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Against the Odds: Engaged Young Fatherhood in Contemporary South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the positions of young fathers living in contexts of unemployment and poverty in South Africa's Eastern Cape. We use two primary sources of data to explore young men's ideas about fatherhood, as articulated in letters written to their children as well as in ethnographic fieldnotes based on conversations with 11 young fathers. This article highlights the ambitions that young men have for themselves as providers for their children, despite the precarity they face. We explore contextual factors which impact on how fatherhood is experienced. We identify issues of precarity (joblessness; lack of resources, prospects and customary transactions) which limit the ability of fathers to realise their own expectations and hopes for decent fatherhood. We examine how a group of young fathers convey both their aspirations for, and regrets about, their relationships with their children. Ultimately, the conditions of precarity frustrate young fathers' ambitions, and continue to work against the enactment of new gender orders and positive masculine norms in South Africa.

KEYWORDS

fatherhood; youth; South Africa; democracy; masculinity; precarity

Youth as fathers

The experiences of youth around the globe vary widely. In many cases this phase marks a transition from childhood to adulthood associated with education, developing an identity independent of parents and being free of the responsibilities and burdens associated with adult life. In the Global South the experimental orientation of being a member of "the youth" may apply to many of the middle class with secure family and other available resources. Yet for millions of young people the responsibilities of adulthood are loaded early. Resource scarcity and family pressures force income-generating responsibilities onto young people.

In this study we examine another responsibility experienced by young men at an age where they do not have the resources—material, psychological, familial— to readily

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discharge these responsibilities. Young men become fathers. This does not stop them from desiring healthy futures for their children and it impacts the way that they experience themselves not as young men, but as young fathers.

Much of the extant research on fatherhood has been conducted in the Global North and it has understandably focused primarily on fatherhood as an adult domain, although this is not to ignore a significant literature that looks at the challenges facing young fathers (Connell 2009; Hunter, Riggs, and Augoustinos 2017; Pleck 2005). This pattern is replicated in the Global South although there has been a recent increase in the fortunes of young fathers (Gibbs et al. 2017; Mvune and Bhana 2023; Sikweyiya et al. 2022). This echoes the historical dominance of Western European and North American researchers in the field of youth studies (Cooper, Swartz, and Mahali 2019).

In much of the Global North, the state has been able to provide forms of social security; employment rates and incomes are relatively high and the influence of feminism is felt in social policy and implementation. Paternity leave has been introduced and has begun to impact positively on levels of father involvement. In the Global South, material and family situations are often very different. Generally, incomes are much lower and unemployment higher. The state generally provides minimal social security, but in South Africa there are millions of people who rely on social grants as their sole source of income. These conditions are not an absolute bar to fathers' involvement in their children's upbringing. Matthew Gutmann's work in Mexico (1996) shows how fathers were involved in fathering to an extent not hitherto appreciated. Yet material and social circumstances do impact on how men view fatherhood.

The provider role is globally associated with men and it is generally understood as the responsibility of men to provide material support for family (wife, children and sometimes extended family). Men frequently assess their manhood in relation to how successful they are in providing for their families (Roy 2004). Recently, the meaning of the provider role has been refined to include emotional and social support, although material provision remains dominant in understandings of the provider role. A man who is unable to provide for his family is frequently portrayed in a negative light and treated by family members and would-be dependents as permissive. Taking the provider role seriously is one of the historical explanations for migrant labour around the world. Men will go to great lengths to fulfil the provider role. And there are strong social expectations upon them to do so. But in contexts in which employment opportunities are limited, it is often very difficult to be the provider (Hunter 2010; Morrell 2006; Richter and Morrell 2018).

In these circumstances it becomes important to ask: How do young men regard fatherhood? Will they become engaged fathers, connected to their children, present, constant, loving and supportive? Or will they be absent, detached and unavailable?

In this article we use what has become known as critical studies of men and masculinities (CSMM) as a body of theory to address and answer these questions. Although there are various independent origins of the critical sociology on men and masculinities in the United States (Brod 1987; Kimmel 1987) and the United Kingdom (Hearn 1987; Seidler 1991), it is generally agreed that it was Raewyn Connell's *Masculinities* (1995) that united the field and bequeathed to it a lexicon including concepts such as hegemonic masculinity which has become canonical. Another of Connell's major contributions was to allow space for multiple forms of masculinity. She suggested other forms of masculinity

such as subordinate, complicit, protest and alternative. This framework has stimulated research on fatherhood and caring masculinities.

We draw on CSMM to confront our questions by presenting the views and hopes of young black, isiXhosa-speaking men living in a part of South Africa that suffers high levels of unemployment and poverty. In this context their prospects of fulfilling the provider role are weak. Does this diminish their love for their children or their commitment to being good fathers?

This article begins by reviewing the literature about fatherhood in South Africa. It then describes the methods used to solicit the views of six young fathers (aged 15–23 years), describing the location of these young men in the context of the HEY BABY (Helping Empower Youth Brought up in Adversity with their Babies and Young Children) research project. We begin our paper by outlining the economy of the Eastern Cape and how it has impacted the position of youth. Then, we present and analyse letters written by six young men to their children, together with ethnographic fieldnotes based on discussions with young fathers in which they set out their experiences and aspirations of and for fatherhood.

Men, fatherhood and South African masculinity

Men, masculinities and fatherhood in South Africa are now well-researched topics (Bhana and Nkani 2014; Clowes, Ratele, and Shefer 2013; Richter and Morrell 2006; van den Berg, Ratele, and Makusha 2021). In broad outline, studies have shown that a raced and classed gender order has instantiated hierarchies of power between men and of men over women, and given the primary burden of childcare to women (Morrell 2001). Yet not all men are inactive or absent fathers—paternal carework is undertaken in various ways by many fathers (Morrell et al. 2016). In the post-apartheid era, the gendered order of care in South Africa, in which fathers are often absent and in which children are raised in households lacking a father, has remained steadfast despite other momentous social changes (Horwood et al. 2019). In 2019, 41 per cent of children were co-resident with men who were not the children's biological fathers while 22 per cent of children lived in households where there were no adult males (van den Berg, Ratele, and Makusha 2021, 14).

The question then arises: Under what conditions might we expect men to pursue greater engagement in the work of childcare? There are a number of reasons why men make this choice. One is necessity—when household or family members are ill, resident men will step in to conduct work that ordinarily is undertaken by women. Another is that ideological changes have challenged and disrupted conceptions of gender roles and presented alternative gender understandings that can also act to promote engaged fatherhood. Evidence of these changes can be found in contemporary research (Langa 2016). For example, when Malose Langa conducted his research with 12 young men in Alexandra Township he found that they expressed the desire to be good fathers, and to be with their children even in conditions of unemployment and material insecurity (Langa 2020). Being a good father expressed a desire for a form of adult masculinity—manhood—which getting older and siring a child did not necessarily create. These young men in Alexandra are making choices to realise a vision of engaged fatherhood, eschewing lives of crime and unemployment and trying to spend time with their children. This desire is encountered increasingly frequently amongst young black men as expressions of alternative and more gender-equal forms of masculinity (Bhana and Nkani 2014; Morrell 2007).

Men, unemployment and marginalisation

Since 1994, South Africa has not realised the hopes of economic growth that accompanied the ending of apartheid. The idea of a developmental state working to redress historical economic inequalities has largely failed (Freund 2018). Growth in real per capita income over time has been "anemic" in comparison with other emerging markets and with the world economy (Fedderke 2018, 177). The upside has been that poverty levels have decreased; the downside is that inequality has grown (Seekings and Nattrass 2005; Southall 2016). The lack of economic growth and employment opportunities has major implications for gender relations and for constructions of masculinity. These implications are accentuated for younger people and further accentuated by provincial location. In the province of Mpumalanga, for example, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, a survey found that among 18–24 year olds, only 12 per cent of women and 38 per cent of men were employed (Wilkinson et al. 2017). In the data presented below, the young fathers were resident in the Eastern Cape. This is among the poorest provinces in South Africa (Statistics South Africa 2019, 1). The province has the second highest rate of child poverty, with 78.7 per cent of children living in poverty (Statistics South Africa 2021). In 2020, the Quarterly Labour Force Survey found that the Eastern Cape had the highest rates of unemployment in South Africa: 40.5 per cent in the first quarter of 2020, climbing still further to 47.9 per cent in October–December 2020 (Stats SA 2021). Due to the dire shortage of jobs, many—perhaps a majority—of households are reliant on social grants. Satumba et al. found that over 60 per cent of households in the Eastern Cape are "extremely poor," with a heavy dependence on social grants for subsistence and survival (Satumba, Bayat, and Mohamed 2017).

Social grants are a vital source of support for marginal households, but they can also be viewed as the state replacing the male head of the household as the key provider. For example, Paula Meth's study in Durban found that men viewed the basket of state interventions, aimed to address poverty and advance gender equality, as infringements on masculine gender norms which upheld the role of men as providers and distributors of family income (Meth 2009). A similar tension plays out in relation to childcare. Fathers want to fulfil the provider role, but in circumstances in which this is not possible, they still desire a meaningful connection with their children despite their lack of money to provide for them.

The inability to be the provider is thought to be depriving men in South Africa of the respect that they believe is their due. Kopano Ratele observes that, in South Africa, "Men no longer rule over their families" (Ratele 2016, 15). Anthropologist, Leslie Bank, observes "widespread pessimism" amongst youth in townships and informal settlements.

> Many young men and women doubt that they will ever marry or set up a homestead for themselves in the rural areas, as was the case in the 1960s and 1970s. There is real uncertainty among the youth about the future and what lies ahead in a world of rapid social and economic change, where they lack the critical skills and technological mastery required in the 21st-century job market. (Bank 2020, 386)

In this context the focus of young people is on survival and making sense of their lives. For young, poor and often fatherless men, Ratele argues, this involves confronting a tremendous unacknowledged and unprocessed pain caused by "a myriad of intersecting forms of oppression" (Ratele 2016, 15). Under apartheid, patriarchal power rested on an alliance between men and the state. The "patriarchal bargain," as Steinberg has termed it,

meant that black and other "non-White" men participated in the workings of the state and the economy, largely because they had no other choice. But their patriarchal power over women was a form of compensation for this oppression (Steinberg 2013). The "patriarchal bargain" fell apart even before 1994 as urbanisation gathered pace and more women entered the formal and informal economies (Bank 2020, 385). These changes also saw dramatic drops in marriage rates and what many commentators have called a crisis of masculinity—the foundations of men's power were cracked by economic, social and political changes (Posel, Rudwick, and Casale 2011, 102–111).

Being a paternal provider was historically the foundation of respectable manhood in South Africa, with joblessness attenuating the means for provisioning of families. Disillusionment rather than hope is associated with the post-1994 period and the "born-free" generation (Tivenga 2021). In a study of a rural area in northern South Africa, Madhavan et al. found that only half of all fathers provided support and that levels amongst those who had children from 1991 onwards were appreciably lower than for older fathers. The figures suggest that "economic and social changes have had a greater impact on younger men than on older ones" (Madhavan, Townsend, and Garey 2008, 662).

Social grants, migrant labour and paternal absence

More than a million children in the Eastern Cape province rely on government food schemes for subsistence and survival (Ellis 2023). Across South Africa in general, social grants are the most important source of income (46.2%) after salaries (66.2%), with over a fifth of households relying on social grants as their primary means of income (20.4%). In the Eastern Cape, social grants rather than salaries provide the bulk of household income (61% versus 39%). Statistics South Africa's Household Survey shows nationally that only about a third of children (32.7%) live with both parents. While most children live with their mothers (42%), a much smaller proportion (4.0%) live solely with their fathers (Statistics South Africa 2021, 10–12).

Apartheid's migrant labour system wrought decades of domestic separation. During the apartheid era (1948–1994), the majority of black children were raised primarily by their mothers together with other members of their maternal families, often hundreds of kilometres away from their fathers' workplaces. Despite substantial changes to the socio-economic organisation of the "post-apartheid state," the commonality of paternal absence from their children's household remains steadfast three decades into the democratic transition. We argue here that the desire to be a good father dominates the imagination of the young men in this study, who hope that providing love and constancy will help to create happy and successful children, even in the absence of their abilities to provide for their children's basic needs. Despite their difficulties in fulfilling the expected role of father as material provider, these young men remain hopeful that they could establish more caring relationships and stronger connections between themselves and their children (Swartz and Bhana 2009).

Methods

The primary data drawn upon in this article comes from two research components of a larger study of young parents conducted in the Eastern Cape in 2018. This was the HEY

BABY study (Helping Empower Youth Brought up Adversity with their Babies and Young Children), about the health practices and experiences of young parents. HEY BABY focused on mothers and children in particular: 1 406 mothers and 1 144 children were included in the study. We used snowball sampling combined with direct sampling of young mothers who were part of antenatal care services, who then introduced researchers to the fathers (aged 15–23) of their children. Young, male researchers who were from the same townships as participants, who were both fathers, and who were fluent in local vernaculars, conducted interviews with 11 young fathers and wrote detailed ethnographic fieldnotes about their content. They held a focus group in which six of the 11 young fathers participated. (The remaining five research participants were either unavailable or unwilling to participate.)

In the course of the focus group, young fathers were requested to write letters to their children which reflected critically on their role as fathers, outlining their aspirations for their children's future, and giving advice to other young fathers. The fathers in this sample all had infant children. Four letters were written in English and two in isiXhosa (which were translated by an experienced bilingual researcher), and were coded manually and thematically. Research participants chose their own psuedonyms.

The letters written by fathers to their children are what Unterhalter et al. (2004, 57) (after Jean-François Lyotard), have drawn on as *petits récits* ("little narratives") of young people's everyday lives in post-apartheid South Africa. In the era of "big data," there is a growing reliance on large sample sizes to demonstrate the statistical significance, and thus empirical value, of research and its attendant claims. This study follows a contrasting methodological turn, focusing in detail on the intimate and subjective narratives of a small number of research participants ($n = 6$ for the letters; $n = 11$ for fieldnotes), whose accounts foreground emotion, experience and aspiration.

Our research recognises the tentative agentic steps taken by young fathers in expressing themselves to their children through letter-writing and in personal discussions with the researchers in this study. Young fathers' accounts and excerpts of writing describe their hopes to reconcile their families' expectations for greater material and social provision with their own desires for greater adult autonomy, and for the respect and gratitude that ideally accrue to a father's fulfilment of his provider role. The hopes of these young fathers—to find work, earn decent wages, and provide material support to their children—are contrasted with the realities of protracted and deepening poverty, precarity, and reliance on networks of patronage or state aid for survival and subsistence.

Field notes were written to document discussions held with young fathers. Most did not want these discussions to be recorded with a dictaphone, fearing that recordings could be used against them to claim child maintenance through the court system. This reveals that, while young fathers were willing to talk to researchers, they did not necessarily trust researchers entirely and were worried that the content of interviews might be used against them. This points to the sensitivity around fathers' fulfilment of the provider role, with concerns about the prospective financial threats facing young fathers from the mothers and maternal kin of their children. This article situates findings from the primary analysis of these letters and from interviews and fieldwork notes in relation to South Africa's current gender order, exploring young men's experiences of, and aspirations for, fatherhood.

"Letter to my child"

The corpus of letters in this primary resource base, including reflections on young fathers' own lives and their ideals for their children, may be textually understood as a composite of biography and prophecy. They are a figuration of young fathers' pasts and their lived experiences in their roles of siring children, as well as their feelings about, and desires for, their roles as fathers and—critically—of their children's futures, and their hoped-for relationships. The research exercise was established as a kind of future-projection, inviting young fathers to write to their children, not regarding their direct and present experiences dictated by their current circumstances, but as a description of an aspirant future, in which children could discover their fathers' personal accounts of their challenges, admissions and ambitions for their children as they grew older and reached adulthood. A number of the young fathers who participated in this exercise were not of the legal age of "majority" (18 years old in South Africa). In general, their role as "minors" was a complicating factor in their acceptance—despite having sired children—in assuming fiscal responsibility for their children. They were not legally the principal guardians of their children. This role was given by law to the mothers or, in instances in which they were younger than 18, their mothers' guardians.

For the fathers in this research, the status of "guardian" being assigned to an adult member of the mother's household, including its implications for the accrual of social grants to a mother's household, had profound social impacts for their association with, and responsibility for, their children. Further, and while this article's analysis focuses on the current commitments of young fathers to their children and does not extend its analysis to their future commitment, it is notable that a number of the young fathers in this sample who had matriculated from high school and begun tertiary education in the years since they had become fathers were recipients of grants from South Africa's National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) designed to fund higher education for those unable to afford it. The fact that young fathers who were enrolled in tertiary education were receiving NSFAS support was recounted by some fathers as another source of income which was expected to be shared with the mothers of their children.

"A father is born to be a provider": the material imperatives of fatherhood

The imperatives for young fathers to provide financially for their children were foregrounded in the focus group discussion, and emerged strongly in interviews, as well as in the fathers' letters. Each of the letters written by young fathers emphasised that the ability to provide material support for one's child was the first priority of a father. As Asonalise wrote: "A father is born to be a provider. As a man you must make it your top priority to provide for your child." Fathers wrote of the difficulties of finding secure employment, despite their struggles to do so. As Jabu wrote: "I am striving and doing all that I am doing for you in order to have a better life." Confronting the difficulties, or even the impossibilities, of providing for his family, Jabu then wrote: "Try not walk in my shoes. Try a different path, but a better way than I." Buthani wrote that it was essential for a child to "be loved and be supported with all means financial and social," acknowledging the supportive role a father should play beyond merely fiscal support. Buthani's inability to financially support his child had extremely negative consequences for his

relationship with his child's mother. In his letter, he wrote: "Nowadays fathers are chased away from their baby mammas because of financial support." Khunou (2006) shows how failing to provide results in fathers being "chased away" and explains that the necessity of financial support by fathers for their children is the principal defining feature of popular perceptions of fatherhood.

Fathers were generally at pains to expand their role from merely financial support to broader forms of assistance. As Seiso wrote: "A father has to be spiritual. It does not have to be about money." Seiso was also concerned with the negative effects of absentee fatherhood. He wrote: "In most situations, children are raised by single parents, which are their mothers. Where are the fathers? They are out there in the world." While mothers are playing the primary domestic and parental role, Seiso views fathers as being estranged from their families. He emphasised the necessity of being present in a child's life, no matter one's economic circumstances, writing:

> The word "father" or "dad" means you have a responsibility, which is a child. You have to play a role as a father. The role of a father is to be present for a child. Being present can change many things like the way your child behaves, where respect and discipline is involved.

CJ agreed with the negative effects of paternal abandonment, stating: "A father should not escape the child, cause that will make a very bad impact on that child as he/she grew up without a father's love." A number of fathers were at pains to convey that they might not have money, but that this did not affect the love that they felt for their children. As CJ wrote: "I might not have money, I might have nothing, but that doesn't mean that love I have [for you] means nothing … Love is not about money, but feelings and happiness we have together."

Absentee fatherhood remains extremely common in South Africa, with the majority of children living in single-headed households led by their maternal lineage, demonstrating a continuity rather than a break from the past. A number of the young men in this study had grown up with absent fathers. As Qhamani recounted:

> [H]e thinks about what his father did, which was leaving his mother as a single parent. Now that his relationship with this girlfriend [and the mother of his child] has ended, he fears that his child might look at him the same way as he looks at his father. (interview 24 May 2018)

Young fathers' financial precarity impacted fundamentally on how they envisaged their place in their children's lives. As Sinethemba (30 May 2018) recounted: "I can't say that I am a father if I cannot support the baby financially." Sinethemba stated that financial support was the "backbone of raising a child." A number of the young fathers in this study felt purposely excluded from their children's lives because of their inability to provide financially. This exclusion was meted out not just by the mothers of their children, but by the mothers' families as well. Sibulele (11 June 2018) explained that not being able to provide financially for his child was "shameful." He stated: "Even the baby mama won't see you as a proper man because you can't provide for your child." Their failure to fulfil the provider role thus cast doubts on young men's masculinity. Qhamani (24 May 2018) explained:

> The reason why it's difficult for him to visit his child sometimes is knowing that he doesn't have money. And when he gets to the house they will say the baby doesn't have nappies or food. That makes him think twice about visiting his child.

Here, Qhamani's desire to care for his child is eroded by his lack of money. Rather than visiting his child empty-handed, he would rather not visit at all.

"Shame and disgrace": the social damage of young paternity

While conferring a stronger sense of masculinity for some of the fathers in this study, the shame of young parenthood was also highlighted. As Philasande recounted:

> Some of the challenges that young parents are facing is how people in the community look at them as young parents. They look at them with shame and disgrace. People say that kids are having kids. You feel like you have done something wrong and at the clinic nurses shout at them and say, "you didn't invite me when you had sex, now you want me to come and help you," so that's what you have to deal with … It's difficult for him and raising a child without any form of income is terrible. People talk about him an the pressure gets too much. Our communities have expectations from a person that is a parent and if you can't meet those expectations they make you feel like a loser. (12 June 2018)

The shame conferred by fathers' inability to provide financially for their children prevented them from going to visit their children who were being taken care of by their mothers and their mothers' families. Absentee fatherhood was regarded by some of the men in this study as preferable to present fatherhood without financial resources. As one researcher explained: "The reason why some other guys are running away from their babies is because they don't have the money to take care of their babies. We know that fathers must support their children financially." This researcher had asked a young father whether he could visit his baby without bringing anything for her and his response was "No!" The participant explained: "That is because they feel ashamed and even the baby momma won't see you as a proper man because you can't provide for your child … so if you have nothing you will feel ashamed to go and see your child" (11 June 2018).

Under amaXhosa customary law, which governed the lives of all of the participants in this study, fathers do not have automatic acceptance as genitors of children if they have not paid bride wealth (*lobola*) to the mother's family (Moore and Samukimba 2022). One prospect for poor fathers to recoup paternal responsibility and to be formally accepted as the father of their child was through the payment of "damages" to the mother's family. In lieu of *lobola* (the transfer of bridewealth to a woman's family), the payment of damages for a child born out of wedlock acknowledges that a mistake was made in extramarital pregnancy, but avows the social standing and authority of men as fathers and providers of and for their children. A number of young men planned to pay damages when they were working in the future, but in the meantime they continued to try to see their children and to provide some form of paternal presence. As recounted in discussions with Sesona (29 May 2018):

> He sees his child on school holidays. The only link between the families is just between them [the mother and himself]. The family of the baby mother has claimed damages but they were not paid due to financial difficulties. He plans to pay the damages when he has income or employment.

"I love you from dusk until dawn": paternal love, tenderness and role modelling

This corpus of letters from young men to their children as well as their discussions with researchers were characterised by fathers' loving tenderness towards, and adoration

for, their children. Daddy Sam wrote: "A father is the main person to love and adore his children, and also to care about them." Daddy Sam qualified this assertion with an explanation of how it is that fathers can demonstrate their love for their children, including

> to know their whereabouts, what they are doing, what they are eating, how they are feeling at certain times, who they connect and surround themselves with, how they are doing at school and also hoping all in one to be their child's shoulder to cry and cough, whatever they feel like sharing.

Daddy Sam's love for his child is exacting, and he is concerned even about the banalities of his child's life.

CJ wrote:

> I, your father, want you to note that the love I have for you is infinite. No one could take your part in my heart. I love you for who you are and never doubt the love I have for you. I love you from dusk until dawn.

It is notable that, directly after this declaration of love, CJ goes directly on to write about his financial difficulties and his failure to provide: "I might not have money, I might have nothing, but that doesn't mean that love I have means nothing cause I ain't got money. Love is not about money, but feelings and happiness we get when we are together." The sense that a father's love is bound up in his ability to provide financially is powerfully resonant here.

There is also a sense that having a child incurs both responsibility and ambition. Asonalise stated this directly, encouraging other young fathers to "have ambitions for your child." Through hard work and education, as well as through associating with the right kinds of people, it is hoped that the children of these young fathers would go on to have bright futures. Young fathers credited paternity for their greater motivation at school and in leading a respectable life, setting an example worthy of following. As Jabu (28 May 2018) recounted:

> My child pushes me to be focus with school and the future. Sometimes I think of giving up on life and thinking of my boy gets me up, gives me hope that things will be okay one day. When I think about him I remember that I am responsible for someone's life and I have to give him a bright future.

As with a number of other young men in this study, NSFAS provided a source of material support for young men who were enrolled in tertiary education, but it was also used to support their families and children. Jabu recounted how "his baby keeps him strong. When he sees the baby he gets motivation to go forward" (11 June 2018). The responsibility of having a child was regarded by numerous participants as life-changing. For instance, Philasande (24 May 2018) recounted: "Fatherhood has changed me to be a responsible young man." As the interviewer wrote:

> He cannot do things like before, now he has to think before he makes any decision … Being a father is good for him because he learns a lot and it gives him a good excuse to miss out on any gathering organised by the friends because he doesn't like to always party too much, drinking.

For a number of the young fathers in this study, paternity allowed them to avoid negative or harmful practices, such as alcohol abuse.

Paternity also drew young fathers into relationships with other young fathers, in which they could compare experiences and learn from each other. As Philasande (24 May 2018) explained, two of his friends also have babies, all one month apart from each other. "While they could laugh together about this, it also makes them serious about their studies because now they know they have responsibilities." For Philasande: "being around his daughter growing gives him great joy because he is there to see each stage of the development of the child." The maturity that young fathers developed as a result of their experiences of paternity was foregrounded by participants. As Samkelo (18 June 2018) explained: "Fatherhood is something that requires you to grow, and you have to choose to be an adult or not. For him, it has made him grow as a parent." Fatherhood also strengthened participants' sense of being a man. When asked about how it felt to be a young father, Jabu answered that "He felt good … he felt like a man" (28 May 2018).

Rather than ruining their futures, a trope which is commonly applied to young mothers in South Africa (Hodes 2017), a number of the young fathers in this study felt that fatherhood had impacted on them positively. As Qhamani (24 May 2018) stated:

> The positives of parenting is personal growth. You change as a person and your child helps you to learn things you were not aware of. There are those moments that you spend with your child that you wish you could treasure forever.

Despite being excluded from the families of the mothers of their children, some fathers still managed to maintain a relationship with their children alongside fulfilling at least a provisional provider role. Sesona (29 May 2018), for example, does not see himself as the father of his child because he is unable to support his child financially. "The baby is being supported by the baby mamma's family and from his side he tries but it's not much." Yet, speaking about his dreams, he described how

> raising his child is one of his dreams. To hear his child speak and call his name was [one of] the most amazing moments in his life. He hasn't done much for the kid but the love that he gets back from her, it's always a great experience.

Sinethemba (30 May 2018) spoke of the new emotions and experiences of being a young father: "I am a young father now and my baby teaches me how to love and what love is."

Willing their children to foster their own loving relationships, in the letters fathers encouraged their children to be discerning in their choice of friendships, and to "love and respect people" (Asonalise). Fathers conveyed the importance of having a good relationship with their children as a foundation for their own success. Asonalise states:

> Let your child know that you have love for her so that it may be easy for her to approach you as a parent if she has a problem. Teach her about choice and that the kind of people she associates with says a lot of about her as a person.

He also advises other fathers to

> be involved with your child's education. Take part 100 per cent so that you can know her strengths and weaknesses … Make sure your child takes part in sport and anything that is good that will keep her mind busy and refreshed all the time.

Here, Asonalise seems to be advising not just his child, but himself. In the next paragraph in the letter he writes: "Don't live your life regretting being a young parent, but living your life to the fullest, embracing your child's memories."

The notion of "leading by example" was conveyed explicitly in three of the letters, with some fathers writing that their own lives and choices should not be emulated, and conveying their own struggles to be a good, supportive parent. Fathers conveyed the importance of a supportive relationship during good and bad times. Avowing the need for a tender bond with his child, and thus eschewing stereotypes of toxic masculinity and paternal absence, Daddy Sam writes:

> It is everyone's dream to have a good bond … a relationship with his/her child. Between a father and a child, a good relationship produces good results in such a way that a child can count on his dad always, during dark and lighter periods of time. The journey that leads a father to a better future should be to pass on to their child as a good example, that might remain popping up in their mind while doing and taking decisions about their lives.

Thus, Daddy Sam imagines his own prosperity as a conduit for his child's success.

The marginalisation of young fathers—often by the mothers of their children who have denied fathers' access to their children as a result of their failure to pay "maintenance"—was replete within the primary evidence base.

Most of the letters included sections about the shame that young fathers felt in not being able to support their children financially. As Daddy Sam wrote: "A father is the one who has to educate his child on both the good and the bad path he has taken in life, in that way of paying support to his child." A number of fathers also spoke of the importance of open communication with their children. Daddy Sam, for instance, wrote: "A father should have his own good way to use while communicating with his child, without violence … Good communication between a child and a father conquers it all, no barriers could exist and break up their relationship."

In keeping with the refrain that young fathers be recognised in the role of fatherhood even if they are unable to provide financial support for their children, and with a sense of ambition, CJ, for example, stated: "Fathers should love their children even though he knew that they [one's children] didn't get money [for child support] … ."

Our inductive analysis revealed the desire of young fathers for their children to be afforded better lives and futures. Numerous letters included admonishments to children to show "respect and discipline," while other letters included fathers' admonishments to themselves as a means of ensuring that their children did not make the same mistakes they had. As Seiso wrote:

> Every parent wants a good, disciplined child and that applies to me too … Respect school and invest your time as it'll help you succeed in life. I do not want you to make the same mistakes as me because I'm not proud of those.

Young fathers grappled with their own roles in taking "responsibility." As Seiso wrote:

> The word "father" or "dad" means you have a responsibility, which is a child, and you have to play a role as a father. The role of the father is to be present for the child. Being present can change the many things like the way the child behaves, where respect and discipline is involved.

Conclusion

Six young fathers wrote to their children expressing hopes that the future will be bright for them, that these children will experience the presence and love of their fathers and not

make the same mistakes that their fathers made when they became teenage dads. In these letters we see signs of the emergence of new and more gender-equitable masculinities. We see a move towards embracing emotion, acknowledging and expressing love, of a desire to be involved in childcare, a desire to be better than their own fathers. And yet we also see the tenacious hold that the provider role still has on understanding and performing the role of the father. We see that these young men are vulnerable to the expectations of community and the demands of the mothers of their children. And beyond all of this is the grim backdrop of the economy which provides very little room for optimism. Realising their goals for themselves and their children will be against the odds.

What are the limits and possibilities of engaged fatherhood? Debates about fatherhood have often proceeded on the basis of assumptions of urban, stable, well-resourced, state-supported, nuclear-family societies. They apply "middle class models of fathering to non-European, low-income populations where a combination of economic necessity and cultural preferences bring about markedly different models of parenting" (Madhavan et al. 2014, 460). This yardstick is likely to lead to uncharitable conclusions about father involvement and about local forms of masculinity. Recent studies of South Africa's care regime identify a complex situation where post-apartheid changes have been insufficient to address inequalities in access to care (Button, Moore, and Seekings 2018, 602). What remains is a gendered ideology that still presumes women will be the major providers of care for their children, while the role of father remains tethered to the ability to provide and pay for one's children. Young fathers were frustrated by these expectations, but also felt they had little power to oppose them. A number of the participants in this study planned to pay "damages" to the maternal families of their child's mother so as to correct the "wrongdoing" committed in having a child outside of marriage and without the payment of *lobola* (bridewealth). The young men in this study also felt that the system of social grants upon which families were so dependent for subsistence and survival had replaced their positions as the primary wage-earners for their families.

For those young men who were enrolled in tertiary education, the expectation was that a portion of the government subsidy for their studies (provided by NSFAS) would be paid to the mothers of their children in order to provide for necessities. This is a new research finding on the expanded expectations and obligations of young fathers who receive NSFAS grants.

Ultimately the young fathers in this study expressed love and tenderness towards their children, wishing them a bright future unencumbered by the material constraints that characterised their own experiences of fatherhood. No matter the poor economic prospects for the fathers in this study, the role of fatherhood was assumed by study participants with a sense of optimism and pride, with love for their children paramount.

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