

Silence in Young Womens' Narratives of Absent and Unknown Fathers from Mpumalanga Province, South Africa

Mzikazi Nduna · Yandisa Sikweyiya

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Abstract Research suggests that South African youth use silence as a sign of respect and gratitude and to maintain family and kinship bonds. There has not been much research to help us better our understanding of this phenomenon. This paper explores the strategic use of silence in narratives of absent fathers collected from the Mpumalanga province. Twenty-one-hour, one-on-one, field-worker-respondent, semi structured interviews in their local languages, were conducted with women aged 15–26 years old. Interviews were gender-matched, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and translated into English. Thematic, and some elements of discourse analysis, were used to analyse the data focusing on motivations behind silence in familial relationships. Findings show that motivations for upholding silence within the home were to show respect and gratitude, and avoid upsetting a bothersome mother. The dynamics of silence reported here are similar to those found in narratives of psychological distress and abuse among young South Africans. A novel theme was that of avoiding speaking with a chronically ill mother lest this made her condition worse and recovery difficult. This research suggests a need to equip young women with ways of expressing themselves within families without fear of being seen as disrespectful, ungrateful and a burden to others.

Keywords Absent father · Psychological distress · Silence · Young women · South Africa

Introduction

There are different family formations commonly observed in South Africa such as nuclear, single parent, extended families, child-headed and intergenerational families (National Department of Social Development 2011). This paper is concerned with the experiences of children who grow up without living with their biological fathers. These children experience father absence in different ways, influenced by their contexts and reasons for absence (Morrell and Richter 2006). The term father in this paper always refers to a biological father unless otherwise specified. South African research suggests that to be a father in the Black African society is not exclusive to biological fathers as extended male family members, such as uncles, also fulfill this role (Clowes et al. 2013; Morrell 2006). Regardless of the presence of a social father there is evidence that children who grew up without biological fathers report experiences of frustration and anger, and they also avoid questioning his absence (Clowes et al. 2013; Langa 2010; Nduna and Jewkes 2011b; Phaswana 2003; Swartz 2009). The term Black, is used in this article to refer to a population group whose descent is African but excludes Indians and Coloureds unless otherwise stated (Statistics South Africa: Census 2001 2004).

There has not been much research in South Africa to help us better our understanding of the communication dynamics within families where children grow up with an absent or unknown father. Research on psychological distress shows that talking about adverse experiences and related negative emotions within families is difficult for

M. Nduna (✉)
Department of Psychology, University of the Witwatersrand,
WITS, Private Bag X 3, Johannesburg 2050, South Africa
e-mail: mzikazi.nduna@wits.ac.za

Y. Sikweyiya
Gender and Health Research Unit, Medical Research Council,
Pretoria, South Africa
e-mail: Yandisa.sikweyiya@mrc.ac.za

some adolescents and young people (Meduric and Nel 2011; Nduna and Jewkes 2011a). South African research on communication within families demonstrates that young people seem to use silence strategically to avoid confronting distressing situations, to contain a potentially explosive or hurtful situation, to show gratitude for accrued benefits often constructed as parents' or guardians' generosity, or to protect mothers from distress and to conform to standards of respect as set by the society in order to demonstrate deference and maintain peace among kinship (George and van den Berg 2011; Nduna and Jewkes 2011a). Both affected children and mothers admit difficulty in discussing the matter of absent fathers, regardless of whether they are known or unknown to them (Langa 2010; Manyatshe 2013; Nduna and Jewkes 2011b). Obedience in age and gender hierarchical interpersonal relations is deeply rooted in the culture of Black peoples of South Africa as children grow up knowing, and often comply with, the obligation not to question elders; young women are expected to obey men without questioning (Datta 2007; Hall 1904; Lelkes et al. 2012; Nduna and Jama 2001; Sikweyiya and Jewkes 2009; Wood 2003; Wood et al. 1998). This respect shown by children is abused by some people in various ways (Mathews et al. 2012; Meduric and Nel 2011; Nduna accepted; Polela 2011; Sikweyiya and Jewkes 2009).

Father absence is identified in the South African Policy guidelines for Youth and Adolescent Health (page 24) and in studies of psychological distress as a contributing factor to youth's mental ill health and suicide (Holborn 2011; Langa 2010; Madhavan et al. 2008; National Department of Health 2003; Nduna 2010; Nduna and Jewkes 2011b, 2012b; Nduna et al. 2011, 2013). This is supported by research evidence that shows that unexpressed negative emotions are linked to subjective descriptions of psychological distress, depression and suicide. More empirical research is needed to unpack silence within families. Data from such studies could inform interventions that may aid in curbing related mental health problems (George and van den Berg 2011; Nduna and Jewkes 2011a).

Research Problem

Research on father absence has, until recently, been neglected in knowledge production (Clowes et al. 2013; Holborn 2011; Madhavan et al. 2008; Nduna and Jewkes 2011b; Nduna et al. 2011; Phaswana 2003; Townsend et al. 2005, August). Empirical research is needed to adequately understand and appropriately address communication dynamics within families affected by father absence. This article explores silence in narratives of absent and undisclosed fathers in young women from the Gert Sibande District in the Mpumalanga province.

Method

Participants

Study participants were a mix of high school learners, students at a Further Education Institution, employed and unemployed youth. An information pamphlet detailing the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, risks and benefits and inviting young women who had absent fathers to participate in the study, in simple English, was widely distributed in the study community. The study pamphlet also had the contact numbers of the fieldworker. Recruitment of participants for the study was carried out by a trained Black female fieldworker, aged 23, with an Honours degree in Psychology. The fieldworker was trained in ethics, data gathering, recruitment strategies, vicarious trauma and interviewing. Most of the participants in this study contacted the fieldworker themselves and volunteered to participate, however, others were recruited through a snowball sampling technique (Dahlgren et al. 2004). During the initial contact with the prospective participants, the fieldworker discussed the purpose of the study and what their participation would entail. These discussions were conducted in the preferred language of the prospective participants. The young women who demonstrated interest to participate and met the selection criteria were asked to give written consent to participate in the study.

Some participants mentioned the presence of the biological mother in their lives. However, most described living with different relatives (e.g. grandparents, aunts and uncles). In some interviews, participants said their mothers worked while others mentioned that their mothers were unemployed. Where mothers were unemployed, with no source of income, participants said they relied on the extended family and older siblings for financial support. Participants narrated various life challenges that they had experienced or were currently facing. Perhaps as an attempt to emphasise that they had difficult and unstable lives or had been raised in dysfunctional homes, some emphasised that they were maternal orphans and others said their mothers or guardians abused alcohol. The number of siblings in the participants' families (including the participant) ranged from two to seven. Ten of the participants had siblings with different fathers. With others it was not always clear, as the focus of the interview was not on the siblings but on the participant. All these are social problems reflective of families in Mpumalanga and were not in isolation (Makiwane et al. 2012).

Study Site

This study was conducted in a small town in the Gert Sibande District Municipality in the Mpumalanga Province of South Africa. A recent study focusing on families in

Mpumalanga showed that in 2009, 32.7 % of children aged 0–9 lived without a father being part of the household, and 34.4 % without both a father and a mother (Makiwane et al. 2012). Within this group of children should be a subset of children who do not know their fathers at all; however, this information is not reported. Apart from the fact that the Gert Sibande Municipality in Mpumalanga was chosen for the convenience of the location as a study site, research evidence such as the one presented by Makiwane et al. (2012) points to the need to investigate the phenomenon of father absence in the Mpumalanga Province. The current study was conducted with 20 young women aged between 15 and 26 whose biological fathers were absent in their lives and families. Participants resided in a township outside Secunda town in the Gert Sibande District Municipality.

Procedure

Data for this study were collected in November and December of 2011 over a 3 week period during the University term holidays. In-depth, one-on-one interviews were conducted in the participants' home language. During data collection the fieldworker was based in a nearby town and visited the township daily to conduct the interviews. To encourage free narratives and to guide the discussion, we chose an open interview style with a few exploratory and open-ended questions outlined in an interview schedule (Sands 2004). We believe this conversational approach during interviews made the participants feel comfortable to respond to the questions. Through probing and based on each participant's story, we explored various issues including whether the participant had ever asked or, and whether others in the family spoke about her absent father. The Timeline technique (Berends 2011), was used to aid with probing and assisted the respondents with recalling particular events and experiences. The SAD Persons Scale (Patterson et al. 1983) was used selectively at the end of the interview with participants who displayed a strong negative reaction or distress to the interview. This scale was used as a basis for recommending a referral to local social workers for counselling. Trained lay counsellors at the South African Depression and Anxiety Group currently employ this scale to assess people's distress levels as part of a first aid intervention.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics approval for this study was granted by the University of the Witwatersrand's ethics Committee for Research with Human Subjects. All participants in this study signed a consent form and agreed for interviews to be audio-recorded. Participants were given R50.00 (US \$5.7, in

2011) as a reimbursement for costs incurred in partaking in the research. While monetary incentives may motivate volunteers to participate in research (Jewkes et al. 2012), we do not think this small amount had unduly induced volunteers to participate in this study (Emanuel 2004; Grady 2001).

The study was presented to local stakeholders including schools, non-governmental organisations, social workers, the clinic and young people before data collection started; adults in the community were also made aware of the study. This is in keeping with the ethical principle of respecting the communities of research participants and to conduct research in a manner which is culturally appropriate (Doumbo 2005),

Previous research on father absence with young people in South Africa suggests that distress is not uncommon, and that young people discuss their experiences in a research context with sadness and pain (Langa 2010; Nduna and Jewkes 2011b). To prevent potential emotional harm to participants, local social workers were consulted and prepared for possible referrals should participants demonstrate strong emotional reaction to study questions. However, to our knowledge, none of the participants took up the referral. Whilst we are not sure of the reasons for the low or no uptake of referrals, among the reasons could be that participants experience a relief of some tension and stress as a result of the interviews, and thus did not perceive the need for professional help immediately after discussing their experiences in the study (Jewkes et al. 2012; Nduna and Jewkes 2011a). All audio recordings of the interviews were deleted from the recorders and saved in a password protected file on the first author's computer. No one else, apart from the research team, had access to the data. Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Data Analysis

Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and translated into English by the fieldworker. To analyse the data, we employed a thematic analysis approach but also borrowed some aspects of discourse analysis. We read and re-read the transcripts independently in order to pick up the trend and explore the data. Then sentences were broken into smaller parts and in the process we identified several codes within the same sentences. Similar codes were grouped together to form middle-level categories. We then interrogated the categories for meaning and interpreted what we saw emerging from the data. These are presented as themes below.

A total of nine transcripts were excluded from this analysis either because the father was known, or the father was unknown but there was talk in the family about him, or he was a part of the participant's life even if he was

physically absent. To increase the credibility and trustworthiness of the study preliminary findings were presented and checked for correctness with thirty young people, some of whom had been interviewed as participants. At this workshop, young people generally related to the findings we presented and mentioned that the findings resonated with their life experiences. No new data was collected at this workshop.

Results

Our analysis showed that silence regarding communication about absent, unknown and undisclosed fathers was notable between participants and their mothers, relatives and or siblings. Presented here are the reasons for upholding silence which ranged between demonstrating respect to one's mother, showing gratitude and not wanting to trouble a bothersome and a sick mother.

Silence Between Participants and Their Mothers

In the narratives presented here, it is noted that some participants had some information about their fathers, some knew their fathers but did not stay with them, others did not know their fathers at all, others had lost their fathers through death and in one case the participant was made to believe that her stepfather was her biological father, until she discovered the truth at her real father's funeral. In some participant's homes the conversation about fathers was avoided. Zoleka, (19 years) who lived with her mother and two siblings and knew her absent father, narrated that her father abused alcohol and would get violent towards their mother when drunk. He subsequently left the house. Perhaps to demonstrate that the phenomenon of absent fathers was common in this setting, she further explained that, "...my sister's father passed away and my brother's father we don't know him...my mother does not like us to talk about our (absent) father..." Zoleka appeared disconcerted because not only was his absence not talked about at her home, but also that no one reflected on his violent behaviour. Zoleka's father was from a neighbouring country, and had family in other parts of South Africa. At the time of the interview she did not know where he was. Some of our participants, for instance Tsakane (16), grew up not knowing her father even though they resided in the same street. During the interview she said she learnt about her father at the age of 13 or 14. Tsakane lived in her maternal grandmother's house together with her biological mother. Yet, it seemed from her narrative that Tsakane was not fully accepted by her aunts and uncles as she was always embroiled in conflicts around her father's failure to honour *intlawulo* (payment for pregnancy damages). Tsakane

spoke about being born into the culture of silence as her mother strongly discouraged the mentioning of her father around the family. She explained, "...when I ask (my mother) about my father she does not want to know, she does not want to hear about him..." Although at the time of the interview Tsakane's mother had introduced her to her father, and she was able to visit his home, she sounded frustrated by her history of disconnection to him. Tsakane's mother did not have permanent employment and they depended on her grandmother's old age pension. After her grandmother's death the situation at home became worse for them. Tsakane reported to have endured physical and emotional abuse from her uncle. Later in the interview it transpired that Tsakane's mother had a similar experience with her own father; she did not know him until she was an adult. He died shortly after she had met him. Tsakane's mother maintained disconnection with her father whom she believed refused to pay *Intlawulo*. According to Tsakane, if her father would honour *Intlawulo* things might be better and at least, "...I will be free to speak about my father..." Tsakane expressed distress with her situation. She admitted that she wrote about it to get it off her chest so that it would not make her sick or cause her pain or stress.

Silence in families did not present homogeneously: there were certain things that were spoken about with family members other than the mother and with variability in tone. Thendo (19) did not know her father and had never asked her mother about him. In the interview Thendo was asked whether she had thought of a solution for the lack of communication with her mother, and she responded, "...no I have not thought of it because that is how we grow up, we just adapted to it, and accept it..." She explained that even though it bothered her not knowing her father she, "... just keep quiet and then move on ..." seemingly accepting this silence, albeit with a grudge. Although Thendo did not seem to be able to have this conversation with her mother she did ask her grandmother about her father. Just like Thendo, Khululekani (19) said they hardly spoke about her absent (late) father at home though they had conversations with her mother about other things. During the interview, she was asked how she felt having told her story and she said she was relieved because, "... I have never spoken about this, to my family before..." This was common in other interviews. Jennifer lived with her mother, 'father' and siblings. It was only at the funeral of her 'older brother' that she learned that the deceased was in fact her father and that the man she knew as her father was actually her step grandfather—her mother's (actually grandmother) husband. Jennifer described witnessing and experiencing domestic violence where her '(step) father' used to beat her mother and the children. She received some counselling from her priest after an attempted suicide and since then she, "...keeps quiet..." Mostly participants suggested that

it would be difficult to change because they were too old to start talking freely to their parents as they had not been raised in that way. Keeping quiet was seen as necessary when they could not do anything about their situation. In the member checking meeting, participants shared that their parents encouraged them to, ‘...forget about the past...’ so that they do not get depressed and lose weight—borrowing from the medical consequences of stress and worries. Thus silence was viewed as a strategy to help them forget.

Silence Between Participants, Relatives and Guardians

In the interviews, references were made to aunts, uncles, grandparents, siblings and guardians, though not all were blood relatives. Thandiwe (15) had lost both her parents when she was 11 months old, and she noted silence from her guardians about her father. In a contesting tone she said:

...at home they don't tell me about how he (father) died...what type of a person he was. They don't tell me about my father they just; they don't talk about him at all. Nobody talks about him...if I asked them they will take it in another way; so that's why I don't want to ask them because they don't want to tell us...

It seems that the participant believed that it was the responsibility of her guardians to talk to her. When asked if there was anyone else in her life that she felt comfortable to talk with, Thandiwe said the following about her older brother: “...no, my brother is not open, so it will not be easy to be open to him...he is also not that open and I can't be open to them (aunt) because they are not open. So when I have consequences I just deal with them alone...” Thandiwe and her brother were under the guardianship of their aunt at the time of the interview. Thandiwe's expectation that others should be open towards her and initiate the talk could be related to her position in the family. She was a younger sibling and therefore perceived that her older brother possessed some age and gender power to initiate and take responsibility for this conversation.

Some of the absent fathers were described as violent men. Thando (19) lived with her mother and siblings after her parents had separated. Though she knew her father she volunteered for the study because she felt that he was absent in their lives and there was little said about him in the family. She described a good relationship she had with her grandmother albeit, “...my grandmother, she doesn't talk, we just talk about things in general. She doesn't talk about my father and things like that. She doesn't want to get into details. Cause the time my mother lived with my father and every time they fought my mother would go and tell her ...” Silence in the participants' narratives was

found in two-ways: parents (or guardians) not talking to children but also children not asking. Participants were not necessarily told overtly not to ask or talk about their fathers, rather they seemed to have learned to hold back.

In one instance Portia's (15) father was absent but came back during the burial ceremony of her mother. Her father stayed on after the funeral, and found them a two-room backyard shack to rent and move into. A room (usually rented) is a structural sub-division of a dwelling with walls to the ceiling (or almost to the ceiling), at least large enough to hold a bed for an adult (Statistics South Africa: Census 2001 2004). As she tried to make sense of his long absence, Portia said she asked him where he had been, and why he did not support them, etc.... In what appeared to be a confrontation Portia said, “...he did not answer me...he just said that I am disrespectful, and we stayed together for two days and he left...” In this case the participant was silenced by her father's dismissal of her questions and his subsequent disappearance. These questions must have annoyed Portia's father and his response was in line with the cultural norm or teaching that children are not supposed to question adults about their behaviour. He subsequently disappeared and Portia felt responsible. Later in the interview, in what appeared to be a lesson learnt, Portia described how painful her living conditions were with her guardian who was not related to her. She said, “...I became a slave...” In return the woman (guardian) took care of her, fed her, clothed her and paid her school fees and Portia said, “...now I do not back chat...I do not complain...” about harsh treatment from a guardian she described as a ‘good woman’. She maintained that she did not want people to know about her abusive living conditions. Portia mentioned that, “...Now I don't want people to know about this, this is my secret even my sister does not know about this (maltreatment) ...” Her sister and brother stayed in different houses in the same township. She and her brother did not talk about their absent father because, as Portia posited, “...he doesn't talk too much...” Her brother's silence contributed to silencing Portia and she did not ask him for any help. We see here how silence was a transferable strategy that was even used to protect a person who was seen as abusive.

Another expression of silence among siblings was evident in Thato's interview. Thato (21) lived with her single mother and two siblings from different fathers. Thato and her younger sister did not talk much about their fathers because, “...she also is in pain...” because her father was not providing optimally for her. In Thato's narrative we learned that the family and their ailing mother, relied on her older brother for support. Thato cried a lot during the interview and said that she had no one to talk to about her worries because, “... (name of younger sister) is very young, and my mother is not the type of person you would

want to talk to...I don't understand her (mom), the time that you talk your problems to her, she will go and tell somebody else, you see...my brother, he is just a brother, he is not a type of person that I would talk to him about serious things..." Thato said she last saw her father when she was about to start school. Even though Thato's sister knew about some of the things that were bothering her, for instance that she was raped by her grandmother's boyfriend, or her worry about their sick mother, she said, "...I just keep quiet, ok I tell [sister] but not all the time, sometimes I can't speak about it I just ignore..." Thato's description did not suggest a complete silence on this issue as there was a time when the family spoke; instigated by watching *Khumbul'ekhaya*, a reality show on national television, which connects families with missing relatives. Thobile (16) was a paternal orphan and she moved residence between her mother and her maternal aunt's house. She, her siblings and her two cousins all had different fathers. When asked by the interviewer if they talked about their absent fathers she said, "...We do talk but not about fathers..." It seemed that the responsibility to talk about absent and unknown fathers was perceived mainly as the mother or the guardian's as this was constructed as a family issue.

Motivations for Silence

In this section we explore in-depth the reasons why participants would not ask their mothers and guardians to share information about their unknown and absent fathers. Participants emphasised reasons such as fearing their parents, thinking that mothers will respond with anger, that the step-father does not want a conversation about this at home, fear that mothers (and grandmothers) will accuse them of talking to the community about their secrets and worries that insisting on this conversation may rekindle or invoke their mothers' painful and emotional memories. Participants suggested that sometimes the mother herself had not dealt with his absence and it will be inappropriate for them to raise this and bother her. When we explored the role social workers could play in helping young people to deal with the challenges brought about by having absent or unknown fathers, participants suggested that speaking to social workers would also be viewed by their parents as inappropriate as this was a family secret. This option was therefore not desirable. The main themes presented here are respect, gratitude and feeling responsible.

Silence as a Sign of Respect, Gratitude and to Protect the Mother Who is Distressed

The narratives of the participants stressed the importance of respecting parents and not raising issues that may be

interpreted as disrespectful. This respect bordered on fearing parents. Thando (19) described her interaction at home as, "... not an open relationship, we don't talk that much, it's about obeying your parents and not saying anything..." Similarly, Nokwazi (18) felt that she had to respect the fact that her grandmother did not want to talk about the issue of her absent father. It is understood that the other reason for the silence around unknown fathers was that this topic broached the subject of a mother's sexual life and this could border on disrespect. For instance, Agnes (24) said that as she grew older she found some courage to talk about her absent father but worried that, "...people will judge my mom saying that she love men (meaning promiscuous), how can she make children with different men, but then I tell them that if they don't get along and there is no love anymore what must she do? That is just how life is..." Agnes only knew her father by name and from photographs that her mother kept of him but she had never met him. From what her mother told her, her father denied responsibility for impregnating her and subsequently moved without a trace.

The findings suggest that participants were not silent out of their own volition but that some were silenced within their families. From our data there was a sense that when a mother or guardian was working very hard and had assumed a dual role of being a mother and a father, they should be thanked and not bothered. For example, Neo (21) had an absent but known father, but did not know where he lived and had never met his family. All she knew was that he was from Limpopo province and lived in Johannesburg. Neo expressed that she missed him but felt that, "...if I cry my mother will feel what she is doing is not enough and I really really appreciate what she is doing for us..." It seemed that participants felt that asking about their father's whereabouts could be seen as suggesting that they need him and that they would have to justify why they needed him when the mother/guardian played the role of the father as well, at least to some extent and in as far as material provisions were concerned.

In some instances it would seem that silence was used by participants as a mechanism to protect mothers from bothersome thoughts. For instance Thato (21) did not know her father, who left them when she was very young, but she felt she could not discuss this issue comfortably with her mother because, "...I think that since she is sick and has her own stress, sometimes when you want to speak to her she is not the type of person that you would want to talk to her... you wouldn't know when it's the right time to talk to her..." Thato (21) also did not speak to her grandmother and said, "...I wish I could tell her [grandmother] but she is very sensitive she gets easily hurt and then she cries. Then it becomes like I am always hurting her..." Thato's narrative confirmed her belief that pursuing a search for her

father would bother her ill mother. This was despite her mother's willingness to help her search for him. Another participant, Khululekani (19) cited similar reasons for not wanting to bother her mother by having discussions about enduring hardships since her father's death. Khululekani's father died after a long illness and at the time of the interview her mother was also unwell. Khululekani's main worry seemed to be her prediction that when her mother died she probably would have to leave school and when asked by the interviewer if she ever talked to her mother about her worries she said, "...I don't want to talk to her I don't want to stress her because she is sick and I am here going to tell her about other things..." Khululekani felt abandoned by her father's family after he died. Similarly, Nokuzola's (17) father died of AIDS, her mother was sick with AIDS at the time of the interview and they relied on relatives for a livelihood. Nokuzola seemed extremely bothered by her mother's imminent death and mainly expressed worries similar to Khululekani's around discontinuing school. This was despite the fact that her aunt and not her mother was taking care of her at the time. On the other hand, she was her mother's directly observed treatment (DOT) supporter; evidence of role reversal with the participant taking care of her mother. DOT involves direct supervision of pill-taking and is a commonly used intervention in South Africa for TB patients (Kironde and Klaasen 2002) with adolescents sometimes acting as treatment supporters for their chronically ill parents (Cluver et al. 2011). Asked if she was able to share her feelings around her father's absence Nokuzola said, "...there is not anyone I talk to, I just cry and I cannot talk to my mother because she is also sick...I do not want to talk to her because she is sick and I would be adding more stress so I don't..." These extracts represent young women who consciously decided not to bother their mothers lest they made things worse for them. This suggests that whilst young women seemed uncomfortable around the silence regarding the topic of their absent fathers, they were also motivated to protect their mothers from stress and to prevent exacerbating problems for them, as they perceived them to already have so much to deal with.

Discussion

In this paper we learn of silence within families in situations of absent fathers. Mothers are invariably present in absent father households and this is supported by findings from the analysis of the General Households Survey from this province (Makiwane et al. 2012). In the published literature there is little reported on children's discomfort talking with their mothers, grandparents and other relatives about their absent fathers. We learn from this analysis that

silence is a strategy, conscious or not, that is used to facilitate certain goals such as to demonstrate respect, maintain kinship relations, saving face, communicate gratitude and protect mothers from pain. Worries about sick mothers were paramount in this sample of young women and this needs to be understood within this broader context of the prevalence of AIDS deaths in South Africa (Cluver et al. 2011).

Research from another South African province concluded that young people, aged on average 17.3, reported a need to avoid family arguments and not act in ways that disappoint their parents (George and van den Berg 2011). By so doing they compromised a lot in order to keep peace in the family even though their silence caused them distress (George and van den Berg 2011). Current research findings concur that asking about an absent father could be interpreted as disappointing by a mother who single handedly worked hard to raise the child and this could be interpreted to mean that the child was not happy with the mother's efforts. Furthermore, asking creates the potential for an argument to ensue at home and participants chose to avoid such arguments even if it meant that they remained unhappy. Both reasons; taking care not to disappoint one's mother and worrying about getting into an argument were reported in previous silence about absent, unknown and undisclosed fathers (Nduna and Jewkes 2011b).

Silence, as described here should be understood in the broader context of familial relationships in African society where children have less face time with their parents (Swartz 2009), and where the parent-child relationship is characterised by strict discipline and very little opportunities for communication (Clowes et al. 2013). What these findings suggest is that observation, reinforcement of good (non-confrontational) behaviour and punishment (of undesirable questioning) play a vital role in shaping a silent behaviour around absent fathers. Children imitate their parents as they learn that talking about an absent father is inappropriate, controversial and opens painful wounds for their mothers. It seems from our data that participants held a perception that a well-behaved child who did not ask a lot, would be rewarded by being favoured by adults. Evidence from other studies supports the view that lack of communication between children and their parents is a norm though mothers are presented as being more accessible than fathers (Clowes et al. 2013; Datta 2007). Nevertheless, it seemed that in single parented households children still organise their perceptions of interpersonal relationships in ways that suggest anxiety and insecurities around communication in particular on the topic of absent fathers (Langa 2010; Phaswana 2003; Swartz 2009).

Children are raised not to ask or question their parents directly, especially on sexual matters; asking about one's absent unknown father is a sex laden question. This is a

conversation that may lead to talking about the circumstances of the mother's pregnancy, as this may be central to the reasons for his absence (Manyatshe 2013). For instance, sometimes the reason for father absence is because the putative father denied the pregnancy and the mother lacks the confidence to talk about him within the family or they are waiting until the child is old enough to understand the truth (Manyatshe 2013; Nduna and Jewkes 2011b, 2012a). Even more traumatic is that this conversation can lead to the revelation of mother's experiences of intimate partner violence and intimate femicide and secrecy and silence by mothers and other elders is considered to be in the interest of protecting the children (Manyatshe 2013; Polela 2011). Our findings reveal that silence in families about the absent father must have been related to other mounting challenges, hardships and sheer abuse in their homes. It would seem that young people in South Africa, learn to 'forget' their painful experiences as reported by victims of childhood sexual abuse and intimate partner abuse (Meduric and Nel 2011; Katharine Wood et al. 1998). A report on motivations for participation in research from the Eastern Cape provides evidence that agrees with this; many young people do not talk about their painful experiences ranging from sexual behaviour, HIV/AIDS, to experience and perpetration of gender-based violence, revealing that even participating in research interviews can be censored for some young women, as some reported being beaten at home as a result of their participation. The punishment meted out for participants reflects the broader society's disagreement with 'breaking the silence' and their motivations to conceal the truth.

Silence as a strategy to avoid confronting distressing topics seems to be transmitted through generations and thrives in an environment where children are raised by grandparents; the big age difference being a factor that widens the communication gap between children and their (grand) parents. 'Multi-generational' and 'skip-generation' families are highly prevalent among the Black African families in Mpumalanga (Makiwane et al. 2012). Research by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) on behalf of the Department of Social Development in Mpumalanga recommends, "creating a space that will enable members of different generations to engage in a continuous dialogue" (Makiwane et al. 2012, p. 69). This could be achieved through negotiating the silencing factors as discussed here. Age and gender differentials seem to be important factors. The premise from which intergenerational dialogues start needs to facilitate reconciliation rather than being accusatory. The HSRC research report raises teenage pregnancy among young women as being responsible for absent and unknown fathers (Makiwane et al. 2012). Whilst this is true, the report fails to raise the importance of the response and responsibility of the putative father.

Findings presented in this paper and in other studies suggest that some men deny their responsibility for pregnancy (Nduna and Jewkes 2012a). When the men deny pregnancy, this may result in 'undisclosed' and 'unknown' fathers (Manyatshe 2013; Nduna and Jewkes 2011b). If community dialogues are to succeed in addressing this issue they should encourage male involvement in parenting. The HSRC research report suggests that the South African family policy should be founded on, "...acceptable societal family norms..." (Makiwane et al. 2012, p. 73). This can be problematic and oppressive if some of these norms are not serving the best interests of the child. For instance denial of pregnancy by men could be argued to be a norm in this society and so is not disclosing the identity of a child's father (Denis and Ntsimane 2006; Langa 2010; Mbatha 2012; Nduna accepted; Nduna and Jewkes 2011b; Phaswana 2003). In South Africa different studies report that denied paternity could be experienced by about a quarter of all women (see, Nduna and Jewkes 2012a; Nduna et al. 2011) and denial of pregnancy continues in this society as if it is a minor inconvenience that those affected should live with.

A progressive family policy would interrogate rather than base its assertions on such flawed normative practices. An intervention would start by building scientific evidence to help us better our understanding of how to break communication barriers in families. The intervention would interrogate what acceptable social norms are and by whom and for whom they are acceptable, why they are acceptable and what if they undermine women and children? The HSRC report also identifies perceived conflict wherein older people apportion blame on the younger ones for having pro-democratic values and the youth blaming the older people for holding on to traditional values that do not serve them well (Makiwane et al. 2012). This is important in helping us understand communication around absent fathers wherein parents are holding back and children express the need to know (Langa 2010; Manyatshe 2013; Nduna and Jewkes 2011b; Phaswana 2003).

The psychological models of mental health suggest that people should have space to express themselves because unexpressed negative emotions lead to psychological distress (Okello 2006). Subjective perceptions reported here ironically suggest otherwise: that silence is a coping mechanism in a context where asking questions are viewed as disrespectful and could lead to disharmony within the family. Avoiding disharmony and distressing the family is highly valued by these young women. However signs of unexpressed negative emotions such as anger, frustration, temper and distress associated with silence are reported here and elsewhere (Nduna and Jewkes 2011a).

The HSRC report on families recommends that in light of the prevalence of absent fathers there is a need to

strengthen family law, child and family support and inheritance rights (Makiwane et al. 2012). These are important recommendations but they focus on structural issues and fail to account for soft issues and what needs to be done to assist children with the psychological implications of silence around absent fathers. Certainly, creating a legal and policy environment that increase opportunities for men's involvement in children's lives is important but structural barriers and denied father access are not a problem in all scenarios of absent fathers as Makiwane et al. (2012) seem to believe. This strategic use of silence is similar to that reported by young people in another study in the Eastern Cape where ensuring continued receipt of some support from their guardian appeared quite paramount (Nduna and Jewkes 2011a).

From these findings we recommend that children, mothers and guardians need to be equipped with interpersonal skills and strategies of talking about absent fathers. Silence as a strategy is oppressive and negative and carries a potential to negatively affect the sense of self-worth of the affected. The problem of children born out-of-wedlock is not going to be solved quickly as research shows that in 2009 a high proportion, about 52 %, of the adult population was single and research reports that teenage pregnancy is still a problem (Makiwane et al. 2012). Therefore there needs to be an acceptance of single parent family types and their dynamics and a culture that allows for open discussion of absent fathers as children clearly have a need to know. There needs to be a language that is accessible to all that allows children to question and adults to discuss this issue without feeling threatened. There was some suggestion from the member-checking meeting that some are concerned about friends gossiping about their situation. This suggests that this research topic is viewed as sensitive by young people, and as such research methods like member-checking and focus group discussions should be approached carefully to enhance the protection of participants' confidentiality while also allowing for researching this topic with young people.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study investigated communication about absent fathers with families. Using data from young women with varied experiences including that of having fathers who were known but not co-residing with participants, deceased and unknown fathers, we were able to demonstrate that silence around absent fathers was observed between children and adults and among siblings. Furthermore, we showed that silence about an absent or unknown father was characterised by sadness, anger, feelings of not being valued, pain, and loneliness. Fear of adverse reactions from mothers, relatives and families; being rebuked or punished

or suffering other negatives consequences for questioning about absent or unknown fathers were motivations for silence. Our findings show that young women with absent fathers feel upset and suppressed by others and that there is a need for mothers to be equipped to adequately deal with the issue of absent fathers. Our study findings indicate that some participants had a conviction that their mothers were already stressed and were thus difficult to talk to. Professional and social support for mothers is essential. With that kind of support, mothers may have the mental strength to deal with this clearly sensitive topic and address it working hand in hand with the affected children.

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