



‘No Manhood without Fatherhood; It’s my Legacy’: South African Fathers’ Experiences of Fatherhood and Parental Identity Development

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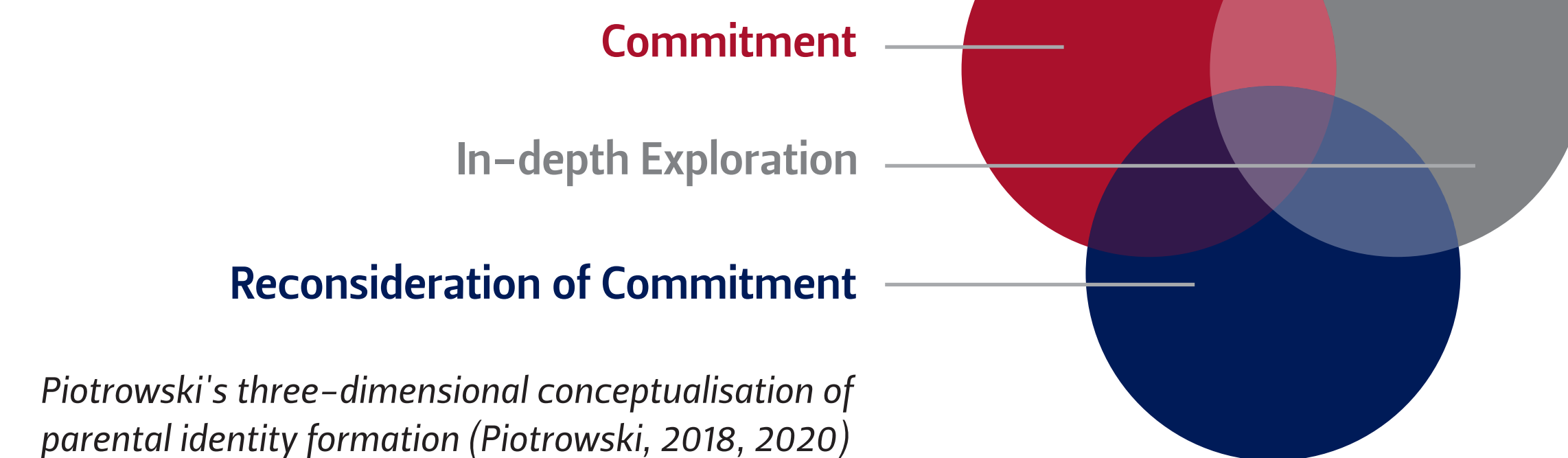


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Aim of the Study

To explore and describe the experiences and perceptions of emerging and early adult South African fathers regarding the development of their parental identity.

Theoretical Framework



Piotrowski's three-dimensional conceptualisation of parental identity formation (Piotrowski, 2018, 2020)

Contextual Background: Societal Discourses about Fatherhood in South Africa

- Fathers are often perceived to be either absent or uninvolved.
- Only 32.7% of children live with both of their parents; 42% with their mothers; 4% with their fathers (Statistics South Africa, 2019).
- Colonialism and apartheid shaped how many black South African families were created and subsequently restructured.
- Cultural practices such as inhlawulo and lobola affect living arrangements, the sense of fatherhood, and parental involvement.
- ‘Social fathers’ = fatherhood is a collective responsibility; child-rearing is facilitated through community socialisation, cultural education, and even shared financial provision.
- Scholars advocate for a view on fatherhood beyond the fixation on biology, the nuclear family context, and stereotypical hegemonic masculine roles towards a growing acceptance of fathers as emotionally engaged, expressive, authentic, nurturing, gentle, and non-violent.

(East et al., 2020; Eddy et al., 2013; Kabongo & Malose, 2023; Langa, 2020; Magqamfana & Bazana, 2020; Makusha et al., 2019; Malherbe & Kaminer, 2022; Mashuka & Richter, 2015; Mavungu, 2013; Morrel et al., 2016; Ncayiyane & Nel, 2023; Ngcukaitobi, 2021; Phasha et al., 2022; Ratele et al., 2012; Van den Berg et al., 2021)

Research Methods

Paradigm: Social constructionism
Approach: Qualitative
Design: Explorative and descriptive
Participants: Eight black fathers between the ages of 24 and 36 years; from varied ethnolinguistic groupings
Data collection: Individual semi-structured interviews
Analytic strategies: Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022).

Findings

Theme	Participant Quotations
'No Manhood without Fatherhood: It's My Legacy'	<ul style="list-style-type: none">"a child is your identity... what you are going to leave on this planet when you are gone.""when you are looking at this child, you see yourself""my child will have everything that I never got the chance to have... will not have the same struggles that I had""be more than you are; achieve lots of things that you did not achieve"
'I Don't Want to be a Visitor to My Own Flesh'	<ul style="list-style-type: none">"I hardly get to see the child ... maybe like once a month... I am not really able to create a bond with my child... I feel like I have robbed""I'm only there financially. Physically, I'm not there... it's not nice. It sucks. Sad is an understatement"
'I Want to be a Safe Space for My Children'	<ul style="list-style-type: none">"growing up, I never liked my father. And he was always hard on us... he never seemed to show any emotions... I always told myself that if I do have kids, I will definitely never be like my father""My heart just got soft and just got overwhelmed... I might not know exactly how to help you become a great woman, but I know what I can give you, and I could smother you with all the love that I have for you... a lot of black girls don't get that in South Africa. They don't know that their dads love them".
'A Father is as a Father Provides: I'd Rather be Absent than Empty-Handed'	<ul style="list-style-type: none">"to be called daddy, you turn to be a provider, which should be part of a man's nature to do""naturally, as a man, you think finances first... I felt I lacked as I am about to become a father""your child needs to eat, and you can't provide. Then you start questioning yourself""I'm not good; I'm not bad; I'm an absent father. I'm falling in the statistics of being absent because physically, I'm not there... You can't be both; you have to choose whether you are present or you provide... You being there and not being able to provide is hell... pointless. So, I am very absent"
'First comes love, then comes marriage and then comes a baby in a baby carriage?'	<ul style="list-style-type: none">"There are so many studies that talk about divorce messing up children. To know you're going to do something that's going to mess up your kid was very hard for me""I am a family-orientated guy. I want to come back to a home where my wife is there; the children are there. We are building our own rules, laws, policies, systems, doctrines on how to live our lives"
'It Takes a Village'	<ul style="list-style-type: none">"a child belongs to the community""not on my own... ask somebody from next door, a neighbour, and I would ask my parents, of course. I would ask my grandmother. I would ask everyone... yes, the whole community... it is not only me... I also raised other people's children""you must not isolate yourself from the community. You are part of the community... it makes the kids not to be in a tunnel. Their mind must be broad."

Conclusions

Fatherhood Makes a Man a Man: The participants of this study considered fatherhood a natural progression in a man's development journey into adulthood. A strong connection between their personhood, manhood, and fatherhood was evident in how participants described their children as an extension of themselves.

Fatherhood is an Opportunity to “Heal” and “Correct”: Fatherhood allowed participants to resolve intrapsychic conflicts regarding childhood events in which they felt deprived, with attempts to compensate for their own childhood experiences and break generational cycles.

A Different Kind of Father: Participants expressed the desire to be both physically present and emotionally involved in their children's lives (prioritised family values, open communication, empathy and self-reflectivity), confirming the shift in the discourse on fatherhood towards a stronger focus on care and nurturing.

The Conundrum of Being a Present Father vs Being a Provider: Despite embracing more nuanced versions of fatherhood, participants continued to consider financial provision as a priority and their inherent obligation as fathers. They perceived the lack of financial provision as equivalent to the lack of capacity to be a good father. Systemic challenges of economic instability in South Africa exacerbated shame and a weakened sense of self.

A hybrid conceptualisation of fatherhood as a personal and communal responsibility: Participants articulated idealistic views about having and rearing children in a stable family unit within a committed relationship where values are shared and parenting practices align. Still, participants held communal views of parenthood and subscribed to South African notions of 'social fathers', collective responsibility, community child-rearing, and cultural education

The Shades of Fatherhood
Different layers represent various generations; although each layer provides depth, none provide defining strokes. Each layer informs the final subject, but the defining line remains the subjects'.



Artwork by Divine Wayela Bitalo

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