

Non-resident Black fathers in South Africa

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Introduction

South Africa has one of the highest rates of non-resident fathers in Africa, after Namibia,¹ with only about a third of preschool children co-residing with their fathers.² Father absence is attributed to, variously, labor migration, violence, abandonment, AIDS, violent and accident-related paternal deaths, poverty and unemployment.³ Popular assertions and policy proposals tend to make the linked assumptions between father absence and lack of support for children. However, given that most Africans in the southern African region live within a network of extended family relations,⁴ having children living apart from fathers, especially due to migrant labor does not automatically mean that the children are being neglected or not being cared for by their fathers, especially given that most migrant laborers return their earnings to their families in the form of remittances. Nor does it equate to a break in social connectedness between a father and child.⁵ Father's physical location and child involvement are two separate dimensions of father connection to his children.⁶

Research Context and Results

Labor migration and non-resident Black fathers in South Africa

The advent of Apartheid strengthened the economic and political power of the ruling White minority and enforced racial segregation through oppressive laws.⁷ Richter and Morrell⁸ contend that in the Apartheid era, different possibilities and experiences of work fundamentally shaped fatherhood for Black, Colored, Indian and White men. Apartheid affected and continues to influence Black fathers and patterns of fatherhood in South Africa. Labor migration – which separates reproduction and production – became the main cause of the low rate of co-residence between Black fathers and their children in South Africa, as the financial muscle power of fathers became exclusively important in determining and measuring 'good fathers'.^{9,10}

Many households functioned as ‘stretched’ residential units,¹¹ with family members ‘dispersed’ between different households for reasons of work, education, care, support and housing.¹² These patterns have become entrenched, with many men having separate families, wives and children, in their rural home and in the place where they are employed as migrant laborers. Migrant labor continues to influence contemporary domestic and labor environments in South Africa even after independence and democracy. In most impoverished areas in South Africa, as in many poor societies, there are very few opportunities for anyone to earn a living in the areas where they can afford to live. As a result, it is near impossible for most Black South African fathers to both support and live with their children.

Poverty, unemployment and non-resident Black fathers in South Africa

Evidence from South Africa suggests that employment status and income now largely discriminate between Black South African men who are able to get married and co-reside with their children and those who are not able to marry and co-reside with their children.¹³ Employed men in higher earning categories are many times more likely to be living with their wives and children than men in the lowest income category or those who are unemployed.¹³

Also, due to high poverty and unemployment, some Black South African men suffer damage to their identity, masculinity, self-esteem and confidence to act as fathers because of their sense of failure to provide financial support to their children and families.¹⁴ Financial provision is a deeply entrenched aspect of masculine identity in African society and being unable to command financial and material resources undermines men’s involvement in families, both practically and psychologically.^{15,16,17} Poor Black South African men may try to avoid criticism by distancing themselves from their children and families,^{14,16} with the extreme of abandoning them altogether.¹⁸

The role of culture

Cultural norms, such as inhlawulo (the payment of damages by a man to a women’s family for impregnating her before marriage) and lobola (bride price), compounded by family dispersal, economic insecurity and employment instability, contribute to the social and residential separation of biological fathers from their children.¹⁹ As a result of these cultural prescriptions about how spouses and children are incorporated into families, the majority of Black young children born to unmarried parents live with their mothers, often in extended households headed by maternal kin.²⁰ Until a child’s father pays inhlawulo, he may not be recognized as a legitimate father of a child, especially by the family of the child’s mother, and he may be restricted from visiting and spending time with his child at the mother’s family homestead.^{5,21} Such living arrangements pertain until the parents can conclude the inter-family marriage negotiations and afford a wedding. Because a man may not co-reside with his child’s mother and child until he pays and finalizes lobola negotiations, the father is dependent on the child’s mother and her family to facilitate his relationship with his child.

Role of Black non-resident fathers in South Africa

Despite the fact that many Black children grow up in households where their biological fathers are absent and are in the care and support of multiple adults, biological fatherhood in South Africa remains very important as it has cultural, as well as social and personal significance. Married Black biological fathers provide a child with the

'family or clan name' and this represents a significant source of social capital (such as extended kin and ancestral traditions) and status for their children as it links them to resources and other people in the communities in which they live.^{17,22} Biological fatherhood is very important in transmitting cultural values to children and in promoting identity development, because children and families identify with the biological father even when he is non-resident in the household.²² Also, in South Africa, like in many other countries, some unmarried non-resident Black fathers make substantial contributions to families and children, as well as to children who are not biologically their own, through remittances, social visits and telephone contact.⁵

Conclusion

We conclude that the high rates of non-resident fathers among Black men in South Africa is the result of a number of factors, which include – but not limited to – cultural values, labor migration, paternal deaths due to AIDS, injuries, mostly resulting from road traffic accidents or violence, poverty and unemployment. We argue that being a non-resident father does not equate to lack of involvement. Most non-resident fathers have some kind of connection with their children, be it household membership, contact, financial support, and/or emotional involvement.²³ We recommend that given the burden of the complex familial, material and cultural forces that influence high rates of non-residency among Black fathers in South Africa, particular attention should be paid to incorporating these considerations into policy and programme efforts to promote involved positive fatherhood for Black non-resident fathers.

While cultural norms are important in maintaining family and societal values, they must also be flexible and accommodative in response to other factors such as socio-economic contexts. Cultural expectations such as the payment of inhlawulo and lobola should accommodate poor, unemployed, unmarried, non-resident fathers being involved in their children's lives. Supporting and encouraging fathers in difficult circumstances enables them to be more involved in their children's lives which in turn ensures better life outcomes for children, women and men. On the other hand, it is important to advocate for and encourage non-resident fathers to play active roles in their children's lives regardless of their financial capabilities and the nature of their relationship with their children's mothers.

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