

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The categories of experience, comprising the different themes which were identified from the interviews with the ten participants will be described in this chapter.

4.2 FAMILY BACKGROUND

The family environment of nearly all the participants was characterised by low cohesiveness, lack of support by their fathers, unpleasant conditions, feelings of not belonging and the role of the extended family.

4.2.1 Low cohesiveness

In the case of nine of the participants, either the participant or a sibling stayed with relatives such as grandparents, uncles, a mother's younger sister (*mmame*), or sisters who had their own houses. The reason for this was financial problems, such as lack of food and clothing and being unable to pay school fees and the children therefore had to rely on relatives for financial support.

Low cohesiveness was also reflected in the KFDs of four participants, by individualisation of the family members (i.e., being involved in individual activities) instead of interacting with each other. Some participants who stayed with their extended families, did not draw the latter but the members of their own nuclear family in the KFD. This indicated the importance they attached to the nuclear family and probably a wish to live with their own immediate family.

Although some extended families accepted the children, others regarded them as unwelcome and a burden to support. In the case of three of the participants the result of this was that they

moved from one relative's household to another. Changing residence was not only due to conflicts. One boy who grew up with his grandmother, returned to his mother's house after his father left the family, so that he could help her.

4.2.2 Paternal contact

Six of the participants said they did not know their fathers. None of the participants got any form of support from their fathers. One participant, for example, said "My father does not visit us or give me money for school fees". Another one said he felt bad about his siblings during Christmas and wished he could help them, because they did not have Christmas clothes, while other children around the village got new clothes. (In the village where the study was done, it is customary to buy children new clothes at Christmas time).

Seven participants expressed a need to be with their biological fathers, giving different reasons. One child was worried that if another man were to come into the household, he may not treat them well and it will also reduce the chances of reconciling with his biological father. Another child said the family was ready to forgive the father, and even if he were ill they would welcome him back, because he is the father of the family and no one will ever replace him. Another child said he needed his father to get dignity and respect from the community. Only two children, who were born out of wedlock, said their mother should marry another man, because their biological fathers were married to somebody else.

The children gave various reasons for the absence of their fathers. Three participants referred to witchcraft. Two mentioned that her fathers loved them very much, and felt that he left them because of witchcraft. Another one said the witches were taking advantage of the family because they were fatherless, by making them do manual work for the witches during the night so that they wake up tired in the morning.

However, not all the children knew what had driven their fathers away, and they said they would like to hear from their mothers or their fathers why they left them. Some participants said that their mothers had told them why the fathers left, but they did not understand. One girl said that she did not ask why her father left because it was an adult matter, and she was not supposed to be involved

4.2.3 Unpleasant conditions at home

The children did not feel happy or comfortable about their family environments. There was evidence of conflicts, including physical conflicts and poor interaction between the members of the family. For instance, in her KFD one participant drew her mother and uncle verbally insulting one another. Another one said her uncle frequently assaults her mother, he has even assaulted her with an axe, and did not want her mother and the children at home. (The family was staying at the child's grandmother's home, where the uncle also lived).

Another child, who was staying with his two uncles, his mother's sister, grandmother and uncles' wife reported that he did not look forward to going home after school: "I totally do not enjoy to be at home. I get no happiness, my uncle's wife and mother's sister are not in good terms. I need my own family so that I can eat and watch TV whenever I want."

4.2.4 Feelings of not belonging

The children who were living with relatives, said that they did not feel that they were real members of the family. One participant, who lost both his parents and stayed at his uncle's place, reported that his cousin did not want him in her home. Another participant who had never lived in the same home with her own nuclear family and stayed with her grandparents, reported that there was continuous conflict and every now and again, an uncle, who also lived there and who was mentally disturbed, chased them away. She said: "I wish my grandfather will allow my mother to move to her own place with her children."

All the participants who stayed at their grandparents' place expressed a need to have their own home, since they did not enjoy the environment where they lived in (as discussed above). One participant, whose mother never married, underlined the pictures in the KFD, which suggested a lack of security and instability within the family environment.

Those who were deserted by their fathers after once having lived together, wished to complete or extend the houses left unfinished by their fathers; others wanted to buy big and nice houses for their mothers since their fathers failed to do so. For example, one boy who was staying with

his mother in a temporary structure said: "I will only get married after buying my mother a house, I do not want to see her suffering while I am working."

4.2.5 The role of the extended family

The extended family did not only cause stress for the participants, as described above, but also played a supportive role. The extended family such as such as uncles, cousins and grandparents provided them with second-hand clothing, food, money, etc. Six of the participants said they depended on their grandparents for most of the things they needed. They also got emotional support, such as assuring them that it was not their fault that their fathers had left them.

Not all the children lived with their extended families. Some of them, whose fathers left them after they had established their own homes, lived in more conducive family environments. They did not get stress from members of the extended family, but got help from them, such as providing them every so often with food, money, or other essentials.

4.3 FINANCIAL SITUATION

All the participants experienced financial problems, due to unemployment of the mothers or, if she worked, the low income she earned, and lack of child support from their fathers. The information given above, namely that the children and their families often relied on their extended families for food, clothing and other essentials, must be borne in mind with regard to the financial position of the children.

Three participants reported that their mothers were not employed, five said their mothers worked as domestic workers around the village, but earned insufficient money to meet their needs.

Three participants reported that they were working part-time to help their families. One repaired shoes, radios and television sets. Another child did gardening at a missionary's house and another one sold sweets and peanuts.

Almost all the participants complained about food and clothes. One said most of the time he had nothing to eat at home or during lunch at school. Most of them felt they could not attend tertiary education institutions due to the financial difficulties within their families

4.4 SOCIAL SUPPORT

Almost all the participants received support from their social network, such as friends, the church, school and relatives.

4.4.1 Support from relatives

The participants got help from the extended family (as discussed in paragraph 4.2). One participant reported that her married sister gave them some food from her in-laws. Her married sister left her son with her biological parents, and this gave her an excuse to provide them with food and money, since she was supporting her son.

4.4.2 Friends

Seven participants reported that their friends provided them with support and those friends also enjoyed their company. One boy said his friends paid his fees for a trip the school had arranged, so that he could be with them. Another child was suicidal and easily fought with her friends; however, her friends still encouraged her and said that her mother still needed her help, because she suffered raising them alone. Another child said he enjoyed life at school with his friends, because at home he found no happiness due to poor family relationships. Others said their friends shared their lunch with them since they did not have food for lunch.

However, two participants reported that they often got stress from their friends. One said his friends looked down upon him since his father left the family. The other one said his friends interpreted his mistakes as the result of his father's absence. Only one girl said she did not have friends at all, because her mother told her that friends could influence her to do wrong things.

4.4.3 Church

Four of the participants were members of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), three of the Roman Catholic Church, one of the WatchTower and two did not belong to any church. Most of the participants received a lot of support from their churches, which included prayer, providing them with the opportunity for part-time work, prediction of the future, explanations for the causes of their problems, and healing of illnesses.

The prayers and the Gospel (good news) give them hope for life. One said he always prayed for his father to come back. There were choirs at the church that kept their minds off their family problems. When they sang in the choirs, there was a spirit of happiness and their unhappiness receded into the background. One of the participants worked in the missionary of the church during holidays to help his family with money.

The members of the ZCC get predictions of the future and the causes of their problems from the prophets in the church. One child said the prophet told them that her father was driven away by witches. Another one said the church rituals healed her mentally disturbed uncle.

The church also helped them to maintain their moral values, such as not drinking alcohol, smoking, and not to be violent when confronted with problems. One participant who was a member of the ZCC said he couldn't drink alcohol, because many people knew he was a member of the ZCC, and he made a public commitment to the church.

4.4.4 School

The teachers at school also provided support to some of the children. For example, one participant said his teachers understood his problems and helped him, through giving him advice of how to deal with life's problems.

4.5 PERCEPTIONS ABOUT SCHOOL AND FUTURE GOALS

Three of the participants reported that they wanted to work after finishing their matric because of the financial problems they experienced (as described above). Almost all of them wanted to

help their mothers when they are working. They wanted to buy houses for their families and pay school fees for their siblings. The participants emphasised helping their parents. In the DAP inquiry one participant said her brother was worried, because he was unable to get a job and his mother was working while other women stayed at home. She also said that the people in the village were laughing at her mother when she went to work. She said her brother wanted to see his mother not working anymore.

Four participants said they wanted to attend tertiary education institutions even though they did not have money. One said he hoped his mother would be working when he finished his matric so that she could pay for his studies. Another one said the church members (Roman Catholic) promised to support him to go to university. Two said their relatives might help them to further their education, which also reflects the supportive role of the extended family. The children were not aware that they could obtain bursaries or loans to further their studies.

Almost all of the children regarded school as a good thing and they gave different reasons for this. Two of the participants perceived school positively because it "gives them light." One said it helps children to read and write and another one said it helps them to express themselves in English when looking for a job.

Seven participants said school was good because they performed well at school and they never failed any standard. For instance, one said he was academically gifted and he wanted to do electrical engineering after matric. Another one said she could perform well, but she did not study hard.

Four participants reported that they enjoyed school because it was a place where they could meet their friends, and they had good relationships with the teachers. One participant said his teachers understood his problems and gave him advice on how to deal with life's problems. Another one said his friends were not welcome at home, so he could only meet his friends at school.

However, there were also things that disappointed them at school. Two said they hated it when the teachers have sexual relationships with schoolgirls. Three said they disliked physical punishment at school: "Teachers can use any other punishment than the corporeal one

because it is painful.” Two said they disliked it when their classmates made noise and teased the teachers. They were also worried about the high failure rate at the school and the teachers going on strike.

4.6 PERCEPTIONS ABOUT MEN

With the exception of one child, all the participants said that they did not trust men and the reasons given were that men may kill others, rape women, abandon their own offspring, have extramarital affairs, contract sexual diseases which they could transmit to their wives, and impregnate school girls. In some DAP pictures the males had hidden or cut-off hands, which suggested inadequacy in males to cope effectively with the demands of life. In some pictures, males were smaller than females and that also suggested that men were perceived as less able to deal with demands. However, one child felt that not all men are untrustworthy, since some take care of their families.

4.7 PERCEPTIONS ABOUT MARRIAGE

Almost all the participants perceived marriage positively, and gave different reasons. Six participants viewed marriage as good because it provides children with two parents to take care of them, unlike the situation they were in. One said marriage is good because the parents will have children to help them. Another one said marriage reduces the family size (i.e., when a married son or daughter moves out of the house): “Life is very expensive, my sister is now married, the family is small and the food can last for a longer period.”

All the participants wished to get married when grown-up and have small families. Some said they wanted to take their children to private schools because of the high failure rate at the local schools and lack of co-operation between the teachers and pupils. Two reported that they wanted to get married only after helping their parents (as discussed above). Two girls said they wanted to get married on condition that they were first educated and employed, to secure financial security for their children, in case their husbands were to leave them. Both these girls came from families where the parents were divorced and they were thus familiar with the possibility of divorce. One girl said she wished to get married in order to get out of her unfavourable family environment.

However, the children gave a different perspective on their mothers' adjustment. Five participants
One girl, who had a child but was deserted by her boyfriend, said she did not believe she would
get married but if she did marry, she wished to get married to an old man so that he could take
care of her. She added that some of her friends were married to older men and they were
taking care of them.

4.8 BOYFRIENDS OF THE MOTHER

The majority of the participants did not experience any problems with regard to their mothers'
boyfriends. Six of them said there were no men coming to visit their mothers. One said his
mother was a well-behaving person, and that she had married friends. (In the area where the
study was done, it is believed that if a woman is married and goes in the company of other
married women, it indicates that she will behave well, as married women do. Married women
should not have unmarried friends, but should have friends of their own status). The other five
children said they never saw any men coming to visit their mothers.

Two said some men used to come in the family, but they thought those men came for
something else than their mothers, for example: "Those men coming in my home, they are
working with her, so I do not have problems with them."

However, two children reported that they had a problem with the men who visited their mothers.
One said that a man came at night, and they were worried that he might hurt their mother. The
other one said that the man who visited her mother had his own children, and she feared that
his wife might confront her mother. She also did not want that man to leave his children for
them.

4.9 INTERPERSONAL ADJUSTMENT

In the interviews, most of the participants related that they had good interpersonal relationships
with the people in their surroundings. They reported that they enjoyed the company of their
friends, teachers and their parents. One child said he never behaved in ways that the
community would disapprove of, and that his teachers appreciated his behaviour.

However, the DAP gave a different perspective on their social adjustment. Five participants indicated poor social interest, by omitting eyes and ears in the pictures.

4.10 PERCEPTIONS OF THE SELF

Although these children were abandoned by their fathers and went through stressful experiences with other people such as relatives and friends, nearly all of them felt positive about themselves, because the same people who gave them stress, also provided them with support. Most of them performed well at school. They reported that they would like to be those who have fathers, but that did not mean that children with fathers were better than them, because they also have their own problems.

In the DAP, eight participants drew their pictures in the centre of the page, which suggested self-directiveness and confidence to deal with demands. Their ability to adjust helped them to deal with the problems they experienced in their family environments. However, there were also indications of insecurity and this will be described in paragraph 4.12.

4.11 SEXUAL IDENTITY

The sexual identity of eight participants was not negatively affected. In their KFDs they did not show any identify confusion in their sexuality, i.e., they assigned male roles to the males and female roles to the females.

Only two participants showed some sexual identity confusion. In the DAP of one child, whose mother died and whose father left them, the male and female pictures did not show any sexual differentiation, which brought the suggestion of sexual identity confusion. The other one was a girl who drew the person of the opposite sex (male) first in her DAP. Although this could reflect sexual identity confusion, it must be borne in mind that it could also relate to identification with her grandfather, since she mentioned that he was the most important person in her life.

4.12 EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES

The participants expressed feelings of helplessness and insecurity, shame, anger, blame and abandonment.

4.12.1 Feelings of helplessness and insecurity

Six of the participants who spoke about the bad treatment they received from family members, said they could not do anything about it, because they were young and their mothers were also too poor to take them out of the situation.

All ten participants experienced financial insecurity. They were abandoned by their fathers, while not receiving any financial support from them. Their mothers were also not employed and those who were employed got a low salary.

Emotional insecurity was also evident amongst the children. Nearly all the participants indicated feelings of rejection and of not being loved, either by their father or some other family members. They did not feel secure and settled in their families. One participant said she wished to have her own home since her uncle sometimes chased them with an axe. Two children drew pictures with small feet in the DAP and one underlined his pictures in the KFD, which suggested a lack of stability and security. Slanting figures in two participants' drawings also suggested feelings of helpless and insecurity. Dependency was reflected in DAP pictures of six participants by drawing buttons on the clothes. Short and weak arms in the drawings of one participant in the DAP suggested feelings of inadequacy and a need for support from the external environment.

The drawings of symbols of heat (such as tea, stove, fire and light) in the DAP and KFD pictures of six participants suggested a need for warmth and love, which their fathers and other relatives deprived them of.

4.12.2 Shame

Seven participants did not show or express feelings of shame because of their parents' behaviour. They felt that it was not their fault and that they were not to be blamed for their fathers' absence. The support from other people who said that they were not to be blamed for their fathers' absence, also gave them strength and hope for life.

Only three participants expressed shame about their parents' behaviour. One boy said the neighbours and friends looked down upon him after his father left the family. Two girls said they did not like it when their mothers got involved with married men, because these men have children to care of. They felt ashamed of it because in the village other people would get to know about it and this would devalue the mother.

4.12.3 Anger

In the interviews, only three participants described anger on their side. One said he punched other boys, but did not hurt them. Another one said friends teased him and he was not sure if he would be blamed if he hit them, because he was not afraid of them. The last one said she easily fought with her friends.

However, seven participants indicated aggressive tendencies in their DAP pictures. The following indicators illustrate this: long arms and big hands suggest overt aggression, the mouth drawn as a line suggests oral aggression, while a big head may also suggest aggression. A large nose and hands extended away from the body suggest externally directed aggressive needs.

4.12.4 Blame

Seven participants blamed their fathers for leaving the family, and said their fathers were womanisers. According to them, there is no problem when a man lives without his family because he works in an urban area, but he must come back home, either monthly, fortnightly or weekly and failing to do so, he is to be blamed. Two blamed family conflicts for the disintegration of their families, and they believed that their fathers did not visit them because

they feared their mothers, since they fought before and most likely feared that their mothers still held a grudge against them and would not welcome them back. This implies that their mothers were indirectly blamed for their father not returning. Two blamed witchcraft for their fathers' absence. Omission of hands of the male person in some DAP pictures suggested failure to behave correctly – i.e., that the male person behaved incorrectly in the sense that he caused the problems in the family.

4.12.5 Rejection/abandonment

Almost all children felt their fathers rejected them, for example: "My father does not love me, he even failed to buy me clothes after my birth at the hospital, I left the hospital naked". They felt the people who were supposed to take care of them deserted them, and they were left with questions such as why their fathers left them.

4.13 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, the categories of experience in the context of father absence were described. Eleven categories were identified, namely:

- (a) family background
- (b) financial situation
- (c) social support
- (d) perceptions about school and future goals
- (e) perceptions about men
- (f) perceptions about marriage
- (g) boyfriends of the mother
- (h) interpersonal adjustment
- (i) perceptions of the self
- (j) sexual identity
- (k) emotional experiences

These categories of experience will be interpreted in the next chapter.