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CHAPTER 49

Fatherhood in Urban South Africa: The Making of the "Poor, Black man" as the Absentee Father in South African Media

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Introduction

This chapter examines the ways that reified notions of African masculinity are being constructed in post-Apartheid South Africa via multiple, intersecting sources. Analysing newspaper articles published since 2011, we highlight the discourses that form part of the one-dimensional representations of (poor, black) African masculinity as being in crisis, dangerous,

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violent, and disengaged from family life. Although various academic discourses have offered critical analytical frameworks to explain the pathology of these presumed masculinities (i.e. du Toit 2014) and challenge the one-dimensionality of such portrayals (Morrell et al. 2012), few have attempted to trace the emergence of this discourse. Guided by Foucault (1980) when he asserts that, "we should try to discover how it is that subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts, etc." (97), we are interested in uncovering the mechanisms behind a discourse to foreground the way in which specific modes of being and thinking are made possible while disqualifying and dismissing others (Escobar 1995: 5). In this chapter, we focus on discourses that highlight absentee or "uninvolved" fatherhood as an underlying social problem that (1) can be fixed by encouraging young fathers to change, and (2) if fixed, will help to rectify a wider set of problems linked to problematised masculinity, including child abuse, violence against women, and HIV/AIDS. This discursive shift, we argue, has been driven by evidence collected within the context of donor-driven gender equality initiatives that promote involved fatherhood that have been implemented primarily by Sonke Gender Justice.

Background

Reports, policy briefs, and academic articles published since 2011 by researchers connected to organisations such as Sonke Gender Justice have led to increased media attention on the topic in South Africa (Van den berg et al. 2013), which should not be surprising given that such organisations normally have media officers who are charged with publicly disseminating their findings. Additionally, recently published statistics that track increases in the number of children living without fathers and female-headed households have contributed to the framing of these issues as urgent, further bolstering the proliferation of public discourse on absentee fathers (Posel 2009; StatsSA 2010). According to Ratele et al., this increased attention has "served to reproduce an image of men, in particular poor black men, as either not fulfilling their expected roles as fathers and/or performing these 'badly'" (2012: 554). Morell and colleagues (2012) have argued that the rise of flattened portrayals of South African men in academic and public discourse has come about due to a simplified application of Connell's theories regarding hegemonic masculinity. They suggest that most research has

focused on "the relationship between men, rather than between men and women" with the aim "to fix the content of each hegemony … the combination of the two has in some instances allowed for a fixed account of hegemonic masculinity, at odds with Connell's earliest formulation" (2012: 25). They argue, "one of the shortcomings of the appropriation of a fixed understanding of hegemonic masculinity by gender equality activists has been that it has produced/reproduced a moralistic binary, which links hegemony with bad men" (ibid.).

Du Toit (2014), on the other hand, argues that the frames used when thinking about issues related to the crisis in masculinity have led to seeing one form of masculinity as being hegemonic. In her article, 'Shifting Meanings of Postconflict Sexual Violence in South Africa,' she describes the "past perpetrator trauma" and "the current social exclusion" interpretative frames as the two most likely to be found in academia, media, and popular discourse (du Toit 2014:102). According to her, the past perpetrator trauma frame offers the idea that "colonial oppression or the liberation struggle or both have damaged previously colonised men to the extent that they have been symbolically castrated" (ibid., 103), while the current social exclusion frame offers "post-transitional dynamics of socio-economic exclusion" as a causal explanation (ibid., 108). Du Toit argues that both frames tend "to other the phenomenon of rape and to disproportionately blame the already marginalised part of the population for its prevalence in our society" (ibid., 111). Pointedly, she alludes to the idea that it was predominantly non-white groups that have been both historically oppressed and economically worse off, and therefore black masculinity is almost tautologically linked to problematic masculinity, even if it is being explained via historical and economic analysis.

For decolonial media scholars such as Chiumbu, these frames are to be expected in South African print media because even though the media landscape underwent transformation at the end of apartheid in terms of a shift in ownership, staffing, content, and audiences, the structural and systematic racialised nature of media, power, and knowledge remains unchanged (2016: 422). This transformation has been further complicated by the emergence of a global capitalist media structure governed by rules of globalisation, privatisation, and liberalisation where commercial interests and profits are prioritised (ibid.). Operating within this functionalist structural logic of circulation, distribution networks, price structure, and advertising, the print media continues to focus on the elite as their target market (Sean Jacobs 2003 cited by Wasserman and De Beer 2005:

39–40), thereby affecting the way in which subaltern, economically marginalised publics are represented in the media (Wasserman and Garman 2012: 50).

Methods

For this chapter, the data is based on newspaper articles published in major English-language South African newspapers since 2011. Using the keywords, "absent fathers" and dates from January 2011–present (May 2021), the articles were extracted from the SA Media Database hosted by the University of the Free State. Although the first big research project on Fatherhood was initiated in 2003 by Professor Linda Richter, we chose to confine our search to the last 10 years so that we could get a sense of the shifts, if any, that have occurred over the last decade. The database produced a total of 551 articles. We then used purposive sampling to identify and select the articles in which the content addressed the absentee father/fatherlessness phenomenon. Purposive sampling is a non-probability method in which the units for analysis are selected by the researcher, relying on his or her own judgement (Teddlie and Yu 2007:77). In total, 123 articles fit the sampling criteria. However, employing maximum variation sampling helped to identify key features of the issue in the different media outlets, after which we began to look for cases where the same issue was discussed and to see how this topic varied from one article to another. This variation in content media outlet was an important criterion in the selection of articles (Suri 2011:67).

As online newspapers are increasingly popular in South Africa, we also conducted a google search of the words, "absent fathers South Africa" to see what that search would elicit, and all newspaper articles with titles about absent fathers, fatherlessness, single parents, and fathers were collected. Some articles published online were found in the printed version of the newspaper, although our search did bring up articles that were not circulated in the printed version, which supplied more articles to analyse. A total of 20 articles were added to the 123 that we had collected from the SA Media Database. A brief content review of each article eliminated 91 that proved not to be relevant. However, the 91 articles eliminated also included 23 that fit the topic in terms of headlines but copies of these articles were not available for content analysis. We were left with 52 articles, of which 30 were analysed in detail while 22 were used as secondary data (See Table 49.1).

Table 49.1 List of all newspapers selected for analysis

Print Newspapers	*Online Newspapers*
Citizen (6 articles)	*Sowetanlive* (3)
Pretoria News (6 articles)	*IOL* (3)
Star (6 articles)	*Timeslive* (2)
Sunday Independent (6 articles)	
Citizen (6 articles), *City Press* (4 articles)	
Cape Times (6 articles)	
The New Age (3 articles)	
The Weekend Witness (3 articles)	
Cape Argus (2 articles)	
Daily News (1 article)	
Mail & Guardian (1 article)	

Our arguments are based on qualitative content analysis of the above articles. Qualitative content analysis places emphasis on examining language to narrow a large amount of text into workable categories that represent the same meaning (2005: 1278). We chose this approach as it allows us to focus on the communication aspect of language, paying close attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text (ibid.), and in particular, because it can be "used in a way where textual interpretation is decentred to reconstruct the text, uncover underlying social and historical process" (Chauke and Khunou 2014:20).

Findings

The two main themes that emerge highlight the portrayal of poor black women and children as victims of male behaviour and the depiction of men as victims of apartheid laws and the current economic situation, thus illustrating how media facilitates hegemonic masculinity of "poor black urban men" as figures of the absentee father phenomenon.

Poor Black Women and Children as Victims of Male Behaviour

The way in which the articles frame the absentee father is to portray poor black women and children as victims of male behaviour. Women's victimisation lies in being left by men to raise child(ren) alone, while for the children it is to be raised in female-headed households without their father.

The articles illustrate these arguments using research statistics that contend that the majority of those who are single parents are African (black), female, urban, and unemployed (read: poor). The use of statistics in these articles is a way of lending credibility to the information that is revealed as numbers are often viewed as more objective in representing reality (Hansen and Mühlen-Schulte 2012: 455). However, the neutrality of numbers often masks the more insidious side of it which is highlighted by Hacking (1999) when he states, "counting is no mere report of developments. It elaborately, often philanthropically, creates new ways for people to be"(161). Nonetheless, numbers do not work alone and are often accompanied by words, and in these articles, stories of single mothers are highlighted to complement the statistics. Connelly and Macleod (2003) explain this framing well when they posit that, "the initial discursive framework within which a topic is given meaning serves as a predictor of how the story will be understood from then on" (65). As indicated in this *Sowetanlive* article titled "9 million kids with no dads":

> A TOTAL of 9 million children are growing up without their fathers.
>
> Research by the South African Institute of Race Relations indicates that "the 'typical' child is raised by a mother in a single-parent household". The children have absent but living fathers. Phindile Bhengu, who is unemployed, raises her 3-year-old daughter single-handedly. "The father is not involved in any way. He left when I fell pregnant." (2011, 5 April)

This article was published in 2011, and when we look at the second article published in *The Citizen*, titled "Single Mom majority soon," we can see these newspapers are following the same discursive framework. This article states:

> The 2017 general household survey showed that 62.7% of households had absent fathers. Almost half (49.6%) of these households had a single mother and less than 4% had a single father…Single mother Rachel Mahlangu, 35, is struggling to provide for her 12-year-old daughter. Mahlangu fell pregnant less than a year after she started dating. "He actually tricked me into not using protection… he told me not to worry, I wouldn't fall pregnant." (2019, 5 April)

Numbers are significant in this discursive framework in that not only are they used in the content of the articles but also in the headlines. Based on these two articles alone, we see how numbers are used to count the

number of children without fathers and the number of women who are single mothers. For Hansen and Porter, "counting makes it possible to extract a specific quality of the objects being counted, leaving aside all their other qualities. This maneuver reduces complexity and makes the resulting number much more mobile than the object(s) being counted (and more mobile than the longer text needed to be written to convey the exact number of objects)" (2012: 413). As clearly demonstrated here, although these articles are exactly eight years apart, the pattern is maintained not only in the way that the articles are structured but in how numbers travel over time. This illustrates Connelly and Macleod's argument that, "by (re)producing symbols familiar to their audience, reporters and editors 'proclaim the 'preferred reading' of a text'" (2003: 65).

Both these articles draw the reader's attention to the women's experiences by highlighting that they have been left to raise their children alone. Inasmuch as these excerpts work to create the impression that the race and class of the absent father are not relevant, the reader is still given enough context-specific information through the name of the women whose stories are being highlighted to imply race (i.e. Bhengu and Mahlangu, African surnames). Interestingly, in the article published in the *Cape Argus* (2019), even when anonymity is requested African names are still used, highlighting the importance of race in this framing although the articles seem to suggest otherwise. The articles illustrate these arguments using research statistics that contend that the majority of those who are single parents are African (black), female, urban, and unemployed or struggling to provide (read: poor), suggesting that if the male figure was present, the women would not be in this precarious situation. Reinforcing this assertion, Rogan attests to "the view that female-headed households may be particularly vulnerable to poverty stems largely from the notion that the general disadvantage that women face (e.g. in the labour market) is exacerbated by single motherhood or residence in a household in which there are no adult males" (Rogan 2013: 4).

Following Chandra Mohanty Talpade (1984), we would argue that this kind of portrayal is particularly problematic, not only because poor black women here are seen as a homogenous group, characterised by their dependency on men, but also because this kind of thinking has its roots in Western feminist discourse on women in "developing countries." In her seminal essay "Under Western Eyes," she argued that when "women are constituted as a group via dependency relationships vis-à-vis men, who are implicitly held responsible for these relationships…the analysis of specific

historical differences becomes impossible because reality is always apparently structured by divisions—two mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive groups, the victims and the oppressors" (2003: 25). This focus on women as victims and male as oppressors is hardly surprising for the South African context because much of the focus on gender equality took centre stage during the transition to democracy in the 1990s when there was a lot of lobbying by the women's movement to the newly elected government to end women's oppression by prioritising gender equality (Walker 2005:226). Coincidentally, this was also at the time when the global feminist and women's movements were growing in scope but were rather limited in their focus; the consensus at the time was to highlight women's oppression (Talpade 2003; Seidman 1999; Hassim 1991). This resulted in men becoming the face of patriarchy as the oppressors and women as the subjugated.

Although not all fathers' absence can be explained in the same way, according to the *Star* article also published in the online news platform *IOL* titled "South Africa is a nation of deadbeat dads and that fall out hurts us all," "many men exhibit patriarchal attitudes towards women and children and thus creating and exacerbating the distance between themselves and their children" (*Star* and *IOL* 2013, March 27). In this kind of framing, children growing up without fathers are also seen as powerless and victimised by their absent fathers. While the race of the absent father is not explicitly mentioned, some of the articles assert that it is black children who are the most affected (*Cape Argus* 2008; *Sunday Independent* 2011; *Sowetanlive* 2012; *The Star* 2018), which leads a reader to assume that it is black fathers who are absent. To further bolster their arguments, the majority of the articles emphasise the children's behaviours in the stories instead of sharing their voices. Their behaviours are judged and therefore seen as resulting from their absent father.

> Boys growing up in absent father households are more likely to display "hypermasculine" behaviour, including aggression, while girls who grow up without their fathers are more likely to have low self-esteem, engage in risky sexual behaviour, and have difficulties forming and maintaining relationships… A father's absence can be defined as either physical or emotional. So while he may reside at home, a father may be unresponsive emotionally to his family, possibly due to drug or alcohol abuse. "Supportive fathers give girls self-confidence, and help boys develop healthy masculinity and clear identity," says Richter. "One of the biggest impacts of an involved father is

> that he gives credibility to school work. Children stay at school longer if their fathers support them in education." (*Star* and *IOL* 2013, 27 March)

Like the use of numbers in the discursive framework, citing Linda Richter, a well-known academic who has published widely on problematic fatherhood, highlights an important element in the formation of a discourse. In his discussion on the economic discourses that have propelled neoliberal development in post-1994 South Africa, Richard Peet calls attention to this point by asserting that "the organised, systematised ideas behind an economic discourse often originate in theories elaborated by academics in elite institutions, usually leading universities, with large endowments stemming from long-established capital accumulations" (2002: 58). So when the reader continues to read that children who grow up without their fathers exhibit certain behaviours (*The Star* 2013, March 27), this statement is more likely to be believed and not scrutinised, despite the fact that the argument that is used to position children as victims of their father's behaviours stems from psychological studies that are based on gendered assumptions of the roles fathers play in their children's lives (Ratele et al. 2012: 554). It is argued that these "studies indicate the importance of fathers' involvement for positive childhood and adulthood social, psychological, psychiatric and behavioural outcomes in comparison with children in single-parent families with absent fathers" (ibid.). So not only are the children victims of their father's absence, they are made to feel different from children who have grown up with both parents. Within this framing, a stigma is attached to growing up without a father, which can foster a sense of lack, even among children who do not necessarily feel this way. Much of the behaviour described can occur in children that grow up with both their parents. Additionally, we are told that many children who grow up without fathers do not necessarily exhibit many of these "bad" behaviours.

Men as Victims of Apartheid Laws and the Current Economic Situation

Interestingly, the second way in which the articles frame the absentee father is to represent men as victims of both the apartheid laws and the current economic situation, suggesting that men are mainly seen as labourers. In all the articles, the migrant labour system instituted during

apartheid is used to explain the disruption of the family, with specific consequences such as that a lot of the men who grew up without their fathers do not know how to be "good" fathers because of a lack of role models and the alienation of fathers from their children. Further, employing the migrant labour explanation is also a way to highlight the race of the men involved, which is evident in this excerpt:

> During the apartheid era, the migrant labour system contributed greatly to the alienation of fathers from their children. Women were left to raise the children alone and so many black men grew up without a father and had no role model of how to be fathers themselves. (*Star* and *IOL*: 2013, 27 March)

By mentioning the migrant labour system, it is discernible that it is African (black) men who are being discussed because the migrant labour system under apartheid was put in place to ensure that the cities were reserved for whites. Because the survival of the apartheid economy depended on cheap African labour, African workers (males) were allowed to reside in the cities, towns, and commercial farms on a migrant basis to serve white-owned interests (Budlender and Lund 2012). Moreover, they were required to leave their families behind. This also indicates to the reader that these are poor black men who are implicated as absent fathers during the apartheid system and as such, one can surmise that it is therefore poor black men now whose fathers were absent then that are caught up in this vicious cycle.

Nonetheless, the framing of these poor black men, although problematic, is that of victims of a capitalist system because their participation in the African migrant labour served the common interests of capital (Talpade 2003: 140). As explained by Claudia von Werholf, "capitalism is not about wage labour but about the cheapest possible forms of commodity production" based on the reproduction of a "sexual division of labour" (2007: 15). In the case of the migrant labour system of the apartheid regime, male labour is seen as productive for capital accumulation and profit and therefore their migration to the cities and towns is made important while female labour is limited to the production and preservation of human life (motherhood) by being forced to remain in the rural areas. Although these laws were officially abolished in 1986, the patterns were established and these sexual divisions of labour have persisted (Budlender and Lund 2012). Even so, reliance on the migrant labour frame to explain the absentee father phenomenon implies the failure of women to raise children as single parents. Moreover, that for children to be raised well, a father and

mother are needed and therefore the nuclear family is presented as an ideal. This negates the role played by mothers as single parents and the importance of the extended family when it comes to helping raise children. In doing so, this fails to account for instances whereby the significance of the biological father in families that are non-nuclear in structure is questioned or has never been the norm (Ratele et al. 2012). Neither the notion of social fathers nor communal ways of raising children in extended families have been taken up seriously in this discourse, although the topic was explored in the book *Baba: Men and Fatherhood in South Africa* published in 2005 (Richter and Morell). It is just in the last few years that we have seen this idea start to circulate (*The Star* 2018, 12 July and *Cape Argus* 2018, 16 July), and these were both written by media officers from Sonke Gender Justice. Such ideas would destabilise two of the most important commodities to capital: the man as a productive wage labourer and the child as part of the future labour pool (Dixon 1977: 19). If men are not needed as providers to their families, then most men will not be under pressure to be gainfully employed.

Seeing children as future labourers could also help explain the repetition of statements such as the one found in the article, "A dadless angry generation" published in *City Press*, where the author states,

> A recent report, The First Steps to Healing the South African Family, by the SA Institute for Race Relations, suggested that children growing up in dysfunctional families were more likely to have poorer educational outcomes, go on to be unemployed, practise risky sexual behaviours, commit crime or use alcohol and drugs. (2011, 10 April)

At first glance, including this statement in the article creates the impression that the media framing is well-intentioned in that this highlights the devastation that occurs with the breakdown of the family in South Africa. However, with the South African media increasingly becoming more commercialised (Wasserman and Garman 2012: 50), we need to consider that another motive might be at play. Working with Chiumbu's assertion that "the media…consistently supports a capitalist agenda, albeit with considerable subtlety" (2016: 424), then it is within the realm of possibility that it is less about the experiences of the children and more about how it affects capital. For Dixon, capital views the family as an economic unit mandated with the production and reproduction of labour-power (1977: 19) and as such, children who grow up outside this unit run the risk of

lowering the number of entrants into the labour market. Significantly, unemployment is highlighted as a major factor for fathers being absent in their children's lives. This is because, according to Dixon, working-class families are expected to carry the costs of producing these new workers, making children an economic liability. Capital, although invested in keeping the supply of labour at desired levels, is unwilling to pay to produce these new workers (1977: 19). Moreover, "marriage, with its dependent wife and children, is the principal means by which capital secures a reliable, dependent and disciplined male labour force" (ibid., 23). It is therefore hardly surprising that the lack of employment for men seems to always be tied to their inability to pay ilobola (bride price). The argument is that during pre-colonial and colonial times, ilobola was always central to the building of the family (Hunter 2006: 100). However, this assertion is predicated on the idea that in pre-colonial times, the African family was charged with the same mandate as the nuclear family today. Even studies that attempt to contextualise this issue historically tend to impose a modernist, Eurocentric knowledge paradigm on some of these cultural practices.

The 2013 *IOL* article entitled "Why are so many fathers absent?" cites research conducted by CSDA and Sonke Gender Justice titled "So we are ATM fathers: Absent fathers in Johannesburg." The Sonke study, based on research conducted in 2011, was published and circulated in August 2013. The *IOL* article describes the study as follows:

> The information was gathered through focus groups with fathers in Alexandra, Tembisa, Doornkop and Devland in Gauteng, who had little or no contact with their children. The study hoped to give a voice to absent fathers. (*IOL* 2013, 20 November)

South African readers will recognise these sites as home to primarily poor, black urban residents. Not surprisingly, all the respondents in the study were males residing in impoverished urban areas with mainly African (black) populations. Citing the Sonke study gives credibility to the argument being advanced and underlines the assumption that absentee fathers are mainly a problem in poor, black, urban families. In all the studies cited in the articles analysed for this chapter, the focus has been on poor, black, and coloured urban men. Even though statistics indicate that black children are the most affected by the absent father phenomenon, it is also clear that this phenomenon is not restricted to black children. As statistics shared in this *Sowetanlive* (2012) article indicate:

> The proportion of South African children with such fathers increased between 1996 and 2010 from 42% to 47%. This means almost half of all South African children are growing up without their fathers, though their fathers are alive. Black children are the most affected by this trend, at 51%. While only 17% of white children have absent fathers, this figure represents an increase of 32% since 1996, and it is the largest increase in all racial groups. (*Sowetanlive* 2012, 18 December)

The insistence on framing the absent father phenomenon as a "poor, black, urban man" problem silences stories of problematic fatherhood among other races and classes, as well as from rural households. The *Sowetanlive* article cites statistics reported by the South African Institute of Race Relations which highlighted that the largest increase in absent fathers has been among white children since 1996, coinciding with the 1995 transition to democracy that saw many changes, especially for whites. If the objective is to address the absentee father phenomenon, a study of the increase in absent fathers in the white community would add valuable information to the issue that might render a fuller understanding of the issue itself.

Although class, race, and location are important, such indicators should be used to facilitate a better understanding of the specific context, rather than to elide other voices. Further, research on whites, especially poor whites, might also highlight commonalities across race, especially when it comes to unemployment, an issue that cuts across race. With this in mind, it is evident that the victims cannot only be "poor black urban men" who are unemployed but other men and women who are participating in the capitalist system as labourers in some form or the other. This reveals a rather complex picture of the interconnected ways in which people's experiences and conditions are at play with each other.

A perusal of the study quoted in the articles gives more in-depth information about the impact of unemployment and poverty on the absent father issue when they argue that, "unemployment and poverty are not in themselves factors that should cause fathers to become absent. The study found that it is rather the interplay of these socioeconomic conditions with dominant expectations that a father ought to provide financially for his child and partner regardless of his economic means that create conditions under which fathers retreat or are excluded" (Eddy et al. 2011: 4). The findings of the study not only allude to the complexity of this situation but also draw attention to the idea that father absenteeism is not only just the

choice of men but it is also in the hands of women and society at large. This is an aspect that is referred to in some articles (*Sunday Independent* 2013; *Pretoria News* 2018) but not always explored from differing perspectives. As one article citing Wessel van den Berg, a manager at Sonke Gender Justice working on the MenCare project, says:

> So while the government is looking at stricter enforcement of maintenance payments, introducing paternity leave, more equitable treatment of fathers in legal custody battles, as well as improving the availability and accessibility of "family-type" housing in cities, the real work lies in changing the hearts and minds of young men right now, according to organisations grappling with the issue on the ground. Wessel van den Berg, co-ordinator for MenCare, a global campaign working locally with the Sonke Gender Justice Network, says MenCare has found in its research that if fathers learn that children need other things besides money, such as communication and emotional support, they remain involved more easily. The MenCare campaign hosts expectant fathers groups, and also works with policymakers to promote new societal norms where fathers are concerned. (*IOL* 2013, 20 November)

Mentioning how the government is addressing certain practices such as the unfair treatment of men in legal custody battles and introducing paternity leave suggests that men are not necessarily always the "bad" guys so to speak. However, this perspective still sees men as victims in the public sphere and never in the private sphere of the home. The framing of poor black men as victims of capital or the state keeps men within the public sphere whilst their role in the private sphere is that of them victimising women and children showing in principle that men are viewed more holistically (as both victims and victimisers). This framing also reifies the notion of man the provider and that women belong in the private domain, which is in line with the capitalist agenda.

The *IOL* article explains that at the centre of this programme is the need to change and transform men's attitudes hinting at possible reasons as to the significance of the making of the "poor, black, urban man" as the figure of the absentee father phenomenon, which is not about men's issues per se but who they should become. In narrowing and fixing the problem of absentee fatherhood on a specific group, organisations such as Sonke Gender Justice Network and many others are able to tailor their projects to changing and fixing poor, black men's patriarchal attitudes and mindsets. This is evident in this article when it is asserted:

> "We need to break the so-called 'man-box', with all its stereotypes such as 'men don't cry' and 'men work, women raise the children'," says Rutter. "I believe we have to start at age six or seven. If we get to this generation, it will heal future generations of men, and we will have a very different country. One self-styled role model of modern fatherhood is Sithembiso Ndashe. The father of a daughter, Ndashe is the founder of a Twitter and Facebook campaign called LOVEfatherhood. "Men need to stop blaming the system or the past. And the notion that it's okay to just have a baby and get a social grant needs to be addressed," he says. His approach is to build a "brand" of good fathers, by reaching and changing the attitude of "one father at a time." (*IOL*: 2013, 27 March)

As evident in the different organisations and campaigns mentioned, there are specific male problematic behaviours that need changing. These behaviours, although general, are framed around the "poor black man" and his behavioural problems, which are hegemonic in nature. Further, the process of fixing men is focused on orientating men towards being more caring and not as being better breadwinners. This could be explained by the feminisation of labour that has accompanied post-apartheid South Africa. As pointed out by Van der Westhuizen et al., "the broad female labour force increased by about 60 per cent over the period, in contrast to the male labour force with an increase at around 35 per cent. Increased female labour force participation was driven by African females entering the labour market in greater numbers than before, with African women accounting for almost 50 per cent of the increase in the labour force between 1995 and 2005" (2007: 11). This increase is viewed favourably because of the positive impact waged employment has on women (Lim 1990). As explained by Pearson, "the rapid increase and spread of labour intensive industrialisation not only made women's work in industrialising economies very visible, it has also reinforced the focus on waged work as the key to women's emancipation" (1998: 180). It then becomes extremely difficult for NGOs that have aligned themselves around issues related to gender equality to now start demanding more employment opportunities for men while at the same time pushing for women's empowerment. The push for fathers as caregivers becomes a more legitimate direction considering the empowering component for women that is seemingly interwoven into this process (Marchand 2001: 6).

Discussion

Our analysis showed that the current discourse on absentee fathers in South Africa relies on the making of "poor, black, urban men." Men are portrayed as both victims and victimisers, suggesting multidimensionality in their experience that tends to be absent when it comes to women. The way in which men were transformed via discourse in South Africa began with the shift in gender politics post-1994, when gender activism started to involve men as part of the gender mainstreaming process (Morrell et al. 2012: 12). It could be argued that this gender mainstreaming process was a move away from focusing solely on women's empowerment and oppression towards studying men. Notwithstanding the focus on men and men's involvement in gender politics, men were already implicated in women's experiences as perpetrators of women's oppression and as hindrances to women's empowerment. In so doing, certain issues were highlighted as central to the study of men such as the absentee father phenomenon and thus transforming a particular group of men via discourse.

Studying and understanding men became less about all men and more about those who seem to be problematic. In less than a decade, we have seen a veritable "discursive explosion" attending to particular masculinities. Following Foucault, we would argue that this explosion can be tied to norms of heterosexual monogamy and efforts to contain those (absentee fathers) who resist the norm:

> The discursive explosion of the eighteenth and nineteenth century caused this system centred on the legitimate alliance to undergo two modifications. First, a centrifugal movement with respect to heterosexual monogamy … On the other hand, what came under scrutiny was the sexuality of children, mad men and women, and criminals…It was time for these figures, scarcely noticed in the past, to step forward and speak, to make the difficult confession of what they were. (1978: 39)

Dixon makes a similar argument to Foucault when she asserts that, "the moral and social meanings attached to these styles (heterosexuality) is a doctrine of bourgeois morality which has evolved with the development of capitalism, and must be understood as an element of the superstructure serving the ends and purposes of imperialism and not as "natural order of the universe"" (1977: 27). With media playing its role in (re)producing and reinforcing specific discourses in service of the superstructure of

capitalism, our findings demonstrated that the newspaper articles presented the absentee father phenomenon like an epidemic, couched in statistics and research findings from academics and programmes undertaken by NGOs, and as an epidemic that needs fixing. The articles make clear much research is now being undertaken to track and trace deviant masculinities. We argue that the "poor, black, urban man" as the figure of the absentee father is a category that has been actively generated by science, NGOs, and the media. We are arguing that this making came into being "at the same time as the kind itself was being invented" (Hacking, 165). Through this making, the issue of the absentee father becomes that which can be understood through the stories of "poor, black, urban men." In the newspaper articles we reviewed, the men who make up this category participate in various research studies and programmes run by academics and NGOs. Rather than addressing unemployment, the interventions seem intent on changing the attitudes of "poor, black, urban men" from associating fatherhood with economic provision to that of being caring and engaged fathers. This assumes that fathers who provide for their families cannot be caring or engaged and vice versa. Additionally, it reinforces a heteronormative agenda that dictates that people should be married, monogamous, and engaged as parents in service of the family (the economic unit of capitalism).

Conclusion

Our aim in this chapter has been to unpack the recent proliferation of discourses about the (absentee) fatherhood phenomenon in South Africa by analysing a number of media articles pertaining to this issue. Our findings reveal that there is a particular figure that has been produced in relation to this issue and problematised in such a way that legitimises the need for intervention. This is accomplished by relying on the portrayal of women and children as victims of male behaviour and depicting men as victims of past and present economic conditions. The result is an increased scientific focus on this particular group of men and the normative agreement that interventions are needed to fix these men so they might affirm a specific ideal. This analysis illustrates the role played by NGOs, academics, and the media in "making up people," in this case poor, black, urban men. The issue of absent fathers is a reality, and there are poor, black, urban men who are absent in their children's lives. However, focusing on one particular group silences the experiences of others and overlooks other

contexts in which this issue might be manifesting. The failures of mainstream media to explore the ways that unemployment, combined with gender norms that socialise men to equate fatherhood with economic providing, might foreclose men from being actively involved in caring for their children, and seems like a missed opportunity. Making up people into a category is problematic because it leads to fixation on one particular group and simultaneously fails to address the different components that characterise the absentee father phenomenon.

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