“BEING MAN ENOUGH”: FATHERHOOD EXPERIENCES AND EXPECTATIONS AMONG TEENAGE BOYS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Through a socio-psychological lens, this study aimed at exploring how South African school-boys of low socio-economic status experienced interacting with men and fathers about the transition to manhood and how they visualised their own role as fathers in the future. These questions were explored against the backdrop of the socio-economic conditions for boys negotiating their way into manhood in economically disadvantaged contexts. A sequential triangulation of qualitative methods was employed. The findings indicated a huge discrepancy between their experiences of being fathered and future aspirations for “responsible fatherhood”. Guiding children about personal issues into manhood was seen as the most important father-responsibility, yet the legal framework presented obstacles to initiate future responsible fathering.

Keywords: school-boys, identity formation, fatherhood, responsibility, South Africa, values of children

This paper focuses on boys’ understanding of fatherhood in their transition to adulthood. The transition from boyhood to manhood takes different forms in different societies and is closely linked to socio-economic circumstances (Connell, 1998; Morrell, 2007). Hence, a psychological understanding of boys becoming men must integrate cultural and social perspectives. It is cross-culturally acknowledged that the stages from late adolescence to early adulthood involve the development of a more autonomous sense of self and choices of suitable social roles and values (Eriksson, 1968; Kroger, 2000). Identity development at this stage rests on a meaningful life philosophy and a
sense of sex role identification (Eriksson). Furthermore, the path into adulthood involves learning to take on responsibility in one way or another (Kroger).

Conceptualisation of responsibility varies greatly in different settings (Morrell, 2007). Likewise, the way adulthood (Marcia, 1993) and manhood is negotiated (Morrell) varies cross-culturally. According to Morrell, aspirations to become a parent signify willingness to take on responsibility. He argues that in resource-poor settings with limited opportunities for education and work, the aspiration of fatherhood is a particularly important expression of willingness to take on responsibility. In line with Connell (1998) who argues that fatherhood is a prism to understand youth masculine identities, particularly in resource-poor settings, this study looks at how poor boys understand fatherhood in South Africa, where recent history is rooted in inequality between racial groups and different classes. Morrell argues that African men, particularly if living in a socio-economically disadvantaged setting, often weave race, ethnicity and kinship into their masculine identity differently than non-African men or urban middle-income men (Morrell, p. 67). In resource poor settings men tend to hold a marginal position both at work and at home and as Roy (2008) argues, it is crucial to learn more about how families and fathers in such settings develop strategies to secure men’s involvement with children. Through a socio-psychological lens of family change (Kagitcibasi, 2007), this paper aims to explore how teenage boys of low socio-economic status (SES) in Mankweng in the Limpopo Province experience and imagine fatherhood.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

*Socio-Psychological Perspective on Family Change*

The theory of family change (Kagitcibasi, 2007) offers an innovative way of viewing school-boys who are living in a resource-poor setting and their understanding of fatherhood. The core argument of this theory is that socio-economic development forms a major underlying dimension of variability in family values across cultures. This builds upon a contextual perspective where the self is seen within the family and the family within culture. This framework springs out of the values of children (VOC) studies (Arnold & Fawkett, 1975; Bulutao 1975; Hoffman & Hoffman, 1973; Kagitcibasi, 1982a) initiated in the early 1970s.

Exploring motivations for parenthood, the cross-cultural VOC studies\(^1\) suggest that there are mainly three underlying dimensions; utilitarian, emotional and social values of children. Values of children are found to be tightly connected to socioeconomic development, and to vary along parameters such as son preference (Kagitcibasi, 1982b) and desired number of children (Hoffman & Hoffman, 1973). People who emphasise the emotional values of children tend to aspire to having few children and to transmit values related to independence to their children. These parents tend to have relatively high socio-economic status (SES) and to live in urban areas. People who score low on

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\(^1\) VOC studies have been conducted in Taiwan, Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, The Republic of China, Japan, India, Israel, Turkey Germany, France, and the U.S.
SES by contrast tend to live in rural areas, want more children and express son-preference. These parents tend to put more emphasis on the utilitarian values of children and to transmit values of interdependence to their children. The social value of children refers to the social acceptance people enjoy when they have children, such as the status bestowed upon a man or a woman for being a father or a mother (Trommsdorff & Nauck, 2005).

Based upon the VOC studies, Kagitcibasi (2007) has more recently developed a theory of family change including three models of family interaction patterns that may be used as heuristic devices in cultural and cross-cultural family studies. She proposes two prototypical family models; the interdependence model and the independence model. Kagitcibasi argues that the model of interdependence is characteristic of agrarian, subsistence economies emphasising values of connectedness while the model of independence is characteristic of urban affluent contexts emphasising values related to autonomy. The third model which Kagitcibasi calls the emotional interdependence model partly overlaps the two prototypical models, and are characteristic of areas undergoing societal transformations with increased urbanisation and industrialisation. Socioeconomic changes are mirrored in family values, such as emotional and material investment routes within the family. In the model of interdependence, material and emotional wealth is characteristically directed towards parents in old age. In the model of independence, investments are directed towards grown-up children. The emotional interdependence model points to the impact of societal change on the flow of material and emotional wealth. While material wealth is invested in grown-up children rather than parents in old age, emotional investments go both ways; parents and children.

It is particularly interesting to look at men and masculinities in contexts where the directions of wealth flows are undergoing generational changes. Historically, contexts mirroring the family model of emotional interdependence were predominantly patriarchal (Kagitcibasi, 2007). Men’s social status and identities were often bound up to dominant, superior roles, such as being responsible for material sustainment. Typically, men’s role in the family was not associated with providing care in an emotional sense (Silberschmidt, 2001; 2006). During Apartheid South Africa, in both white and black families, “men made decisions, earned the money, and held power” (Morrell, 2001, p. 18). South Africa’s transformation into democracy is followed by gender awareness and a change of women’s rights and status. With dual-earner families follow changes in domestic responsibilities, and changes in men’s identities and responsibilities as husbands and fathers.

Changing South African Masculinities

During Apartheid, race and class were manipulated by the state in a manner that deeply affected gender identity (Morrell, 2001). According to du Pisani (2001) “Afrikaner (white) masculinity” silenced and marginalized “Black masculinity” through social and political power in a way that emasculated black men. Commonly they were called “boys” and were generally treated as subordinates and denied respect (Morrell,
Being a white man by contrast, meant being employed and financially secured (Swart, 2001). In the era of the democratic South Africa (1994) and constitutional equal rights for people across race and gender, new and diversified masculine identities have emerged (Walker, 2005). Du Pisani (2001) argues that there is no unified Afrikaner- or Black response to the shaping of masculine identities post Apartheid, and that white men do not represent hegemonic masculinity anymore. This is embraced by some white men, and rejected by others (Swart). Similarly, there is no clear response to the changes among Black South African men. A great generational gap in expressions of masculinity is observed between urban young migrants and their rural, more traditionally oriented fathers’ views on manhood (Carton, 2001). According to Morrell (2005) the unusually long period of colonialism and Apartheid could impose responses not fitting into mainstream understanding of changing masculinities. Thus, South African masculinities do not only differ, they have also changed over time (Morrell, 1998), and class and race remain important factors (Morrell, 2005).

Absent South African Fathers

Changing masculinities make an impact on the family - as well as the individual level (Morrell, 2001). The bond between masculinities and fatherhood is generally close cross-culturally (e.g., Brandt & Kvande, 1998; Edley & Whetherell, 1999), but is particularly tightly knit in youth in poverty-settings (Connell, 1998; Morrell, 2007). Paradoxically, a countless number of men throughout the world do, for various reasons, not father their children (Zoja, 2001). The existing literature indicates that fatherhood in South Africa is commonly linked to absence (SADHS, 2005; South African National HIV Survey, 2005). The level of paternal absence exceeds the estimates elsewhere in sub-Sahara Africa (Posel & Devey, 2006). In the Limpopo Province sixty percent of adult men are absent from the household of their family for more than six months per year (Collinson, Tollman, Kahn, Clark, & Garenne, 2006). Seventy six percent of the children do not live with their father present on a regular basis (SADHS, 2005). Similarly, 50 percent of all children in the US live without their father at home during periods of their childhood (Bianchi 1990), and as much as 58 percent of African-American children live without their fathers (Seaton & Taylor, 2003). Among African-Americans, female-headed households have been more pervasive (Hannerz, 1969). Men with low income who tended not to describe a close relation to their father, saw the father-role mainly in terms of breadwinning (Fortse, Bartokowski, & Jackson, 2009).

In South Africa where economic provider role has traditionally been ascribed to fathers (Mturi, Xaba & Sekokotla, 2005) and the unemployment rate is approaching 29 percent (Stats, SA, 2008) absent fathers are often explained by labor migration (Mboya & Nesengani, 1999; Morrell, Posel, & Devey, 2003). In a U.S. setting, separation and divorce (Jones, Kramer, Armitage & Williams, 2003; Leite, & McKenry, 2006; Page & Bretherton, 2003; Risch, Jodl, & Eccles, 2004) and single-motherhood (King & Sobolewski, 2006; Roy & Burton, 2007) are more salient explanations in the literature. However, families in transition and single mothers (Khunou, 2006; Richter, & Smith, 2006) also form part of the South African absent father picture. Paternal or-
phanhood both in black U.S. men and black South African men has been ascribed to the fact that black men live in violent neighborhoods, where the death rates are high (Ngobeni, 2006). Father absence could be explained by imprisonment as well. One of four black U.S. men end up in jail. This is also a problem among black South African men (Morrell, 2001).

It is widely documented that fathers contribute in a unique way to the well-being of their children (King & Sobolewski, 2006; Videon, 2008). Accordingly, father’s absence may have important ramifications for the child’s development. In South Africa, father absence has been associated with less social security and even a “lack of dignity” for the household (Mturi et al., 2005, p. 56). Major decisions, for instance regarding children’s education, may be delayed until the return of the father (Mturi et al., 2005). Similar to the paternal-orphan situations in the U.S. (McLanahan, 1999), it is also indicated that children with absent fathers have poorer school-performance than other children (Mboya & Nesengani, 1999; Timaeus & Boler, 2007). According to the international discourse on “new fatherhood” (Lewis & O’Brien, 1987), absent fathers are expected to impact on the daily emotional care and nurture of the child.

Given the subjective nature of both giving and receiving emotional care, it is interesting to learn about the experiences of family members of different generations and particularly to learn more about the dynamics between generations of males in absent father households. The academic attention paid to fathers has primarily been in the context of two-parent families (Golberg, Tan, & Thorsen, 2009). Although the VOC studies and the theory of family change acknowledge the importance of men in passing on family values, the studies have focused almost exclusively on women. Similarly, the stories of South African men in family life have often been told by women (Montgomery et al., 2006). The literature on the upcoming generation of men is especially sparse, yet Anderson, Kaplan, Lam, and Lancaster’s study (1999) brings to light the experiences of being fathered by biological- versus stepfathers in Cape Town. Morrell (2006) documents father aspirations of school-boys of different SES in Durban. To our knowledge there are no socio-psychological studies linking the experiences and expectations of fatherhood in South African boys. With few exceptions (Sam, Peltzer, & Mayer, 2005; Spjeldnaes, Sam, Moland, & Peltzer, 2007), the VOC studies have not been extended to the African context.

This paper seeks to understand fatherhood from two points of departure; 1) teenage boys’ experiences of interacting with men and fathers about the transition to manhood, and 2) teenage boys’ expectations to their own role as fathers in the future. The study used semi-structured interviews in contrast to the structured questionnaires used in the VOC studies, to explore the above issues among school-boys living in a semi-urban poor area in the Limpopo Province. As Connell (1998) has pointed out, fatherhood represents a lens through which we can learn more about youth masculine identity formation. The perspective of the teenage boys on fatherhood is particularly interesting because their identities as men are being shaped in a situation of father absence, and women-centred households and social networks.
**Method**

*Study Site and Sample*

Limpopo is a rural, low-resourced province in South Africa. The provincial capital, Polokwane, is situated 41 kilometres east of our study site, Mankweng, which is a semi-urban centre that belongs to the Capricorn district. Out of the 1.1 million inhabitants in the district 96.4 percent are black, and the great majority belongs to the Northern Sotho ethnic group. Among the Northern Sotho, kinship has traditionally been counted in the male line (patrilineal) (Kuper, 1975), but today this may be changing and households are commonly matrifocal. The population is young since the largest age groups are younger than 19 years old (Stats SA & HSRC, 2001). There are 63 secondary schools in the area, all of them public.

The study involved 13 South African teenage boys. Mid- and late adolescence was chosen as selection criterion in line with the belief that young men may have more developed ideas about future aspirations of family life at this point than during early adolescence. Male learners attending grade 10-12 in a secondary school constituted the study group. The participants were between 15 and 19 years old and represented a relatively homogenous group in that all except one belonged to the Northern Sotho -cultural group, associating themselves with lower SES, and were Christians, yet affiliated to different denominations.

*Procedure*

Access to a secondary school was made possible through the South Africa- Tanzania project SATZ. SATZ-researchers selected the school for this study in accordance with the criterion of being an “average school” serving both boys and girls. The recruitment of learners at the school was done purposively, carried out under assistance of a social worker and teacher. Learners attending parallel grades who did not know one another well were recruited in accordance with recommendations from focus group research (Asbury, 1995). This is supposed to make it easier to “open up” in the group and reduces the fear of gossip.

The data collection was done over a two-year period (2005-2007) using a sequential triangulation of qualitative methods, which included focus group discussions (FGD), photo- and diary-assisted semi-structured interviews, and participant observation.

In 2005, three FGD’s with five to twelve participants were conducted as preparatory tools for the individual interviews. The study participants were asked to write diaries.

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2 One of the boys was not a Northern Sotho, but spoke SePedi and lived in the neighborhood of the other participants. His views on fatherhood did not differ considerably from the other participants’ views.

3 SATZ aims to develop interventions effective in reducing spread of HIV by changing sexual behaviours among adolescents in secondary schools.

4 Average schools refer to “medium-leveled schools” when it comes to books, classrooms et cetera.
about their everyday life for three weeks and to shoot photos of people, things and places that they cared about. This material was used as a basis for the interviews that followed. In order to deepen and clarify the material, additional data was collected from the same individuals in 2007. The 2007-methods followed the 2005- methods to a large extent although the diaries were written over a period of six months.

A total of five FGD’s, 10 diaries and 30 interviews with 13 teenage boys were collected. Both the FGD’s and interviews employed semi-structured topic guides. The topics covered attitudes towards having children, reproductive health, relationships with parents, and other significant adults. They generated different but complementary data, as the FGD guide asked about perceptions and norms in their community, the interview guide asked about personal experiences and expectations. FGD’s were facilitated in the mother-tongue of the study participants, SePedi, while the individual interviews and the diaries were optional of English and SePedi or a mix of the two languages. Two males and two females of Northern Sotho origin assisted the first author during the data collection.

Informed consent to participate and to be tape recorded was secured from all participants. A small amount of money was given as a surprise gift after completing the fieldwork. The participants’ anonymity was carefully protected in the study. The project was approved by the ethics committee of the University of Limpopo and by the Limpopo Provincial Department of Health and Social Development.

Data Analysis

With its aim of capturing and representing the lived experiences of the study participants, the study drew upon phenomenology. Phenomenology allows for the inclusion of experiences of phenomena that may be absent (Sokolowski, 2000). Understanding of fatherhood was studied in a context where absence of fathers is common. The study explored teenage boys’ perceptions on fatherhood in depth and was aiming for descriptions of the experience as given by the subjects. The bracketing of our foreknowledge was an important concern.

Immediate impressions arising after each FGD and interview were noted, and discussed with research assistants in accordance with Kvale’s (1996) and Robson’s (1993) recommendation. The English data was transcribed verbatim, while the SePedi data was translated into English during the process of transcription. The transcripts went through a systematic text analysis inspired by Giorgi’s five-step phenomenological method (1985). The software package NVivo assisted the data analysis.

RESULTS

After a brief introduction of the households in which the boys lived, this section will first describe the boys’ experiences of interactions with fathers and men about the path to manhood, and then explore their evaluations of men’s family-life behaviours. The final part explores the boys’ expectations about their role as future fathers. Men and male sources of knowledge here refer to fathers, uncles, grandfathers, male teachers,
stepfathers, men in their church communities and other men in their immediate surroundings.

Experiences of Interaction

Growing up in women-centred households. All of the participants shared dwellings with mother and siblings during childhood. It was also common to live with maternal grandparents, aunts and cousins. Most of the boys did not know about their fathers during childhood, and none lived with a father permanently. Some of the participants had labor-migrant fathers who returned home from two to six times a year, and a few talked about stepfathers, who visited during weekends. The mother and siblings remained the stable core of persons in the household. Yet, some of the boys experienced mothers leaving the household for work, and during the week days they were left in the care of other female relatives or were left on their own. Men in the family worked far away, and a few of the fathers had died before their sons had entered the teens. While some experienced having more contact with the father than before adolescence, others had no contact at all or did not know their fathers’ identity. A few had contact with a maternal uncle.

Not an open somebody. Since none of the boys lived with their father or other adult men on a permanent basis, fathers and father-figures were not the first persons mentioned when they were asked to describe daily life. However, probes revealed ways men of different generations communicated with each other and the kind of interaction that took place. The boys who had some contact with their fathers told about face-to-face- and long-distance phone-call- conversations, and shared activities during their fathers’ rare visits to Mankweng. Boys who had no contact with their father gave glimpses into episodes with other men they knew, and all of them talked about men they observed from a distance in their neighborhood.

Describing their interactions with fathers and men, the boys pointed out topics that were not acceptable and topics that were acceptable for discussion. Not acceptable topics were personal issues related to becoming a grown-up man, such as intimate relationship, sexuality, reproductive health, HIV/AIDS and drug abuse. These were sometimes referred to as “life in general.” The acceptable topics included school and sports, as Matome explained: “When I am together with my father we talk about school-stuff, we talk about sports. We usually don’t talk about life in general.”

“Life in general” was carefully avoided in father-son interaction. Nevertheless, they commonly expressed that it was exactly these issues that they missed guidance on and wanted to discuss with an adult man and preferably with their own father. It was also these topics that 19 year-old Tambo who grew up with a labour-migrant father referred to when he stated, laughingly: “From my father I learn nothing.” Other male relatives than fathers, such as young maternal uncles who some of the boys had sporadic contact with, were sometimes seen as easier to discuss “life in general” with. One of the boys remembered talking about girlfriend issues with his 24-year-old uncle who had raised issues both related to risk and to emotions:
We talk about many things—about girls and just everything! He is the one who is telling me that I have to stick to one woman if I want to be safe. Being with many girls is sometimes dangerous, because you are playing with people’s emotions.

Yet, the experiences of not being guided in “life in general”-topics were commonly shared. To some of the boys the silence was not limited to the unacceptable conversation topics, but seemed to be a basic trait in the relationship to their fathers. Matome could recall many situations of sitting in the living-room next to his father who did not talk to him: “Usually we just sit together and I keep quiet. If you don’t say anything he won’t talk at all.”

Some boys said they felt “uncomfortable,” “terrible,” or “afraid” when their fathers were around and none of the boys deemed fathers or other men their confidants. Benny recalled what he felt when his labour-migrant father returned to Mankweng: “I am just afraid of him, even to look at him straight.” The fear of fathers and men made some boys not dare to ask for advice, especially not about “life in general.” Like Tuma, who had experienced being ridiculed by his uncle when he was seeking adult advice (e.g. about girlfriends): “They tend to mock us. They will mock you man, they will mock you.” The risk of mockery caused young boys to shy off discussions with adult men on personal issues. Rather, the boys often hang around in the streets at night observing men in the local bars. The FGD’s were sometimes filled with stories of what they had seen in their neighborhoods:

Facilitator: From whom do you learn about being an adult?
Dennis: From men outside, I see a lot of men. How they act- they drink beer, they come home late and that is not a good thing. I see most men at taverns. Aih, they drink a lot there.

All but one of the youths perceived their fathers as “quiet” and not “open and talkative.” Matome, who had the longest experience of living with his father, told:

My father is not talkative. He is always quiet. My father is not an open somebody. I wish I could maybe talk to him about many things, about life in general, about relationships, but he is not open. Let me say; he is not approachable.

With absent and silent fathers and with mothers not being seen as eligible conversation partners in this field, the boys remained with peers and TV as their main sources of information and guidance. As Rapula put it: “There’s no one besides my friend (who is 17 years old). I have not grown up with any men around.”

Not being man enough. Being man enough was in the eyes of the boys related to behaving responsibly and respectfully towards their family. A man who is acting in a responsible way takes care of his family by providing economically and emotionally, including when making a woman pregnant. The boys also meant that paying respect to their female partners and her children by not arguing loudly in the house was part of
being “man enough”. Men acting at odds with these expectations were regarded as “not being man enough”. Fathers who did not provide care and support to their children were seen as failing to fulfil their responsibility and their role as men was questioned.

Some of the boys, like Lesetja, worried about what kind of men they themselves will become:

I have a stepfather whom I haven’t seen for two years. Him not supporting his children just clicks to me—what type of a man is he? Am I going to be that type of a man?

According to the boys, men in their neighbourhood did not show responsibility toward their families. Thomas who was fatherless, and did not grow up with any male person around explained:

If you are man enough, like myself and if I impregnate a lady, I have to take the responsibility. To be man enough means that you can take full responsibility of your actions. Fathers here are not men enough to take that responsibility.

The boys’ evaluations of male behaviour both at home and in the streets were generally negatively tuned. In addition to the failure to take on the responsibility that was expected as a father, the boys were concerned about the lack of respect that some men demonstrated towards wives or partners. Lesetja’s story serves as an example:

He [my stepfather] once had an argument in front of me with my mom. I saw that he was not respecting me and truly not my mom. I mean if he wanted to argue with my mother, he should’ve gone somewhere private.

Only two of the boys mentioned their own father and one named a male teacher when they were asked directly about whom they respect the most in their life. Other boys ranked their mother, aunt and grandmother. Hence, when they were asked about role models only two of the boys mentioned an adult male person they knew personally, an uncle and a teacher.

In this context of men and fathers some of the boys expressed indifference, like Peter: “I don’t see a relationship, ok.” Others reacted with anger, which was expressed through non-verbal cues during interviews and stories in the diaries, but was most directly recognized through the use of degrading words like “hate,” “being a dog,” and “being a cheat” when talking about fathers or stepfathers:

My stepfather is a dog. He’s a dog because he has three beautiful children [that he does not take care of]. If he doesn’t care about me it’s okay. I do need his love but I don’t feel it. He never showed that to me. So, him not being a real man—I see that he’s a cheat because he doesn’t even support his own children. By that, my younger brothers and sisters will miss that father-figure. (Lesetja)
Expectations About Future Role as Father

Despite the fact that the boys described fathers and men as unapproachable (not an open somebody), and evaluated their behaviour in relation to their family as irresponsible and disrespectful (not man enough), the teenagers did dream of a different reality. The boys’ most recurring emotional reaction to these experiences was a longing for emotional closeness to a father or father-figure with whom they would share everyday life. As Peter in spite of his fear for his father simply stated; “I want him [father] to stay here with us.” There was a consensus in the FGD’s that they wished their father was living with them in Mankweng. Thomas, who was fatherless, explained in his diary why fathers’ presence in the household was very special: “It is too hard to live without a father in your life because you do not know whom to talk to as a guy. It is not easy to talk about relationships, actually sexual ones, with your mom.”

Aspirations on becoming fathers themselves were topics easily understood and elaborated on by all of the participants. Their aspirations for the future seemed tied up with getting a family with three or four children, however, ideally not until their education or career was settled around their mid-20s. When discussing what kind of fathers they wanted to become, the boys emphasised three functions that they thought were basic responsibilities in fathering; to guide, to provide economically and to care emotionally.

It was a clear tendency to consider guidance as the most important of the three: “I will just guide my children because my father did not guide me” (Tambo). Guiding referred to teaching their children about adult life including paying respect and giving love to other people, especially elderly, as well as guiding them to take responsibility regarding school-work, drugs and alcohol and not the least sexuality and HIV/AIDS. As pointed out by Matome:

If you don’t talk to your children and something happens, they will blame you: “Dad, why didn’t you tell us that we can get AIDS, why didn’t you teach us about condoms, warn us about AIDS?” I have to sit down with them and say; “Guys, there is something that is called AIDS. You have to take care of yourselves.”

Providing economically was seen as an important part of fathering, yet a responsibility that could be shared with a future wife. The boys related the provider role to be able to cover the expenses for medical care and school-fees. Poor access to resources in their own childhood clearly stimulated this concern, as expressed by Thomas:

I want to give my children everything! You see, when I was growing up, I didn’t have that access to “everything,” because my mother is not working. I don’t want my children to live the life that I lived when I was young. I want them to have a nice life.

Finally the teenagers expressed a wish to be emotionally close to their children. They wished to live in the household with wife and children on a permanent basis and to be a caring father:
Being a father means that you have to love, care and adore what you have. [I want to become] a father who wants to know more about what the children are up to—a father who advise children, who would follow-up on what the children are doing at school. A father that would support his children in each and everything they do. A father who would care. I just have to be a loving father. (Lesetja)

**DISCUSSION**

This study aimed at exploring semi-urban South African school-boys of Northern Sotho ethnicity and their understanding of fatherhood from a socio-psychological perspective. The study participants commonly described men and fathers as “not an open somebody” when it comes to “son-father” interaction. There simply did not seem to be any adult man, neither in nor outside the family, that could take on a guiding and supporting role for the boys in the transition to manhood. Guidance about “life in general” was certainly longed for, and deemed the most important responsibility of fathering. Furthermore, the school-boys interpreted men and fathers as “not being men enough” since they did not act responsibly in providing their families with emotional and economic support. In the future, the teenagers wished to play out what they saw as responsible in a different manner, namely by guiding them into adulthood and providing for them both in an emotional and economic sense.

In the following the boys’ understanding of responsible fatherhood will be discussed in view of the identified discrepancy between their experiences and expectations. Finally, the opportunities for the study participants’ to play out the aspired father-role will be discussed. Kagitcibasi’s (2007) argument that socioeconomic development is a main underlying dimension for variability in family values will shed light on these issues. Considering South Africa being a country undergoing socioeconomic transition, we will in particular consider the family interaction model of emotional interdependence.

**Responsible Fatherhood in Mankweng**

In present day Mankweng, fatherhood is the most visible route for young boys to be respected as adults. The boys in this study certainly shaped masculine identities and self-development around becoming fathers in the future. This is in accordance with Morrell’s (2007) argument that the concept of responsible fatherhood is brought to mind at an early age for people growing up in economically disadvantaged areas. Boys growing up in more economically privileged societies with better educational and vocational prospects than in the Limpopo Province in South Africa (Stats SA, 2008; World Bank, 2008), tend to want to postpone fatherhood and family life until late 20s or early 30s (Lampic, Skog Svanberg, Karlstrom & Tyden, 2006). For the boys in this study responsibility seemed to be located at the core of the prevailing idea about fatherhood. Therefore, this section will discuss what responsible fatherhood means in contemporary Mankweng.

Several dimensions are found to characterise responsible fatherhood: Providing economically (Roy, 2008; Silberschmidt, 2001), disciplining and protecting (Mturi et al.,
mirror the way traditional father roles were constructed. Moreover, in the era of “new fatherhood” the importance of caring emotionally is underlined (Ramphele, 2002; Roy, 2008). In this study some of these dimensions were recognised (providing economically and caring emotionally), and one new dimension was added (guiding).

Guiding youth into adulthood is a dimension of responsible fatherhood that to our knowledge has not been underlined to the same degree in other South African fatherhood-studies. Teaching the young generation about adulthood has neither been emphasised as a sort of wealth flow in Kagitcibasi’s theory (2007). The boys in Mankweng put forward that giving advice about “life in general” is the most important responsibility in fathering sons. The gap of male mentors for the school-boys could be related to the disappearing Northern Sotho rituals marking the entrance to manhood for young boys. During participant observation, key informants described how appointed elderly men used to be responsible for teaching boys topics reflected in “life in general”. Nothing has replaced this institution in the Limpopo Province. So, perhaps fathers and other men do not see “life in general”-discussions as their responsibility. Clearly, the lack of male mentors should receive more attention in reproductive health programmes in general and HIV/AIDS educational programmes in particular (e.g., Aarø et al., 2005).

Providing economically forms part of what it means to be “man enough” for the boys in this study. Some of the boys partly experienced economic support from labour-migrant fathers, and they also intended to support their own children materially in the future. So, providing represents a stable dimension of responsible fatherhood in Mankweng as in other South African areas (e.g., Moodie, 1984; Rabe, 2006). Moreover, to the school-boys, it seemed important that providing economically should not take precedence over fathers being physically present at home. This is in contrast to findings in a study among Black South African students (Bozalek, 1999), which underscored that even if fathers rarely see their children they are considered “good fathers” because they aim to ensure the survival of their families. Nonetheless, this study coincides with Bozalek’s study when it comes to the reciprocity of material wealth flows between generations. Some of the boys express a concern about providing for their mothers in old age, which is a direction of material goods that is described as “traditional” and fits into Kagitcibasi’s family interaction model of interdependence (2007). At the same time the boys in Mankweng go behind the societal changes of “dual-earner households” in acknowledging mothers as providers, and they also wish to share this type of responsibility with future wives. This pattern of mutual economic investments between grown-up children and their parents do not immediately mirror the economic wealth flow direction in the model of emotional interdependence.

Providing emotionally also forms part of how the school-boys see “man enough,” and as such, the discourse on “new fatherhood” (Lewis & O’Brien, 1987; Smit, 2006) seemed integrated in the study participants. Other research on Black South African youth (Roy, 2008; Ramphele, 2002) similarly recognises attitudes related to “new fatherhood.” Furthermore, Richter and Smith (2006) found attitudes of being emotionally caring fathers in middle-class, white South African men. However, the attitudes of the Mankweng boys stand in sharp contrast to their perceptions of fathers as men who were generally absent and who did not put any emotional investments in their children.
Given the boys’ expressed fear and avoidance of their fathers, the boys themselves did not seem to invest substantially in their fathers either. So, the mutual emotional investments between grown-up children and parents suggested in the model of emotional interdependence (Kagitcibasi, 2007) do not reflect the pattern of limited interaction between generations of men in this low-income South African context. Nevertheless, this study demonstrates a strong desire in future fathers to reverse the situation.

Mturi and colleagues (2005) found that disciplining and protecting are traditionally viewed as important father-roles in the Limpopo Province, as it is by Afro-American fathers in the U.S. (Shears et al., 2006). Disciplining children is seen as a male or father’s responsibility since the father is expected to make the rules of the household. Furthermore, Mturi and colleagues (2005) found that protecting children means having a father present in the household to avoid robbery or abuse by intruders. Discipline and protections are qualities in fatherhood that are not easily played out by absent fathers.

Developing Ideas About Responsible Fatherhood

To the Mankweng boys, responsible fatherhood embraces both so-called “traditional” and “new fatherhood” qualities. Since it is merely the traditional provider role that comes from personal experience, we will discuss how the absence of fathers may have informed their understanding of the “new fatherhood” qualities.

Regardless of whether the absent father situation is due to labour-migration, desertion or divorce, our participants had a strong inner longing for a father-figure to be present emotionally and to guide them into manhood. Moreover, the boys in this study do not express a need to be disciplined and protected. This could reflect teenagers’ desire to be autonomous, or it could be an expression of changing gender roles where mothers or female relatives have taken on such responsibilities.

External, societal influences may also have shaped the boys’ ideas about fathers who should show emotional care and spend time on guiding children. Semi-urban communities like Mankweng, with increasing access to media, may be exposed to ideas about the nuclear family and the discourse on “new fatherhood”. Moreover, a strong children’s rights discourse emerging from the late 1990s, where claims concerning schooling and protection were put forward, may have instilled a greater alertness in youth about the social and emotional needs in child-upbringing. Also, the South African literature on contemporary families and fatherhood (Morrell, 2001), discusses changes in masculine identities post-Apartheid. The study participants were born during the years of liberation and may idealise future family life in ways traditionally not expected by boys of low SES.

Obstacles to “Responsible Fatherhood”

The intensions to postpone fatherhood and marriage until an education and a career are settled indicate that the study participants have reflected on how to become responsible fathers.
Undoubtedly, there is a gap between how the future fathers envisage “responsible fatherhood” in the future and the opportunities in present day Mankweng to play out the aspired father-role. According to Hochfeld’s discourse analysis (2007) fatherhood is in the National Family Policy of 2007 presented in a conservative way. The nuclear family is presented with a traditional labour division between mothers and fathers. Hochfeld concludes that fathers are “almost exclusively referred to as a source of harm or in the peripheral role of economic provider” (2007, p. 89). Furthermore, the biological father does not automatically get custody over his child if he is not married to the child’s mother. The “Natural fathers of children born out of wedlock Act” No. 86 (Republic of South Africa, 1997) and the amendment of the “Child Care Act” of 1983 (Republic of South Africa, 1996) are based on the “Best of the child’s principle,” and indicate that unmarried fathers must legalise his custody through court. So, the legal position of fathers is rather weak. In the context of expected bride wealth, unstable marriages and an increasing population of single or divorced mothers, the legal system represents an important obstacle for the development of father-son relationship. A study by Richter (2004) indicated that only 20% of the fathers who have children “out of wedlock” had contact with their children at the time the child reached age eleven.

Future Research

This study has documented a gap between boys’ experiences and expectations of the father role, which may be followed by another; a gap between the boys’ idealisation of fathering and their opportunities in Mankweng to become “man enough.” There is also a gap between Kagitcibasi’s model of emotional interdependence (2007) and the interaction patterns seen in this study, which calls for more studies to uncover lived experiences in family-life.

The child rights’ discourse was seen as a contributor to the school-boys’ views on fatherhood, therefore future research should target how school drop-outs envisage fatherhood.

Furthermore, the perspectives of adult men in relation to sons, nephews or other teenage boys should be attended to. Taken into account that some of the boys raised “life in general” topics with uncles, the uncle role deserves more attention. Growing up in women-centred households, like the boys in this study do, clearly indicate that the role of mothers and other female relatives should be studied in relation to boys’ development of masculine identities.

References


The three women were among the latest victims in a surge of violence against women in South Africa which the country’s president has described as a “pandemic. Tshegofatso Pule was heavily pregnant when her mutilated body was found hanging from a tree. “As a man, as a husband, and as a father, I am appalled at what is no less than a war being waged against the women and the children of our country,” said President Cyril Ramaphosa in a nationwide television address Wednesday. Fatimata Moutloatse, founder of the Black Womxn Caucus said South Africa had been battling with issues of gender violence, inequality, and unemployment, and the pandemic could push the nation to the brink. “We have a crisis, and the lockdown restrictions are amplifying it,” Moutloatse said. Noah was born in Johannesburg, South Africa in 1984. With a Black mother and white Swiss father, he was, as he wrote in his bestselling 2016 autobiography, born a crime. Under apartheid laws, which officially governed South Africa between 1948 and 1994, race was the country’s defining cultural and legal factor. Even out in public, Noah’s experience was predicated on deception. When they walked around Soweto, his mother, Patricia, would often pretend to be a stranger, or at least someone other than his mother. As he told Parade, this was generally the only way for them to walk outside together without the authorities bothering his mother and arresting her for having a biracial child. Youth in South Africa constituted 37% of the population in 2010, numbering 19.1 million individuals. South Africa’s National Youth Commission Act, 1996, defines youth as those from ages 14–35 years. Like many other developing countries, South Africa’s population as a whole is quite young. The elevated level of youth population is expected to exist for the next 20–30 years; the large proportion of working-age population presents South Africa with a time period of opportunity for human capital and "Being Man Enough": Fatherhood Experiences and Expectations among Teenage Boys in South Africa. Ingrid O. Spjeldnaes, K. M. Moland, J. Harris, D. Sam. Psychology. 2011. Through a socio-psychological lens, this study aimed at exploring how South African school-boys of low socio-economic status experienced interacting with men and fathers about the transition to...