Disrupted Families and Dislocated Fatherhood: Economic Challenges Driving Father Absence in South Africa

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Abstract

Numerous voices of disrupted families are expressing themselves more loudly, and visible consequences are observed in countless broken families. Destructive social issues, such as toxic fatherhood, father absence, and disengaged or unavailable fathers, have resulted in significant challenges within families. Contributing factors include the breakdown of family structures, HIV/AIDS, the COVID-19 pandemic, rising divorce rates, and the increasing complexity of family dynamics. The absence of fathers, often linked to the disintegration of nuclear families, has become a significant concern, particularly in the South African context. Over the past four decades, researchers have made substantial progress, developing and refining conceptual frameworks to clarify human fatherhood.

Key words: disrupted families; dislocated fatherhood; father absence; South Africa
J.E.L. classification: A13, B55, D1, D91, I3

1. Rationale

The family, a fundamental institution in society, plays a crucial role in the survival and well-being of humanity. It is a primary social system through which individuals receive physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual sustenance. Comprised of individuals connected by blood, marriage, or adoption, the family functions as a cohesive household, where members interact within distinct social roles – such as husband and wife, father and mother, son and daughter, brother and sister – creating a shared culture. Spanning at least three generations, the family evolves, providing stability and strength within society. Families have long been recognized as the core social unit, vital to the political, economic, social, emotional, and religious fabric of life (Kath, 2021, p.17). In South Africa, however, many families are profoundly affected by the absence of father figures (Salami and Okeke, 2018, p.2; Popenoe, 1996, pp.12-13).

2. Introduction

A family is defined as a group of individuals related by blood, marriage, or adoption, typically residing together and sharing emotional and economic bonds. Kath (2021, p.15) states that the term 'family' originates from the Latin word "*familia*," meaning "household" or "household servant," and from "*famulus*," meaning "servant." The term 'family' refers to a distinct social group with a primary objective: to offer intimate care for the development of all families (Kane, 2017, p.10). It serves as the first institution for personal growth, support, and protection (Saikia, 2017, p.445). Parents play a crucial role in instilling norms, values, and character development in their young children, who in turn are expected to respect, love, honor, and obey their parents, as well as support and care for them in their later years (Mayowa, 2021, p.1342). The family constitutes the fundamental unit of society and is seen as the most significant element of a nation (Saikia, 2017, p.445).

In the current service delivery context, families increasingly consist of mothers and their children, while fathers are perceived as irrelevant and insignificant (Fletcher, 2002, p.4). Research shows that children residing with both parents exhibit superior emotional, physical, and academic well-being

(Anderson, 2014, p.378). However, evolving family demographics have led to significant changes in relationships, negatively affecting many families (Anderson, 2014, p.378).

The family significantly impacts a child's development (Felisilda and Torreon, 2020, p.216). Despite being the smallest unit of a social system, it remains the most sensitive and vital component, contributing greatly to society (Felisilda and Torreon, 2020, p.216). The family establishes the spiritual, moral, and psychological foundation for a child's development (Felisilda and Torreon, 2020, p.217). Moreover, it establishes a solid educational foundation for children's spiritual, moral, and psychological development, which is essential for their academic success (Mayowa, 2021, p.1343).

Brody (2020) asserts that familial discord and estrangement can lead to chronic stress, undermining social, mental, and physical well-being. Such discord often arises from religious, political, financial, and existential conflicts and disputes, resulting in long-term physical and emotional suffering. Unresolved conflicts, for example, can lead to chronic stress, which may worsen conditions like anxiety and depression and exacerbate diseases such as heart disease and diabetes, potentially shortening individuals' lifespans (Brody, 2020).

The circumstances of African families in South Africa are unique. Many children are raised in households where both parents cohabit, or where fathers are absent for various reasons. Extended family members – such as grandfathers, uncles, and nephews – often contribute to child-rearing, ensuring the family's overall survival (Mayowa, 2021, p.1342). While African and Euro-American perspectives on families and parenting differ, both are substantial. In the African context, the well-known proverb "It takes a village to raise a child" is often associated with the South African principle of *Ubuntu*, emphasizing that individuals should care for others as they care for themselves. A child's success and well-being are viewed as dependent on the community's support (Tyatya, 2015).

In Sepedi, the phrase "*ngoana ke wa Sechaba*" signifies that a child is a communal responsibility, receiving guidance and education from the community. This community includes the immediate family in which the children are growing and developing. In Nguni, the adage "*intandane enhle ngumakhotwa ngunina*" means that an orphan with a mother is more fortunate than one without, highlighting the significant role of mothers compared to that of fathers (Mabusela, 2014, pp.48-49). A debated claim is that many fatherless children succeed and thrive due to the profound and commendable influence of mothers and grandmothers (Mabusela, 2014, pp.48-49). South African mothers often embody empowerment, strength, assertiveness, resilience, self-reliance, and confidence, nurtured within supportive nuclear and extended families (Magqamfana and Bazana, 2020, p.169). Motherhood is crucial in any family, community, or society, as mothers ensure their children's health, growth, and development, acting as their most effective educators (Leskošek, 2011). However, Mayowa (2021, p.1345) argues that the traditional African family is deteriorating due to the impacts of civilization and modernization, leading to increased marital failures within the African context.

Meyer (2018, p.3) highlights in her research that in 19th-century isiZulu culture, the father (*umnumzana*) was the head of the homestead (*umuzi*) and had the authority to marry multiple wives through the payment of a bride price (*lobolo*). In this context, fatherhood carried both social and economic responsibilities. While the father was the primary role model for his children, other figures such as elders, brothers, uncles, and peers also contributed to the role of fatherhood. In African culture, the roles of father and husband are deeply tied to authority and command respect. Additionally, the father serves as an emotional leader, providing care and support for his family as a provider, and is dedicated to ensuring their safety (Mabusela, 2014, pp.48-49).

3. Theoretical background

This literature review presents a meta-theoretical analysis of disrupted families in South Africa, focusing on the impact of dislocated fatherhood and father absence.

3.1. Disrupted families stem from dislocated fatherhood

What constitutes disrupted families? Over the past 40 years, there has been a significant rise in disrupted families globally, particularly in the United Kingdom (Eddy, Thomson-de Boor and Mphaka, 2013, p.20). Consequently, the UK now has one of the highest rates of disrupted families in the Western world, reaching historically unprecedented levels (Eddy, Thomson-de Boor and Mphaka, 2013, p.20).

A disrupted family is defined as a household where one parent assumes the responsibility for the material, financial, and emotional needs of the family, as well as the caregiving duties of raising children, in the absence of the other parent (Mayowa, 2021, p.1342). Disrupted families are a global phenomenon, impacting vulnerable households in both developed and developing countries (Felisilda and Torreon, 2020, p.217). This trend is particularly notable within African family structures, where modernization and industrialization have contributed to its escalation (Mayowa, 2021, p.1342).

Mayowa (2021, p.1342) argues that disrupted families are often perceived as un-African and treated as exceptional cases or instances of non-acceptance. However, the increasing prevalence of disrupted families has become a growing concern in society (Mayowa, 2021, p.1342). The extended family structure is now expanding rapidly and has surpassed the nuclear family in prevalence (Mayowa, 2021, p.1342). In societies such as Nigeria, disrupted families often go unrecognized or are dismissed as anomalies (Mayowa, 2021, p.1342).

A pertinent inquiry in this context is: What causes familial fragmentation? Families are disrupted by the acceptance of undesirable elements, leading to estrangement and the abandonment of familial responsibilities (Saikia, 2017, p.445). This abandonment marks the beginning of a disjointed family unit, which poses significant societal issues (Saikia, 2017, p.445).

Parental separation or divorce often results from crises such as misunderstandings, mistreatment, and miscommunication. These conflicts can lead to family members leaving the home, abandoning children, and further disrupting the family structure (Saikai, 2017, p.445). This outcome is attributable to illegitimacy, unanticipated pregnancy, and parental mortality (Felisilda and Torreon, 2020, p.217; Mayowa, 2021, p.1343). Disrupted families can also contribute to problematic behaviors, such as drug abuse among youth (Jackson, Usher and O'Brien, 2007, p.321), which further erodes trust within the family and leads to theft, dishonesty, deceit, and unfulfilled promises (Jackson, Usher and O'Brien, 2007, p.325). This dynamic can escalate into abuse and violence, further destabilizing families (Jackson, Usher and O'Brien, 2007, p.325).

Many parents attribute their perceived inadequacies in parenting to themselves (Jackson, Usher and O'Brien, 2007, p.328). Despite the negative perception of parents in society, they significantly influence their children's academic development; however, a disrupted home adversely affects children's academic performance (Felisilda and Torreon, 2020, p.217). Children in disrupted families face significant challenges that complicate their ability to navigate life successfully (Felisilda and Torreon, 2020, p.217). Such family environments disrupt children's lives, leading to detrimental outcomes in their education and emotional well-being (Saikia, 2017, p.445; Mayowa, 2021, p.1342).

Disrupted families have a range of negative effects on children, including emotional instability, academic decline, social relationship difficulties, behavioral issues, and conflicts with parents (Saikai, 2017, pp.447-448). These challenges extend beyond children, affecting parents and society as a whole (Saikai, 2017, pp.446-447). Therefore, the issue of disrupted families should not be underestimated, as it not only impairs children's academic performance but also contributes to delinquency and subpar educational outcomes (Mayowa, 2021, pp.1342-1344).

3.2. Dislocated fatherhood and father absence in South Africa

This discussion addresses critical social issues, including dislocated fatherhood and father absence in South Africa, which have adversely affected families and undermined familial cohesion. Blankenhorn (2001) first characterized dislocated fatherhood as a spiritual issue contributing to father absence, a significant social challenge for families and society. In the South African context, the structural separation of men from their children and families is a legacy of apartheid, colonization, and urbanization, which have dramatically altered family structures and roles over the past century

(Van Onselen, 1976). Colonization forced individuals into wage labor, leading to increased migration from rural to urban areas and prolonged family separations. Apartheid further regulated movement, instituting a migrant labor system that disrupted family life and contributed to the rise of disrupted families (Richter, Chikovore and Makusha, 2010, p.362).

Many men, as husbands and fathers, have succumbed to drug and alcohol abuse, becoming unresponsive to their families (Richter, Chikovore and Makusha, 2010, p.362). Father absence is, therefore, a serious social issue, not unique to South Africa but one of its most pressing challenges (Freeks, 2020, p.2; 2021, p.62). South Africa has the second-highest rate of father absence on the continent (Khan, 2018, p.18; Richter, Chikovore and Makusha, 2010, p.360), which has contributed to rapid changes in family structures and disrupted relationships, particularly regarding father absence (Kesebonye and P' Olak, 2020, p.1).

Father absence remains a pervasive and persistent social issue in post-apartheid South Africa, driven by factors such as evasion of responsibility, household dissolution, divorce, and undisclosed paternity (Albert *et al,* 2021, p.2). This absence is a critical issue in South African society, leading to child neglect and abuse within families (Londt, Kock and John-Lanba, 2017, pp.151-155).

Meyer (2018, p.2) notes the rising prevalence of father absence, which negatively impacts many families. Several factors contribute to this issue, including resource scarcity, unemployment, poverty, the migrant labor system, substance abuse, crime, sexual violence, and unsafe sexual practices (Meyer, 2018, p.4). Research by East *et al* (2020, p.478) demonstrates that father absence correlates with life adversity and detrimental well-being in children, leading to behavioral issues, particularly in children under seven years old (East *et al,* 2020, p.478). This social issue significantly affects the well-being of children and families in terms of economic and social-emotional factors, exerting a causal influence on various aspects of children's welfare (McLanahan, Tach and Schneider, 2013, pp.399-409).

In this context, it is crucial to recognize the growing trend of father absence as a primary factor in the deteriorating well-being of children and a driving force behind many societal issues (Blankenhorn, 2001). Blankenhorn (1998) describes father absence as the most harmful social trend of our generation. Even in historical contexts, such as the reign of the renowned Zulu King Shaka (1787–1828), being fatherless carried significant stigma (Richter, Chikovore and Makusha, 2010, p.361). Father absence often leaves children with feelings of confusion and loss (Richter, Chikovore and Makusha, 2010, p.361). In African tradition, children are esteemed and cherished by the entire family (Richter, Chikovore and Makusha, p.362).

Social issues such as adolescent pregnancy, criminal activity, domestic violence against women, child poverty, and child abuse and neglect are often rooted in father absence, a fundamental factor affecting families (Blankenhorn, 2001). Blankenhorn's 2001 research revealed that approximately 40% of children in the United States live in fatherless homes. In fact, half of all American children experience significant periods of separation from their biological fathers during childhood. Growing up without a father can be profoundly devastating and traumatic for males; however, they have the potential to break this cycle when they become fathers themselves. By being present, accessible, and actively engaged in their children's lives, they can help prevent the continuation of father absence (East *et al*, 2020, p.482).

Despite the critical importance of fatherhood, as highlighted by numerous studies, over 40% of children in the United States are being raised without fathers (Hendry *et al*, 2020, p.19). This poses a serious economic challenge for single-parent households, where mothers, in particular, bear the greatest burden. Blankenhorn describes this situation as historically unprecedented, with a significant number of men estranged from their children and disconnected from the mothers of those children (Blankenhorn, 2001).

Growing up in a household with negligent parents poses significant challenges and risks, especially for males (East *et al*, 2020, p.477). This circumstance is not only regrettable for families but also harmful to children. Children without father figures face significant risks in their lives. Boys are often imbued with violence, hatred, and bitterness, which leads them to perpetrate abuse against women. Conversely, girls often engage in sexual activities and become pregnant prematurely. Unfortunately, many of these girls seek father figures in men whom they perceive to possess their fathers' traits (Blankenhorn, 2001).

3.3. Economic challenges contributing to disrupted families

A longstanding tradition of sociological inquiry has investigated the impacts of divorce and paternal absence on the economic and socio-emotional welfare of offspring across the lifespan. The evidence indicating that paternal absence influences adult economic or familial outcomes is considerably less robust. Thus, the reduction of social safety net assistance and the increase in workplace instability may have exacerbated the economic ramifications of paternal absence, intensifying the adverse effects (McLanahan, Tach and Schneider, 2014, pp.19-20).

Magqamfana and Bazana (2020) identified several factors contributing to father absence in their research, including unemployment, adverse socio-economic conditions, divorce, labor migration, and cultural beliefs. The absence of a father in a child's life is strongly associated with negative psychological outcomes, such as diminished self-esteem, poor academic performance, and insecurity in relationships with the opposite sex. Among black South Africans, fathers are traditionally viewed as economic providers and moral role models. Despite the absence of biological fathers, many young South African women raised in extended families reported resilience, empowerment, assertiveness, and self-reliance, largely due to the support of other family members. As a result, despite facing difficult socio-economic conditions and a lack of partner support, nearly two-thirds of these children developed secure attachments to their mothers.

The presence of a father does not necessarily lead to improved socio-economic conditions, as fathers may be present yet unemployed. Additionally, African fathers, particularly those of African descent, aspire to engage in the socio-educational development of their children; however, they encounter limitations in providing financial and material support due to various cultural and economic factors. The socio-economic factors, namely financial resources, paternal skills, maternal relationships, and paternal race, significantly correlate with the challenges faced by children whose fathers are unable to engage in their socio-educational development. The financial capacity of fathers may influence their ability to fulfil their anticipated roles (Salami and Okeke, 2018, pp.3-5).

In the research conducted by Rantho, Matlakala, and Maluleke (2022), it is highlighted that numerous scholars have concentrated on elucidating the impact of South African history and the apartheid regime on the economic challenges faced by citizens. The atypical environmental conditions have presented difficulties for many families, compelling them to seek equilibrium in an environment that does not foster familial stability. Consequently, these households have disintegrated, resulting in an increase in absent fathers, which has adversely affected numerous father-child relationships and instilled in children the perception that fathers are merely financial providers rather than supportive figures. Fathers were expected to reduce their visits to their children in order to conserve finances, thereby hindering their ability to provide emotional and physical support, which consequently rendered mothers the primary support networks. Notwithstanding the economic obstacles that impede paternal engagement, many fathers still aspire to be active in their children's lives and to cultivate a connection with them.

In the analysis by Freeks (2024, p.74), father absence is identified as a significant and pressing concern that is catalyzing swift socio-economic changes throughout Africa, with South Africa exhibiting particularly pronounced impacts. Moreover, a substantial proportion of families in South Africa are led by single mothers, with the primary factors contributing to the socio-economic challenges of single parenting linked to the negative social consequences of fatherhood and paternal absence.

In summary, the role of a father encompasses not only the joys and benefits associated with children but also leads to adverse psychological repercussions. Fatherhood is simultaneously gratifying and detrimental (Waldvogel and Ehlert, 2016, p.2). It is important to acknowledge that limited fatherhood, as seen in disrupted families, results in guilt, feelings of inadequacy, and role strain (Waldvogel and Ehlert, 2016, p.2).

4. Research methodology

The methodology used in this paper provided a strategic framework to achieve the research objectives. According to Vyhmeister (2008, p.38), the methodology serves as the process through which the articulated objective is accomplished. It clarifies the researcher's approach to collecting,

analyzing, and evaluating data to address the research question or hypothesis. This study employed a descriptive literature review to explore the phenomenon of dislocated fatherhood and father absence, along with the associated economic challenges and their impact on families. A wide range of sources, including books, journal articles, academic papers, and literature reviews, were analyzed to identify trends, events, and scenarios relevant to the topic. The literature review encompassed both national and international scholarly works. Multiple academic databases, such as ATLAS, EBSCOhost, NEXUS, SCOPUS, ISI, and ISAP from North-West University (NWU) in South Africa, were utilized to gather data. The research question was: "What are the detrimental consequences of dislocated fatherhood, father absence, and the economic challenges for families in South Africa?"

5. Findings

Family stability serves as a foundational element for children's success and advancement in life. However, when parents divorce, many children lose this stability, resulting in the loss of critical aspects of their childhood, with effects that can persist throughout their lives (Felisilda and Torreon, 2020, p.17). A contributing factor to disrupted families, particularly in the African context, is the cultural shift towards cohabiting families, which makes them more vulnerable to instability (Mayowa, 2021, p.1342; Eddy, Thomson-de Boor and Mphaka, 2013, p.14). This literature review identifies six key findings related to disrupted families, focusing on dislocated fatherhood, father absence, and the economic challenges faced by families in South Africa:

5.1. Dissolution of marriage

Within the scope of this paper, the primary detrimental factor contributing to disrupted families is divorce. Consequently, it is essential to acknowledge that divorce serves as a significant causal factor for many families in South Africa. The impact of divorce on the family unit is profound, as it is the leading cause of fractured familial relationships. Common disputes between spouses encompass financial issues, adolescent pregnancy, sexual misunderstandings, early marriage, health concerns, education, and a range of other factors. The dissolution of marriage may result in one or both parents vacating the household, and the absence of a parent can negatively affect the family's overall functioning. Divorce has far-reaching consequences for children, undermining their competence in various aspects of life, including education, emotional well-being, familial relationships, and future earning potential.

5.2. Death

The loss of a family member diminishes familial cohesion, with the death of a mother being more devastating than that of a father in early childhood. Mothers typically play a crucial role in nurturing children during their formative years. However, as children grow, the absence of a father tends to be more detrimental, especially for boys. In such cases, mothers often struggle to balance the dual responsibilities of earning a livelihood and managing the household, which can affect their ability to provide adequate care for their children.

5.3. Misunderstandings

Family issues often arise from misunderstandings among household members, which can be destructive and harmful. These misunderstandings are frequently fueled by factors such as alcohol misuse, drug abuse, domestic violence, and misconduct within the family.

5.4. Administrative failures

Administrative failures, particularly ineffective family management or leadership, contribute to disrupted families.

5.5. Influence of parents or friends

Family fragmentation has often resulted from negative external influences, including disparagement.

5.6. Violence

Domestic violence is unequivocally unacceptable due to its harmful impact on children's development, behavior, academic performance, and long-term health.

6. Conclusion

The family is fundamental to any human group, playing a vital role in the comprehensive development of individuals and driving societal transformation. It is within families that new generations are nurtured, and care and affection are extended to the older generation, fostering education, mental health, and empowerment for all. The family is also a space where members should experience security, intimacy, and the freedom to express their true selves, while simultaneously contributing to the well-being of the family unit. At the core of family life is God, with everything revolving around God's divine plan and will. Life derives its meaning in relation to God, and its purpose is fulfilled through interpersonal relationships, which are best practiced within the family. A Christian family that prays together remains united, and while this perspective is central to Christian families, it is also acknowledged and valued by various other religious traditions (Kath, 2021, p.16).

7. References

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