

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter highlights the main findings of the study, and also includes a critical evaluation of the study and recommendations.

6.2 SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

The aim of this study was to describe the psychological experiences of black rural adolescents in the absence of their fathers.

Eleven categories of experience were identified as having a great impact on the participants, namely:

- (a) family conditions in which the children lived which included the role of the extended family
- (b) the nature and impact of financial problems experienced by the children
- (c) the kinds of social support they received
- (a) perceptions about school and future goals
- (b) perceptions about men
- (c) perceptions about marriage
- (d) boyfriends of the mother
- (e) interpersonal adjustment
- (f) perceptions of the self
- (g) sexual identity
- (h) emotional experiences

These themes overlap and influence one another.

All the participants reported that their families experienced financial difficulties, and that they often lacked food and clothes. As a result, either the participant him-/herself or a sibling had to stay with extended family members. Thus, financial problems could be regarded an important cause for family instability. In instances where the mother had never been married, the children grew up in an extended family environment from birth. Others received financial support from the extended family, while staying in their own homes.

Almost all the participants felt that they would not be able to attend tertiary education because of financial difficulty in their families, unless they received help from relatives or institutions such as the church. They believed the situation was brought about by their fathers who left them, because in rural areas the man is still, in most families, the only person responsible for the economic status of the family.

Their economic problems were also expressed in their future goals. Some of the children said that when they grow up, they are going to get a job and help their mothers because they have been living in poverty. The boys said they wanted to build houses for their mothers or, when they lived in half-completed houses, they wanted to finish building it. They also said they did not want to see their siblings suffering anymore. All the boys said they wanted to get married and do better in their families than their fathers did.

The emotional experiences reported were feelings of rejection or abandonment, anger, shame and blame. They blamed their fathers for abandoning them, but they were not always certain of the reasons for this. Two attributed the absence of their fathers to witchcraft. Most of the participants were ready to forgive their fathers. Those children whose fathers left the family after marriage, did not want men other than their biological fathers for their mothers and themselves. Six participants reported that their mothers were not involved with other men, thinking their mothers were well-behaved women in terms of the expectations of society.

Although only three participants expressed their anger verbally, in the DAP and KFD pictures, there was a tendency to express aggression.

Some participants expressed shame about their parents' situation, saying that other people now look down upon them

Overall, the participants did not trust men, and said the reason was that men are capable of killing, raping and abandoning their own offspring, having extramarital affairs, transmitting sexual diseases to their wives, and impregnating schoolgirls. They felt marriage was good because it provides the children with two parents to take care of them. They associated marriage with care, rather than any other aspect of love. However, there was also uncertainty about being married and some girls said they would only get married when they were educated and working, so as to be able to take care of her children should their husbands leave them. They felt they might repeat the mistakes of their parents.

Even though the participants experienced many difficulties in their lives, they got social support from the friends, relatives, the church and school. The family provided them with material help such as clothes and food. They also assured them that it was not their fault that their fathers deserted them. Friends provided them with advice, food, and companionship which was not provided by the family. They also got spiritual support from the church by means of prayer and through the sermons. The school gave them an environment to meet their friends and to get advice from their teachers.

However, relatives were also a source of stress. They reported that they were not happy because of continuous conflicts in their families. They also felt that they did not belong to the family, because their uncles reminded them that they were not legitimate members of the family. They thought it would be better if they were to have their own home/house to get out of that situation. Some friends also interpreted their mistakes as the result of being fatherless.

With regard to interpersonal adjustment, perceptions of the self and sexual identity, varied results were obtained. Some children adjusted well on an interpersonal level, whereas with some there were indications of a lack of social interest. Similarly, some children did not present with problems regarding their self-concept, whereas others presented with feelings of insecurity and a lack of confidence. Except for two children, there were no indications of problems regarding sexual identity.

6.3 EVALUATION OF THE STUDY

6.3.1 Research design

The researcher used a qualitative research method. This required direct contact between the researcher and the participants. Overall, the children were willing to share their stories even though it was demanding for the researcher to handle some of the issues such as the emotional reactions of the children when they told their stories. Some of the participants expected something in return from the researcher for sharing the information, such as the expectation that she would assist them to come in contact with their fathers. One even brought a friend afterwards with the hope that the researcher would assist in solving their problems. However, the researcher's aim was to collect data and nothing more, and she referred these children to the appropriate service such as social workers.

The method and the topic of research required from the researcher to establish good rapport with the children, but she also had to be honest about the reasons for the interviews. This openness helped the participants to express their feelings freely. However, the topic itself is emotionally provoking and seemed to touch the participants, as if old wounds were opened up. This required from the researcher to provide acceptance and support to the children.

In qualitative research it is important that the researcher is aware of her emotional reactions to the narratives of her participants, so as to guard against unnecessarily avoiding to discuss certain aspects, or to be biased in her interpretation of the data. An honest and open attempt by the researcher to try and enter the worlds of the children as they experience it, and to understand their experiences from their point of view helped to enhance the credibility of the results.

6.3.2 The participants

All the participants came from a rural area and this places a limitation on the extent to which the findings can be generalised. Unique characteristics of the context in which the research was done, such as the generally low socio-economic status of people in rural areas, and local

cultural beliefs and customs, might have influenced the life experiences of the children who participated in the study. This might not apply in other contexts.

All the participants were fatherless due to divorce, separation, desertion, unwed childbirth or teenage pregnancy. This also limits the generalisability of the findings, because it might not apply to children whose fathers are absent for other reasons, such as being imprisoned or going into political exile.

6.3.3 Method of data collection

Personal interviews, Draw-a-Person tests (DAP) and Kinetic Family Drawings (KFD) were used. Although most of the participants were co-operative and willing to share their stories during the personal interview, it was more effective to combine it with projective techniques. It was apparent for the researcher that it was easier for some of the participants to tell a story about the person they have drawn, rather than providing the information in the interview itself. Some of the interview information was the same as that which came from the DAP and KFD. However the projective techniques also revealed additional information that the participants failed to narrate during the interview.

The DAP test included inquiries about the pictures, and this helped the researcher gauge the psychological experiences of the participants. For example, if a child drew a relative, the enquiry about this shed light on aspects such as the quality of relationships. The KFD was used to determine how family conflicts might be projected and provided clues regarding important aspects of the family dynamics (Hulse, in Klepsch, 1982).

Machover (1949) and Klepsch and Logie (1982) posit that projective methods of exploring motivations have repeatedly uncovered deep and perhaps unconscious determinants of self-expression which could not be made manifest in direct communication. All the methods used in the present study were informative but time consuming, and it required one and half to two hours for each participant.

6.3.4 Data analysis

During data analysis and interpretation, various precautions were taken to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the study. This included that different methods of data collection were used, namely interviews and projective techniques. According to Reason and Rowan (1981), the use of more than one method of data collection could improve the credibility of the results. The data from the projective techniques was analysed according to the theoretical principles inherent in these techniques, but also enquiring into and using the meanings that the children themselves attached to their drawings. In addition to similarities between the participants, the unique experiences of each participant were also given recognition. The interpretation was done taking the context in which the study was conducted, into consideration, including the cultural meanings attached to aspects such as marriage, the clear division between children and adults, and other aspects.

6.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations focus on preventative and remedial measures, pertaining to the relevant parties involved. These recommendations are based on both the present study, and relevant aspects from the literature, and include: the child support system, social support and counselling for couples and fatherless children, and teenage pregnancies.

6.4.1 Child support

Child support is related to the economic aspects discussed in the previous paragraph. The law must ensure that fathers take financial responsibility of their offspring and that the level of child support is adequate. Legislation is needed to ensure that the court orders for child support use an appropriate formula to ensure that the child receives sufficient money for survival. It must make sure the money is regularly collected from uncooperative parents.

However, court orders should not be the only intervention. Programs must be implemented to motivate and encourage fathers to support their children willingly. It must not only be law enforcement, but it must also help or teach the fathers the importance of providing support for their children. This should include financial, emotional, physical and moral support. The

fathers must be taught that they must consider the well-being of their children regardless of whether the mother is married to someone else or not.

The programs must also involve highlighting the effect that father absence has on children, so that the fathers will understand what is going on in the lives of their children, and realise their responsibilities in this regard. They must also be advised that they have the right to quit an unhappy marriage or relationship, but they do not have the right to deprive their children of care and financial support.

The programs should also be directed at the women to make them aware of their rights and to encourage them to claim child support. However, this should take cultural beliefs and values into consideration.

6.4.2 Social support network and counselling

Family, friends, institutions such as schools, community agencies and government services can serve as a source of support, by providing resources or fulfilling the role of a 'surrogate parent' (Prater, 1995). Friends and relatives may provide fatherless children with a healthy social and family environment and, if possible, material provisions such as clothes and food. The schools may also provide them with guidance about education and job hunting.

Scanzoni (in Gunard, 1982) suggests that marriage should be built around the efforts of both partners as co-achievers and co-providers and not solely around the effort of the husband or a wife. The partners should share a desire for flexibility and freedom in marriage and deep mutual friendship. People must be made aware of marriage counselling and couples should be encouraged to make use of these services.

Mead (in Gunard, 1982) suggests that the public could be made aware of matters related to marriage and marriage counselling through nation-wide discussions in magazines, newspapers and television. Through these media, people who are happily married can help those who are not and provide new ideas about what could be done to succeed in marriage.

Rucci (in Gunard, 1982) points out that children who do the best after their parents' divorce are those whose parents spend time with them, who make them feel loved and wanted in each home, who do not involve the children in the conflict in a manner that they have to take sides, and allow the children independent relationships with each of them.

Potgieter (1986) posits that psychologists and social workers must be involved to give children from divorced families the opportunity to air their problems, for example in workshops, and to endeavour to find possible solutions to unhappiness at home. The children must also be taught that they need not feel responsible for the problems of their parents, and help them minimise the pain and sufferings that the children experience during their parents' divorce.

6.4.3 Teenage pregnancies

The focus here will be how to help teenage mothers and how to prevent teenage pregnancy.

Prater (1995) contends that the best strategy to deal with teenage pregnancies is to establish programs aimed at supporting personal self-esteem and social acceptance in teenage mothers, rather than spend time and energy to criticise and discuss how they have ruined their lives. They cannot change their past but they can focus on the future in a positive way, if they get support from the community.

They still have much potential to develop themselves, no matter what happened to their lives. They can still attain their goals if the society focuses on helping them reaching their destiny. The help must not only focus on the young mothers, but their children also need support to adjust to their living environment.

Programs can be implemented to prevent teenage pregnancy. This may take different forms. The schools, the church, and the community can play an important role in this regard. The teachers at school may provide sex education and highlight the disadvantages of involving in sexual intercourse at an early stage. These include the danger of contracting venereal diseases and AIDS, and having unplanned children and how that could affect people's lives.

The church plays an important role in enhancing morality among its members, based on the word of God. It is important for the church to implement youth programs that will help in teaching about sexual matters. Some churches prohibit sex before marriage and that also plays an important role in reducing teenage pregnancy.

The community also can establish youth clubs where the youth could be advised about future careers and how to deal with the challenges they have to face. Attitudes regarding education, guidance regarding sexual behaviour, opportunities for participation in sport, and leadership skills could be attended to in these youth clubs.