Paternal participation in programmes and services for families thus has the ability to influence the well-being and functioning of fathers as individuals as well as their families (Bronte-Tinkew et al. 2007). Intervention programmes for fathers are geared towards increasing the quantity of time as well as the quality of the father-child relationship (Panter-Brick et al. 2014).

This study, therefore, aimed at exploring the perceptions and experiences of fathers and their partners after the fathers' exposure to a fatherhood intervention programme conducted by a non-governmental organisation (NGO). The NGO's fatherhood intervention programme focuses on the role of the father in the family, building a relationship with his partner, and being actively involved in raising his children. The programme comprises four weekly sessions of three and a half hours each. The sessions are centred on themes such as the father as the financial provider, expectations of fathers to provide for their family, challenges and rewards of being a father, father as caregiver, expectations and ideas of fathers' involvement as caregivers, myths around men caring for children, and how fathers can become role models to their children. Fathers are awarded with a certificate after concluding the four sessions and are given the option to undergo the NGO's positive parenting skills training programme later on.

Theoretical Framework

This study is theoretically underpinned by the ecological systems theory and social role theory. The ecological systems theory was developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) and later renamed the bioecological systems theory (Berk 2000). It is supported by five interconnected systems within an individual's environment with which he/she interacts daily. These systems are known as the micro-, meso-, exo-, macro- and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner 1979), and have a powerful influence on growth.

Pertinent to this theory is that structural interaction occurs within and between the five systems (Paquette and Ryan 2001). Furthermore, close relationships have a significant impact on children's lives, and their development is similarly influenced by outside factors (Berk 2007). Central to this theory and of significance to this study is how every aspect within developing children's lives and their surroundings has a direct effect on their behaviour, growth, and development. Parents, therefore, have to instil certain beliefs, values, norms and rules that shape and develop the child from childhood through to adulthood. The father, here, has a significant opportunity to use his role to uphold these values.

Drawing on the social role theory, as developed by Eagly (1987), emphasis is placed on traditional gender roles and activities—where women naturally assume duties within the home and men's responsibilities are automatically outside of the home. The social behaviour of men and women are associated with their gender differences; this in turn begins to diverge from the expectations of men and women (Eagly 1987). These expectations are communicated to the next generation; they continue to impose on the social behaviour of the genders and in turn manifest as gender stereotypes (Williams and Best 1982).

Conversely, the social role theory also suggests that there is flexibility within gender differences, as the genders are influenced by their own social roles (Eagly and Johnson

1990). The relevance for the current study is that the fathers themselves, through their social roles, can reinforce the promotion of fatherhood and father involvement.

Research Methodology

A qualitative research approach was used to answer the research question, “What are the perceptions and experiences of fathers and their partners after the father’s exposure to a fatherhood intervention programme conducted by a non-governmental organisation?” A qualitative approach seeks to provide insight into the complexities of phenomena from the participants’ own perspectives. More specifically, the purpose is to provide a description of and understand the meaning they ascribe to their experiences (Babbie 2009; Leedy and Omrod 2005). The study further employed an exploratory and descriptive research design to explore and investigate phenomena about which little is known within the context of this study (Silverman 2000). In exploring new factors related to fatherhood, the exploratory research design provided the researcher with the opportunity to identify new areas of meaning, understanding, knowledge and insight (Brink 1996; Brink and Wood 1998). Krysiak and Finn (2010) assert that descriptive research gives a clear picture of the problem, as well as describes the characteristics of the participants affected by the identified problem.

The inclusion criteria for this study consisted of adult men who (a) were fathers, (b) were aged 18 years and older, (c) participated in and completed the NGO’s fatherhood intervention programme during the past two years, (d) were residing in the Cape Metropole areas where the NGO renders its services, (e) were fathers living with their partner and children, and (f) were willing and available to participate in the study along with their partners.

In total, eight fathers and eight partners, who were recruited through purposive sampling from the NGO, participated in the study. Although the partners were not involved in the fatherhood programme itself, they were well positioned to provide a third-party perspective on possible changes in the fathers’ engagement with the family after the programme.

The eight fathers that participated in the study were predominantly of Coloured descent, with the exception of one Indian participant. The term “Coloured” is used in South Africa to refer to a race group of mixed descent (De Wit et al. 2012). The fathers were between 31 and 55 years old, having between two to three children each. Of the fathers, six were married, living and raising their children together with their spouses; two were cohabitating with their partners, of which one had been cohabitating with his partner for the past 15 years; five were employed and three were not working at the time of the study. The fatherhood intervention programme is offered in several communities across the Cape Metropole, including Pelican Park, Delft, Hout Bay and Hanover Park. In view of the predominant race group represented in the study, the “Coloured” race group

predominantly populates these areas of residence. The areas are commonly referred to in the Western Cape as the “Cape Flats” (Bickford-Smith 2001).

The age of the partners, all of whom were female, ranged between 28 and 52 years, and they had two to three children each. Of the female partners: six were married, living and raising their children together with their spouses; two were cohabitating with their partners, one of which had been cohabitating with her partner for 15 years; three were employed and five were unemployed at the time the study was conducted.

Predetermined open-ended semi-structured interviews were used as the primary method of data collection (Babbie 2009). The interviews were audio-recorded and field notes were used to capture the non-verbal cues of the participants, which further assisted with the process of data collection (Maree 2007). The interviews were conducted in the participants’ language of choice, which was either English or Afrikaans (Babbie 2009), and took place at their home or workplace, which was their preferred setting. Each interview lasted about 45 minutes.

The study applied the principles of thematic analysis to analyse the data according to the six-step methodology, as outlined by Braun and Clark (2006), which reports and examines the reality and experiences of the participants while reflecting on their ascribed meanings.

Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) principles for trustworthiness were applied. Credibility was ensured through accurately capturing and reflecting on the participants’ views and by rechecking the information they provided. The researcher achieved transferability by making use of purposive sampling in collecting sufficient thick data and providing a background to the study (Rubin and Babbie 2011). Dependability was ensured by describing what was planned by the researcher through the research design, how the implementation was executed, and also providing a detailed description of the data gathering process. The researcher ensured the final construct of confirmability by applying introspective reflexivity, demonstrating an unbiased display towards the participants’ views, and acknowledging them as experts on the topic.

Ethical principles observed by the researcher included gaining ethical clearance from the Human and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Western Cape (Ref. no: S17/8/19), and approval from the NGO to make use of its setting as the research site. Voluntary and informed consent was obtained from the participants after briefing them about the details of the study, its aims and objectives, and furnishing them with all the necessary information of the research (De Vos et al. 2011). Voluntary participation was ensured by selecting participants who were willing and available to participate in the study. The participants were assured that only information related to the study would be collected and that their privacy and confidentiality would not be compromised in any way. Additionally, written consent and permission to audio-record the interviews were obtained. The participants were also informed of their right to

withdraw from the study and research process at any time, without reprisal. Finally, the researcher explained that participating in any research study could involve possible risks, which may include psychological, social, emotional, and legal risks.

Research Findings

The findings of this study highlight the positive benefits of the fatherhood intervention programme, such as increased involvement in parental responsibilities, and sharing the responsibility of parenthood. These findings were concluded based on three themes, namely constructions of fatherhood, experiences of the fatherhood intervention programme, and fathers' experiences of the father-child relationship after exposure to the programme.

Theme 1: Constructions of Fatherhood

The overall outcomes of this study have shown that the fathers and their partners who participated in the study perceived and experienced the fathers to be more involved, responsible, and sharing in parenthood after exposure to the fatherhood intervention programme. Mikulioniene and Kanopiene (2015) speak about the concept of a new father; this postmodern, meta-narrative of a new father is characterised by parenting being shared equally and also by the father taking on a mother type of caregiving role. This concept strengthens the whole culture of fatherhood along the notions of father involvement and equal responsibility in parenting, all of which are inherent in this postmodern narrative of fathering (Mikulioniene and Kanopiene 2015). This theme was described by four sub-themes.

Fathers' Experiences of a New Fatherhood

After exposure to the fatherhood intervention programme, the findings suggest that the fathers' narratives expressed several different descriptions when defining themselves as fathers. For instance, one father said:

Initially for me it was just about being a provider, but after doing the course it brought a different perspective, role models, why kids do this and that, that's why your kids do the certain things that they do. As kids grow up, they are looking for role models, why must kids look up to gangsters or to Michael Jackson when you are the father. So now with my last born I'm learning to get my act together.

When men consider who they are, should be, and can be as fathers, they begin to embrace multiple images of themselves as fathers (Humberd, Ladge, and Harrington 2015). These images become sustainable in their everyday work and personal lives, and vary from being outdated to having more meaningful connotations of what it means to be a father.

Fathers' Perceptions of their Roles

The fathers described their various fathering roles, which included being a supporter, emotional and physical carer, and financial provider. One father mentioned that:

To be a parent is not any person's thing, you see I have children, so I have to stand in that role for them, I have to look after them, I must take care of them, cause otherwise what will happen to them.

The more traditional leading roles taken on by fathers, which include a teacher-like role providing morals and guidance, have over time been replaced by increased active paternal involvement, providing greater nurturance, being a breadwinner and a positive role model (Finn and Henwood 2009; Humberd, Ladge, and Harrington 2015; Marsiglio and Roy 2012).

Fathers Learning about Themselves

Through participating in the intervention programme, the fathers were presented with the opportunity to acknowledge and unlearn some of the traditional fathering practices that had been role-modelled to them while they were growing up. In this regard, one father said:

Ok em, I used to be a very short-tempered person, like I said I was selfish, I would shout if things don't go my way, I would be aggressive, tell my wife things that would hurt her, I was self-righteous, not considering their needs. My daughter was very young then but with my son, I would shout and scream after trying to talk nice and I would send him to his room. I didn't have a problem doing tasks at home, I was unemployed at the time and I studied civil engineering so I can do things, fix things, but on my own time. My wife must not tell me to do it, I will spite you and you will wait until I want to do it, why must I do this for you when you don't want to listen to me.

The experiences that men have of fatherhood are closely linked to their gender identity meanings they learned from their own fathers (Crespi and Ruspini 2015). For example, men whose fathers were involved in raising them have been found to be more involved with their own children, take more responsibility for them, show more warmth, and monitor their behaviours and activities more closely (Cabrera et al. 2000; Crespi and Ruspini 2015). The findings of this study show that some of the fathers in the fatherhood programme had not experienced their own fathers to be involved in their upbringing. They expressed that the fatherhood programme changed their views about taking on more responsibility as a father, making more responsible life choices, and acknowledging the need to get help in their fathering role.

Fathers' Challenges with Unemployment

Circumstantial constraints, such as inflexible work schedules, may prevent men from fully participating in their fathering role; and fathers who work long hours may not be in a position to be committed to undergo weekly programmes that are being offered to

fathers (Fox et al. 2015; Wong et al. 2013). The majority of the fathers in the current study were unemployed at the time of attending the fatherhood intervention programme. Together with their partners, they referred to themselves as having free time and being available to attend the programme. One father said, “I didn’t work that time, I was unemployed ... It was painful being unemployed. I didn’t have anything to do.” However, by participating in the programme, they had the opportunity to be supported by the programme, a personal need was met, and it was beneficial to their families.

Theme 2: Experiences and Perceptions of the Fatherhood Intervention Programme

The findings of this study established that after being exposed to the fatherhood intervention programme, there was an increase in the fathers’ involvement with their children, partner, and home life. Several studies conducted with fathers being exposed to fatherhood interventions have highlighted the benefits thereof (cf. Cowan et al. 2014; Fatherhood Institute 2013; Knox et al. 2011; McAllister et al. 2012).

Some of the benefits, as noted in these studies, include strengthening of the fathers’ parenting capacity; knowledge and confidence building; a better understanding of themselves as fathers; and a positive impact on the father’s relationship with the children’s mother. Three sub-themes emerged from this main theme.

Fathers Communicating with their Families

The findings of the current study found three different positions, namely one father never informed his partner about his involvement in the programme; some fathers never told their partners at the outset but rather later as the programme progressed, and most fathers kept their partners informed from the outset. One partner said:

You know what at first I didn’t even know about the programme, I don’t know how he got involved ... Maybe he needed it, I dunno. He didn’t discuss it with me. He decided on his own. I didn’t really know how involved it was.

If the partners are in favour of the programme, they are more than likely to encourage the fathers’ attendance and completion of the programme, and support the implementation thereof in the home. Communication with children is considered a fathering practice, which engages fathers in parenting (Mikulioniene and Kanopiene 2015). This involves everyday communication with children and it creates new family traditions. Everyday communication educates and enhances the development of children. Furthermore, spending leisure time with children creates a pleasant atmosphere for family commemorations.

Partners’ Perceptions of the Programme

This finding confirms that by willingly sharing the information the fathers received with their partners, it began to open up spaces for the notion of new fatherhood and created

a space for positive engagement with their partners on what they had learned. One partner commented:

I was taught to support our children not just financially but spiritually as well and building up our kid's self-esteem. And even though I didn't go through the programme [my]self, I learnt through him being in the programme.

New fatherhood reflects involved, responsible, and shared parenthood (Mikulioniene and Kanopiene 2015).

Experiences of the Fathers' Implementation of the Programme with the Children, Partner, and in the Home

The findings revealed a change in the fathers' behaviours with regard to their levels of involvement before and after their exposure to the programme. One of the fathers said: "Everything that I've learnt I'm applying. I now make up the bed, I do the dishes, I sweep, everything she does I help her with, I just don't do washing, I change nappies." Intervention programmes for fathers are geared towards increasing the quantity of time as well as the quality of relationships that fathers cultivate with their children (Panter-Brick et al. 2014).

Theme 3: Fathers' Experiences of the Father-Child Relationship after Exposure to the Programme

Research has proven that children's development is largely affected by their fathers' involvement, whether directly or indirectly (Allen, Daly, and Ball 2012; Rempel et al. 2017). The quality of the father-child relationship relates to two sub-themes.

Emotional Attachment

The findings showed that both the fathers and their partners placed a high value on the increased quality of the relationship after exposure to the intervention, expressed in the fathers' newfound ability to bond with and support their children. One partner explained that:

And when something happens here where we live, he comes to fetch all of us, there was a burn, a fire so he came to look for all of us, we all stand together, not one stands there and one stands here. No, we all stand together, we stand by each other. Because he kept us together.

It has been found that there is a relationship between the fathers' emotional health and their engagement in their children's lives (Barnes 2016). Furthermore, the involvement of the male parent has a positive influence on both the male parent himself and on the child.

Involvement in Childcare

As a result of the fathers' experiences of being exposed to a fatherhood intervention programme, the fathers in this study became more involved in the lives of their children and their day-to-day activities; there was also greater involvement in the home. Results showed an increase in participation in childcare and schoolwork, and activities that include the overall well-being of the children. This was confirmed by a partner who said:

There's a couple of changes he made, more conversations and listening to the children, one night in the week we get together ask how's things with you, what's happening at school. Now he's having an interest in the children, they as children even became more open to share on what is happening in their lives.

Pleck (2010) introduces three concepts of fatherhood: (1) engagement, which refers to a father being physically and psychologically present and participating in hands-on care work; (2) accessibility, which refers to the father's availability for direct interaction with his child, and (3) responsibility, where a father ensures the provision of the necessary resources needed to care for his child.

Conclusion

The research question, "What are the perceptions and experiences of fathers and their partners after the father's exposure to a fatherhood intervention programme conducted by a non-governmental organisation?" was sufficiently explored through a qualitative approach, thereby attaining the research aim and objectives of the study. The results of this study provided insight into the perceptions and experiences of families after the fathers' exposure to a fatherhood intervention programme. The overall findings established that the fathers and their partners who participated in this study perceived and experienced the fathers to be more actively involved in the lives of their children and partners, showing increased parental responsibility, and sharing in caregiving duties after undergoing the fatherhood intervention programme. Having summarised the research findings above, the article concludes with recommendations for future practice.

Recommendations

The first recommendation is for social service professionals who provide services to fathers and their families to work with families holistically and to bring about sustainable family and child well-being by offering services to families as a package. This includes services to the family, jointly and group-based, such as families being recruited as a whole, and an assessment of their needs to determine whether they require family counselling, family group conferencing, parenting skills programmes, fatherhood intervention programmes, or children's life skills programmes. Group-based interventions, such as fatherhood intervention programmes and parenting skills

programmes, should include a recruitment and retention strategy, which involves elements such as home visits that should take place before the programme starts, and again mid-way through the programme, especially where participants drop out. A post-programme follow-up is also recommended. Individual or family counselling should be offered in addition to the group-based intervention. In the case of only recruiting fathers into a fatherhood group, it is recommended that the partners be involved from the onset in order to get their buy-in, such as attending an information session to be informed of what the programme is about.

When fathers are attending a fatherhood intervention programme and partners are attending a separate parenting skills programme, it is important for the curricula to coincide on topics and concepts, such as parenting styles, positive discipline, and gender-equal parenting. An evaluation plan should be incorporated in order to strengthen the group-based interventions. This can be done by getting participants to complete pre- and post-tests to track their progress as well as assess the applicability and quality of the programme itself. A follow-up after 6 to 12 months can be contracted with the families after agreeing to be part of the intervention. A follow-up at this stage determines the family's need for further intervention, such as a refresher course, or it can highlight the successes of the programme.

This research study showed that fatherhood must include education and awareness as well as parenting skills to support parenting and fatherhood. It is thus the government's role to make adequate provision of financial support to the non-governmental sector in order to roll out fatherhood intervention programmes, parenting skills programmes, education and awareness. The health sector should advocate for fatherhood intervention programmes and parenting skills programmes to be offered to pregnant mothers and fathers when visiting clinics during antenatal check-ups. Mothers and communities should also be informed of the importance of father involvement in the first 1 000 days of a child's life. The social development sector should advocate for fatherhood intervention programmes and parenting skills programmes to be conducted with prospective and existing foster care parents and adoptive parents.

It is suggested that future research be expanded to include other geographic areas and racial groups where fatherhood intervention programmes are being offered, as it may yield more inclusive and insightful results in relation to the limitations of the current study. Research evaluating fatherhood intervention programmes should be considered that include content analysis and the effectiveness and impact of the programme. Further in-depth studies on the experiences of the facilitators that implement the fatherhood intervention programme should also be considered.

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