

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 PROBLEM STATEMENT

The absence of a father from a family could have different effects on the growing child. According to Biller (1993), closeness with a father can be especially important in fostering the child's sense of self-esteem and self-confidence. Mruk (1995) describes self-esteem in terms of a sense of competence and worthiness; accordingly, low self-esteem is associated with feelings of inadequacy, unworthiness and anxiety.

Holman (1977) and McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) point out that the father is primarily responsible for the economic security of the family. Therefore, in the absence of the father, there may not be sufficient income for the maintenance of the family. This may contribute to the child experiencing social or peer rejection, or to the child isolating her-/himself because she/he does not fit in with his/her friends. For example, the child may lack proper clothes or pocket money, and this could make him/her to feel different to the peer group.

The children may also not aspire to go to for tertiary education due to a lack of financial resources when the father as the only source of income is absent from the family. Thus, a lack of money may demotivate the child to continue with tertiary education. It might also affect the child's academic performance. The child may be more preoccupied with the need for food, the need to fit in with her /his peer group and the need for family security, than to focus on education.

When there is no income in the family, the members may be compelled to move to cheaper housing, or to move to the woman's parents, or the mother may try to get a job away from home to support and educate the children. This may create instability and insecurity for the children.

Ivey, Ivey and Morgen (1997) contend that the family environment of antisocial individuals is frequently full of neglect and abuse, and the dependency needs of such individuals are not met. It is possible that these children, if they fail to cope with the problems of father absence, may resort to activities that are detrimental to themselves and to the community, like becoming involved in crime, alcohol and drug abuse, as well as prostitution. Engaging in such activities may partly be a compensation for feelings of inferiority and worthlessness.

It is, however, possible that the communal nature of traditional African society (Mbiti, 1969), and the important role that extended families play, may compensate for the absence of the father. A child is often regarded as *ngwana wa rena*, which means the 'child belongs to everybody' - i.e., the members of the extended family. The latter participate in the child's upbringing, and other male relatives could fulfil the role of a father.

At the same time, it must be borne in mind that many of the traditional customs, values and norms of African society have undergone radical changes, partly as a result of the influence of westernisation, urbanisation and industrialisation. It is thus possible that the communalism of traditional African societies may no longer prevail to the extent that it compensates for the absence of the father. It is also possible that the older generation may identify with the traditional norms and values, whereas the younger generation may have adopted different norms and values. Furthermore, the harsh economic realities in rural areas may make a child from a relative an unwelcome visitor and an "extra mouth to feed" in an extended family.

As far as it could be determined, no study has yet been done in South Africa regarding the impact of father absence on black adolescents in a rural area. This study aims to shed light on how both boys and girls experience this.

1.2 THE AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of the study is to describe the psychological experiences of rural black adolescents, both boys and girls, in the absence of their fathers (which may be due to divorce, separation, desertion, unwed childbirth and teenage pregnancy).

1.3 MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY

The reasons for conducting the study in a rural area and to involve both girls and boys are as follows:

The researcher lives in the rural area where this study was conducted, and has come across many fatherless children. One of the reasons why fathers desert their families is that they often go to work in the cities due to a lack of job opportunities in rural areas. Migrant labour, in turn, often results in estrangement between spouses, and the breadwinner (husband/father) not supporting his family adequately. A fatherless child is thus a common phenomenon in rural areas. In addition, it is possible that there are mediating factors in rural areas that alleviate the impact of father absence, such as the role of the extended family, a communal life-style, and cultural values. Whether factors such as these indeed play a role in how children experience the absence of their fathers is, however, unclear.

Traditionally, black fathers place great value on the birth of a son, since sons ensure that the name of the family will continue. Although the contact between fathers and daughters is usually limited, this does not mean that there is no impact of father absence on girls. For both girls and boys, having a father contributes to feelings of security, knowing that there is someone who cares for one, and who could help one to deal with the challenges of life. The presence or absence of a father could thus affect the psychological well-being of both boys and girls.

In the area where the present study was conducted, the fathers are mostly the only source of income for the family. They provide economic security for the family and in the absence of this, both boys and girls are affected, even though the effect may be different on boys and girls.

The focus is on adolescents because of the following reason: According to Erickson (Louw, 1991) adolescence is the stage of identity versus role confusion, in which adolescents need to resolve the crisis of role confusion by stabilising their sense of identity. To address this, adolescents need emotional, physical, moral and financial support, which are usually provided by the parents and the community. It is thus possible that the absence of a father during the

child's adolescence, may deprive a child of the necessary support, and thus it may have detrimental effects on the child's identity development.

The possible impact of the research results on the community include the following:

- Conducting this research may highlight the needs of children who grow up in the context of father absence, and the extent to which the current child-support system is effective in addressing their financial needs. The results could shed light on specific aspects which must be addressed by policy makers in this regard.
- The study might also shed light on the role of the father in the development of black adolescents, and how important it is for him to be available for his children, financially, emotionally, morally and physically.
- In general, the study might provide information, which could be used in support programmes amongst teenagers, aimed at assisting them to deal with the vicissitudes of life in the absence of their fathers.

1.4 PREVIEW OF THE STUDY

A qualitative research method was used. In qualitative research, according to Kvale (1996), the researcher focuses on meanings and the context rather than measuring variables. A qualitative research method works with words, not numbers, and is aimed at obtaining rich descriptions of relevant aspects of the interviewee's life world.

Five boys and five girls participated in the study. They were selected according to the following criteria:

- (a) They had to be in middle or late adolescence.
- (b) They had to reside permanently in a rural village.
- (c) The child's father had to be absent from the family, due to divorce, separation, desertion, unwed childbirth or teenage pregnancy; this excluded instances where a father had died.
- (d) The participants had to be willing and able to articulate the information needed.

Data was collected through face to face interviews, and by using the Draw a Person test (DAP) and Kinetic Family Drawings (KFD). Descriptive and interpretative statements about the

drawings were obtained from the children. During the analysis, themes were identified in the children's narratives and the KFDs and DAPs. These themes were organised into categories on the basis of similarity of concepts, and the relationships among concepts were examined. The results were then interpreted in terms of the literature reviewed, the culture of the community and the context of living conditions in a rural village. The method that was used, is described in more detail in Chapter 3.

In Chapter 2, relevant literature is reviewed. This includes literature on relevant aspects of the political and the social-historical context of South Africa, which provides the background for this study; literature on rural black families and the cultural background of the selected population; literature on father absence, the role of the father, and adolescence. In chapter 4 the results of the study are reported, and the results are interpreted in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 comprises a summary of the main findings, an evaluation of the study, and recommendations are made.

regarding the researcher's relationship with the community (background) and intimate knowledge of the community (the researcher's personal participation in various activities and projects in the community).

2.2 SOCIAL-HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The social-historical context of South Africa seems an obvious starting point for this study, as to father absence, the researcher's personal participation in various activities and projects in the community.

2.2.1 Division of labour

According to Prinsloo (2007), the history of the societies of all the leading world countries, where black and white societies are usually exposed to discrimination. Prior to South Africa's transition to democracy in 1994 blacks, who are the majority of the population, were the victims of migration and deprivation by the white minority. They occupied the lowest proportion of land (13%), and the remaining 87% was controlled by whites in the form of 'homelands'. These homelands were called Transkei, Ciskei, Bophuthatane, Bantustan, Venda, Gazankulu, KwaNatal, and KwaZulu.