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‘It left a big wound’: Young Black African Men’s Lived Experiences of Growing Up Without Biological Fathers in South Africa

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Abstract

Background

Father absence is a widespread social reality in South Africa and has significant implications for young men's psychological well-being, identity formation, and masculinity construction. While national statistics and research have established a high prevalence of father absence in South Africa, there is limited qualitative studies that have explored how Black African young men experience and navigate growing up without their biological fathers.

Aim

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of male college students (aged 18–30 years) who grew up without their biological fathers and how this may have impacted them at different stages their live.

Methods

This was a secondary data analysis of 10 in-depth interviews conducted at a South African Technical and Vocational Education and Training college.

Results

Biological father absence was linked to emotional distress, identity uncertainty, economic vulnerability and disrupted social and cultural belonging among many participants. Despite these challenges, some participants highlighted the central role played by female caregivers particularly mothers, grandmothers, and aunts in providing emotional, moral and material support to them. The nurturing, support and guiadance provided by these female caregivers seems to have facilitated the development of gender-equitable attitudes and practices among some young men who described being empathetic, caring and responsible – and attributed this to the influence of these caregivers. Other participants relied on alternative socialisation agents, including peers, extended male family members, and digital media to fill the fatherhood void left by their absent fathers. Many described having utilized various coping strategies including sports, spirituality and self-reflection, to lessen the effects of biological father absence in their lives.

Conclusion

Biological father absence emerged as critical in shaping young men's emotional well-being, identity formation, cultural belonging, and material security. Yet, narratives also suggest that father absence

does not produce an inevitable pathway into harmful masculinity. Supportive relationships with female caregivers fostered resilience and enabled some young men to adopt gender-equitable versions of manhood. The findings emphasise the need to address father absence not only as a family-structure issue, but as a relational, gendered, and mental health issue shaped by wider social and economic conditions. Culturally grounded, gender-transformative mental health promotion interventions which aim to support Black African young men who grow up without biological fathers are needed to strengthen protective caregiving networks, promote emotional expression and help-seeking, and create pathways toward healthier and more equitable masculinities.

1. Background

Globally, literature suggests that fathers play a critical role in the emotional, social and psychological development of their children, influencing mental health, educational outcomes, and identity formation (1–4).Worldwide, father absence is commonly understood through a range of household structures, including single-parent, grandparent-headed, and child-headed households, although the prevalence of single-parent households is the most frequently reported indicator. In high-income countries, approximately 15–25% of children live in single-parent households, reflecting one of the most common manifestations of parental absence (5, 6). In the United States, around 23–25% of children (approximately 1 in 4) live with one parent only (7, 8).

Father absence is also prevalent in many low- and middle-income countries where factors such as labour migration, poverty, parental separation and diverse family arrangements often contribute to fathers living apart from their children (3). The prevalence of children living outside two-parent households is high in South Africa. The Statistics South Africa's General Household Survey (9) revealed that only 31.4% of children live with both parents, 45.5% live with only their mothers, 18.8% live with neither biological parent, and 11.7% are orphaned. The State of South African Fathers (SOSAF) 2024 report indicates that approximately 64.5% of children do not live with their biological fathers (10) .

The detachment of biological fathers from their children in South Africa is a growing concern. Children who grow up in the absence of their biological fathers are more likely to experience emotional distress, behavioral challenges, and lower socio-economic outcomes compared to peers with present biological fathers (11, 12).Existing literature has shown that children who grow up without involved biological fathers tend to experience emotional and social challenges, including emotional distress, anxiety, loneliness, social exclusion, difficulties related to identity and belonging, and poorer educational outcomes.(13, 14).These emotional and social experiences are important because they may affect young people's mental health and wellbeing. Understanding these experiences among young men is therefore important for identifying appropriate psychosocial and mental health support and informing interventions that promote their wellbeing.

For children, father absence has been associated with increased vulnerability to early substance use, risky sexual behavior, and poor educational attainment, disproportionately affecting boys and young men

during adolescence and emerging adulthood (15, 16).

While biological fathers are widely recognised as important contributors to children's development, literature also shows that father presence is not always beneficial for children (17). Research has shown that when present fathers are violent, misuse alcohol, or use illicit substances, their presence may negatively affect children's emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing (18, 19). Exposure to such environments has been linked to increased risks of emotional distress, behavioural difficulties, and long-term mental health challenges in children (20, 21). In these situations, children may experience fear, instability, and disrupted caregiving, which can undermine healthy development (5). This evidence highlights that it is not father presence alone that determines positive outcomes, but rather the quality, safety and stability of paternal involvement.

The concept of the "absent father" is often rooted in Western notions of the nuclear family, where fatherhood is primarily understood through biological paternity and continuous residential co-residence within a single household (21, 22). This framing does not fully capture family structures and caregiving arrangements in many Black African communities in South Africa, where childrearing has historically occurred within broader kinship and extended family networks (23). The absence of biological fathers from children's lives in South Africa has largely been shaped by broader historical and structural processes, including the migrant labour system that separated men from their families for extended periods, as well as poverty, parental separation, and parental mortality associated with the HIV/AIDS epidemic (24, 25)

In South Africa, caregiving and the socialisation of children often extend beyond biological fathers, with mothers, grandmothers, aunts, uncles, social fathers, and other community members playing important roles in nurturing children, providing guidance, and transmitting social and cultural values (26). Research has shown that fatherhood and child socialisation in many African contexts are embedded within broader kinship and caregiving networks, with social fathers and extended family members frequently assuming important parenting and mentoring responsibilities (27). Similarly, studies have highlighted the importance of alternative caregivers, including social fathers, in supporting children's development and shaping masculinities in contexts where biological fathers are absent (28, 29). As such, in the current study, while father absence is understood primarily as the absence of a biological father during childhood, the significance of social fathers and extended caregiving arrangements is recognised, thereby avoiding a deficit-based interpretation of fatherhood that may obscure locally grounded experiences (4). Nevertheless, existing research suggests that the presence of alternative caregivers does not necessarily diminish the symbolic, emotional, and identity-related significance of biological fathers in young men's lives (4, 29).

1.1.Theoretical Framing

This study draws on Attachment Theory, Resilience Theory, and the theory of hegemonic masculinity to provide a nuanced understanding of how biological father absence is experienced by Black African

young men (aged 18–30). Using these theories in this study provides a comprehensive lens for understanding how father absence may impact young men's social and mental and their overall well-being. Attachment Theory (30, 31) helps explain how early caregiver-child relationship shape the child's emotional security, self-regulation, and relational patterns across the lifespan. This theory postulates that secure attachment fosters healthy emotional and social development, whereas disrupted or insecure attachment can increase vulnerability to psychological difficulties (32). Resilience theory helps explain how individuals (e.g., a young man) may adapt and develop strengths in the face of early adversities. Scholars have described resilience as a dynamic, context-dependent process that highlights how personal strengths and social support allow individuals to thrive even after early disruptions (33). Resilience theory (34, 35) highlights the importance of protective factors such as supportive relationships, coping skills, and community resources in enabling individuals to maintain or regain well-being despite the challenges they face. Resilience Theory thus provides a useful framework for examining how individuals navigate adverse social experiences and life circumstances (35, 36).

The theory of hegemonic masculinity complements these perspectives by focusing on how particular forms of masculinity become socially dominant and legitimise gendered relations of power. Connell (18) conceptualises hegemonic masculinity as the culturally exalted form of masculinity that occupies a dominant position within a gender order, shaping relationships among men and between men and women (19, 37). While hegemonic masculinity has often been associated with traits such as authority, strength, heterosexuality, provision, and emotional restraint, these characteristics vary across social and historical contexts, reflecting the fluid and contested nature of masculinities. Importantly, hegemonic masculinity is not fixed but varies across social and historical contexts, resulting in different expectations regarding what constitutes an "ideal" man or father. While some constructions of masculinity emphasise men's role as economic providers, others increasingly promote fathers' active involvement in caregiving, emotional support, and everyday child-rearing. Relatedly, the concept of hybrid masculinities highlights how men may combine traditionally masculine ideals such as provision, authority, and responsibility with more nurturing and emotionally engaged forms of fatherhood. This reflects a growing recognition that masculinities are multiple, dynamic, and continually negotiated.

These differing ideals shape how father absence is viewed and understood in a given setting. In contexts where fatherhood is primarily associated with financial provision, their absence in the lives of their children may be interpreted mainly in economic terms. However, where fatherhood is linked to nurturing, guidance, and emotional engagement, father absence may be viewed broadly as encompassing not only material deprivation for children but also the loss of care, emotional support, and everyday paternal involvement. Furthermore, another body of research suggests that masculinity construction is shaped not only through relationships among men but also through interactions with women, whose expectations, experiences, and social roles contribute to the construction and reinforcement of masculine identities.

Combining these theories in this study provides a robust framework for exploring and understanding the lived experiences of young Black African men who grew up without biological fathers in South Africa.

Understanding their experiences of growing up without their biological fathers and how they made sense of this is essential for examining how such experiences impact various aspects of their lives (4, 29). This study aims to contribute to a growing body of South African literature of fatherhood through exploring the lived experiences of young Black African men (ages 18–30 years) who grew up without biological fathers and the implications this may have for their social health, mental health and general well-being.

2. Materials and Methods

Study Design

This study involved a secondary analysis of qualitative data generated from in-depth interviews (IDIs) with 10 male college students aged 18–30 years from a Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) college in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The participants were part of a larger qualitative study that explored male-perpetrated technology-facilitated gender-based violence in South African higher education institutions (HEIs). Although biological father absence was not the primary focus of the original study, it emerged organically as participants narrated their family backgrounds, childhood experiences and upbringing. The 10 participants provided detailed accounts of growing up without their biological fathers and reflected on how these experiences related to their childhood, relationships, identity and wellbeing. The recurrence and depth of these narratives provided the rationale for undertaking the present secondary analysis focused specifically on experiences of biological father absence.

Setting

The larger qualitative study was conducted at a public TVET college. The study setting is predominantly rural, and many TVET college students in South Africa face numerous systemic obstacles, including elevated poverty, food insecurity, and precarious living conditions (38). According to (39), approximately 53% of TVET college students receive NSFAS funding, highlighting the financial vulnerability of a substantial proportion of students attending these institutions.

Study participants

In the larger qualitative study, 21 male students (aged 18 and 30) participated in IDIs. During data analysis (for the larger study), we established that 10 participants described growing up with their biological fathers. The narratives about growing up without their biological fathers featured prominently in the interviews of these participants The demographic characteristics of the 10 participants are provided in Table 1. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 24 years and were enrolled across different years of study, from first to fourth year. All participants had experienced father absence during childhood, with four reporting absence since birth and the remainder experiencing father absence between the ages of 1 and 6 years. Primary caregiving responsibilities were predominantly assumed by female family members, including grandmothers, mothers, and aunts. Grandmothers were the most frequently reported primary caregivers (n = 4), followed by mothers (n = 3) and aunts (n = 3). These

characteristics reflect the early and prolonged nature of father absence in participants lives, as well as the important caregiving role played by extended family members.

Sampling

The larger study comprised 21 participants, generating 21 qualitative interview transcripts. For the present analysis, 10 transcripts were purposively selected because these participants reported experiencing biological father absence while growing up. The adequacy of this sample was guided by the relevance, richness, and depth of the data in relation to the specific aim of the current analysis, rather than by sample size alone. The selected transcripts contained detailed accounts of participants' experiences and perceptions of biological father absence, including its perceived influence on their emotional wellbeing, social relationships, identity, and broader life experiences. Furthermore, recurring patterns and shared experiences were identified across the participants' narratives, while individual accounts provided sufficient variation to capture the complexity of their experiences. The 10 transcripts were therefore considered sufficiently information-rich to support an in-depth exploration of biological father absence among the young men included in this analysis

Data collection

A total of 21 IDIs were conducted from June to July 2025. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted using a semi-structured interview guide developed by the research team specifically for the larger qualitative study from which the present analysis was derived. An English-language version of the interview guide is provided as Supplementary File 1. Male qualitative researchers conducted the interviews in IsiXhosa, which is the dominant spoken language in the Eastern Cape province.

The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission. Participants were initially asked about where they grew up, their family structure, whether they had siblings, the individuals who had been present or absent during their childhood, and their general life experiences while growing up. These questions provided important contextual information about participants' social and family environments and served as a foundation for subsequent discussions about their experiences and perceptions of violence, including technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV).

Data analysis

Data were analysed inductively using thematic analysis approach (40). Data analysis was led by the first author (AB). During the initial reading and familiarisation of the 21 interview transcripts, it was established that 10 participants described growing up with their biological fathers absent from their lives. Given the richness and relevance of these accounts, these transcripts were purposively selected for a secondary thematic analysis focused on the experiences and perceived impacts of biological father absence. First, AB familiarised himself with the data by reading and re-reading the 10 transcripts to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences with regard to growing up without their

biological fathers. Second, he coded the transcripts line-by-line generating numerous codes. Third, he grouped the codes that appeared to be similar to create preliminary themes. Fourth, all authors were involved in merging, refining and naming the main themes reported here. Lastly, all authors were involved in interpreting the findings.

Table 1
Characteristics of participants

Pseudonym	Age	Year of Study	Duration of Father Absence	Primary Caregiver
Kamva	22	3rd	Since birth	Maternal grandmother
Ntsika	19	1st	Since age 2	Grandmother
Sipho	21	2nd	Since age 3	Maternal aunt
Hlumelo	20	2nd	Since age 4	Grandmother
Mandla	23	3rd	Since birth	Mother
Lihle	24	4th	Since age 6	Maternal aunt
Zola	21	2nd	Since birth	Mother
Luvo	20	1st	Paternal death at 2	Aunt
Vuyo	22	3rd	Since age 4	Mother
Abongile	24	4th	Since birth	Grandmother

3. Results

Four interconnected themes emerged from the data, and these are 1) multifaceted impacts of biological father absence; 2) women's role in shaping young men's masculinity; 3) constructing masculinity; and 4) coping strategies and resilience building. Broadly, the findings reveal that biological father absence had enduring effects on participants' emotional and mental wellbeing, gender socialisation and masculine and cultural identities. However, findings also highlight important sources of resilience, with most participants drawing on supportive caregiving relationships, education, faith, sport, and personal agency to navigate adversity and construct positive pathways into adulthood.

Multifaceted impacts of biological father absence

This theme captures the multifaceted impacts young men experienced of growing up without a biological father, including emotional distress, disrupted developmental trajectories, and material disadvantage. Most participants described the emotional pain of biological father absence and its effects on their emotional and mental health, alongside a perceived lack of social and moral guidance. Many also highlighted how the absence of their biological fathers heightened their economic vulnerability.

Emotional and Psychological Impacts

Beyond the emotional impacts of father absence, many participants described a sense of identity uncertainty and disrupted kinship belonging. For some, not knowing their biological fathers left them with unanswered questions about who they were, where they came from, and how they were connected to their paternal families. For these participants, the absence of a father represented not only the loss of a parental relationship but also a disconnection from partenal family history, ancestry, and belonging. This uncertainty often extended into young adulthood and contributed to a continued desire to know and connect with their biological fathers as part of making sense of their identities.

Abongile's narrative, for instance, illustrated the link between father absence and emotional distress and identity uncertainty. He described persistent feelings of sadness and uncertainty arising from his father's absence since his birth: *'Oh, like with my biological father, I felt really sad not knowing him. I would ask myself, what did my father do?'* (Abongile, 24). Luvo's reflection on his father's absence captured the emotional cost not only as grief or sadness, but also how he felt this denied him opportunities in life. Although he expressed gratitude for his grandmother's care, Luvo described having a lingering wish for a more stable future that he believed was denied to him by his father's absence: "*I just think that if he had been there, things would have been different*." (Luvo, 20)

Lihle revealed feelings of emotional neglect and rejection emanating from his father's absence in his life. For him, the absence of his biological father made him feel abandoned.While Lihle's grandmother offered coping advice, he described a pain of feeling unloved by his father: *"'I also found out my dad is still alive, but I never felt loved by my parents".* (Lihle, 24) Similarly, Kamva described the emotional pain that he attributed to his biological father's absence in his life, mentioning that this created developmental gaps in his life: *"The experience of growing up without my father... left a big wound in me. There are some things I feel I lack as a young man, things I never had the chance to discuss with a father figure".* (Kamva, 22)

Likewise, Zola' s described profound emotional pain and a sense of being robbed of guidance and a support system because of his father's absence in his life: *"It [father absence] broke me because there are things I wished I could ask my father... I felt robbed like not having someone to cry to... no one to guide me through things like initiation [traditional male circumcision] or just everyday life lessons*". (Zola, 21) Zola's feeling of being "broken" and "robbed" reflects not only deep psychological distress but also a sense of disrupted kinship belonging. His account suggests that his father's absence deprived him of opportunities to learn about and participate in his culture and traditions, and thereby connect with his paternal lineage. For Zola, father absence represented more than the loss of emotional support, it also signified a disconnection from familial, cultural, and paternal networks that would ordinarily contribute to a sense of identity and belonging.

Economic Vulnerabilities and Material Deprivation

Some of the young men described how father absence contributed to financial hardship and material deprivation in their lives. While some said they received care and material support from their maternal

relatives, others experienced financial exploitation and exclusion from estates and resources that were meant for them.

Recalling the challenges he faced growing up, Mandla explained: *"We struggled a lot at school because my mother was not working. I used to walk to school every day... I only got proper school shoes around Grade 6 or 8"* (Mandla, 23). Mandla's narrative illustrates the economic hardships experienced during childhood, including limited access to basic necessities such as adequate footwear for school.

Others also described how they had not been able to secure finances that were meant for them. For instance, Luvo whose father died when he was two years old, described the emotional pain associated with perceived financial exploitation and conflict within his paternal family. Reflecting on the events surrounding the death of his parents, he explained:

'When I was 2 years old, my father passed away while still in Johannesburg at the mines. Shortly after that, just a month later, my mother also passed away. She had gone to claim the insurance money from my father's estate. It's said that my grandfather [my father's fathe] had been in conflict with my mother and, as a result, when my mother went to claim that money, she stayed only two days and passed away. It was later discovered that she had been poisoned because traces of poison were found in her system."(Luvo, 24)

Luvo's narrative highlights how father absence was intertwined with family conflict, economic insecurity, and disrupted kinship relationships. Beyond the loss of both parents, he described feeling deprived of financial resources and support that he believed should have been available to him, contributing to a broader sense of exclusion from his paternal family network. He narrated how he felt when he was excluded from benefiting from his late father's estate: '*Although there was money [at home], I was still suffering... the pain of struggling while knowing there is money, but it's not coming to you'.* Luvo further described how his grandfather claimed and misused the money that his late biological father had left for him, deepening the emotional and psychological distress he felt: '*He [grandfather] would give me R200, yet he had receive something like R30,000... He told people he was buying livestock for me*.' Moreover, Luvo shared how his mother and maternal aunt tried to claim financial support from his biological father's previous employer, and how their efforts were blocked by his paternal grandfather. '*My mother died while trying to claim my father's funds... my grandfather fought against that, and my aunt was never allowed to access the funds either*.' (Luvo, 20).

Likewise, other participants described how biological father absence was associated with economic vulnerability and material deprivation. The absence of financial and caregiving support from paternal family members often compounded existing household hardship. Reflecting on his experiences following the death of his paternal grandmother, Mandla asserted: *"When we were growing up, after my grandmother passed away, we were never cared for again. We struggled a lot at school because my mother was not working."* (Mandla, 20)

Mandla's narrative illustrates how the loss of a key familial support figure was followed by reduced support from his paternal family, leaving his household with limited financial resources. The combination

of father absence, weak connections to paternal kin, and maternal unemployment contributed to material hardship and educational challenges during Mandla's childhood.

Constructing masculinity

With their biological fathers absent in their lives, many participants described having to learn how to be a man through alternative sources, including extended male family members, male peers, and media. However, these alternative sources of socialisation were often experienced as inadequate for this purpose, leaving young men feeling that something essential was missing in their development as boys. Many felt their biological father were supposed to be the primary male figure to provide gendered guidance, discipline, and emotional affirmation, and shape their understanding of how to be a man.

Kamva's experience illustrates how the absence of his biological father affected how he saw himself as a young boy. Although he was surrounded by male relatives, he felt that they could not replace the unique role he associated with a biological father in guiding a son into manhood:

"The experience of growing up without my father I can say it left a big wound in me. Even though there was my grandfather and uncles, for me, as a child at that time, I was supposed to be guided by my [biological] father. So, I lost that. I have always believed that if my biological father had been there, he would have given me the kind of attention every boy needs from his father. He would have advised me and shown me certain thing". (Kamva, 22)

Kamva linked his father's absence not only to emotional pain, but also to a perceived lack of masculine guidance, where being "*shown certain things*" and being "*advised*" by one's own biological father was central to becoming a man. His framing reflected how cultural expectations in his community positioned biological fathers as key transmitters of masculinity, reinforcing the idea that father absence created a gap in how some participants learned to become men. In response to the absence of his biological father, Kamva turned into external sources like mentors, peers, and digital platforms to inform his understanding of manhood. He described learning from these alternative sources as intentional: '*So, I end up looking outside, to other men, to mentors, or even online on social media. I read quotes, books, things that can shape me. That's the impact of not having a [biological] father in my life*'. (Kamva, 22) Similarly, Hlumelo described how he had to figure out things about manhood on his own, or had to lean on male friends, as there were no consistent male role models in his life that he could look up to: '*There were things about life, about being a man, that I had to learn on my own or from friends because I didn't have those male role models consistently. Sometimes I felt... unprepared for certain situations*'. (Hlumelo, 20)Compounding this, male figures who socialized some participants into manhood were described as as negative role models of manhood. Ntsika explained:

"My uncles were gangsters and drug dealers. The men I saw around me were not examples of what a man should be. That's why I said, 'No, I will be [Ntsika]. I will choose a different path.' Even with my friends, we agreed that we want to be men who bring change especially for women and young boys growing up". (Ntsika,19)

Women's role in shaping young men's masculinity

In the absence of their biological fathers, several participants described the important role played by a range of female relatives in their lives, including in shaping their understanding of 'being *a man*'. They described these women as having provided them with emotional support, guidance, and moral direction, and serving as primary socializing agents during childhood and through adolescence. These young men described how these maternal influences, helped them cultivate values such as empathy, responsibility, care, and respect for women, fostering a form of masculinity that contrasted with the traditional ideals of masculinity that often centered dominance and control over women, and emotional restraint as key traits of manhood.

Likewise, Abongile described how his mother and grandmother encouraged him to go back to school, pursue education, and persevere through life's hardships. For him, their encouragement and support helped him build resilience and self-worth: '*I was raised by my mother and my grandmother... My mom encouraged me, she said*, "*My child, please go back to school.*" *... with their support, I pushed myself*.' Abongile further explained how his mother's and grandmother's support kept him grounded and feeling loved and cared for: '*The support from my mother and grandmother kept me grounded. Even when I struggled, I knew they were praying for me*.' (Abongile, 24)

Other participants consistently highlighted the important role that women, particularly grandmothers and aunts, played in their upbringing. They valued these women for modelling values and behaviours that influenced their understandings of manhood. The care, guidance, and protection offered by female caregivers shaped these participants ideas about responsibility, respect, and caring masculinities. For instance, Hlumelo, Luyo and Lihle emphasized the nurturing and protective care they received from their grandmothers and aunts who raised them. Hlumelo described his grandmother's parenting as characterised by discipline and empathy: '*My grandmother was everything to me, my parent, my teacher, my protector … She did her best to teach me right from wrong. She was strict but caring*.' (Hlumelo, 20). Similarly, Lihle described how his aunt and grandmother provided emotional stability and comfort in his life. For him, their caregiving, which was marked by love and compassion, made him feel safe and supported: *I grew up with my aunt who raised me... She was there for me, comforting [me] and enduring hardships with me... I treated my grandmother as my mom*.' (Lihle, 20). Through their involved caregiving, Lihle's grandmother and aunt modelled values of commitment, responsibility, and care for others, contributing to his gender socialisation as a young man.

Similarly, Zola expressed deep respect and gratitude for the women who raised him. Their influence shaped how he understood his responsibilities as a young man in his family: *"I grew up in a family of females. I was raised by my mother and my grandmother. So, growing up, I always had that thing in me, like, okay, I want to work hard for them. You know? Because I am the firstborn to my mother"* (Zola, 21). Rather than associating manhood with authority or dominance, Zola linked masculinity to hard work, responsibility, and supporting family members.

Other participants more clearly described how being raised by women (e.g., mothers, grandmothers, and aunts) helped them to construct a form of masculinity that did not conform to traditional expectations of what it means to be a boy or man in their communities. Abongile explained that being raised by women positively shaped his worldview and influenced the type of man he aspired to be. He reflected that the absence of his biological father may have protected him from adopting behaviours and practices that he perceived as harmful, while the women who raised him encouraged alternative values and ways of relating to others: *"Maybe if my father was there, I would have taken a wrong path. Instead, growing up with only women helped me see life differently"*(Abongile, 24). His reflection suggests that female caregivers played an important role in shaping his understanding of manhood and offered a different model of how men should conduct themselves.

Kamva described how his mother's, grandmother's and sisters' emotional support and nurturing not only provided him with independence and direction early in his life, but also shaped him into a young man who valued respecting others, specifically women: '*When I needed guidance, I would sit down with my mom... she would always support me, saying, "If you believe this is best for you, then go for it." That gave me power and direction… growing up with only women, my mom, my grandmother, my sisters I learned how to respect and treat women differently.*' (Kamva, 22)

Kamva rejected the dominant notion that manhood is demonstrated through power or dominance over women: *"Being a man is not about going against women but correcting the wrong things I see among men"*(Kamva, 22). Likewise, Zola described how the values instilled by the women who raised him continued to shape his interactions with women: *"The way I respect women makes me feel like I'm the best guy who has ever lived. Because when I see other guys disrespecting their girlfriends, I actually correct them and say, 'Bro, that's not the way to talk to a woman."* (Zola, 21).

Through nurturing relationships with mothers, grandmothers, and aunts, some young men developed more gender-equitable masculinities marked by greater emotional security and positive identity formation. Participants' narratives indicated that the care and guidance provided by these maternal figures partially compensated for the absence of a biological father, fostering a sense of safety, belonging, and moral grounding.

Coping strategies and resilience

Many participants described a range of adaptive coping strategies that helped them manage the challenges associated with growing up without their biological fathers. These included spirituality and faith, educational motivation, participation in sport, emotional self-regulation, and identity work.

Mandla articulated the strategies he used to manage the emotional and practical challenges of growing up without his biological father. He mentioned that his father's absence made him cultivate self-regulation and future-oriented resilience: "*I didn't stress about it [father absence]… I told myself to focus on school and my future*." (Mandla, 23). Mandla's assertion reflects an active effort to redirect attention away from loss and grief toward achievement and self-improvement. At the same time, Mandla

acknowledged the persistence of emotional longing, noting that "*sometimes it does happen that I wish my father was present*. This combination of emotional restraint and lingering desire for his biological father illustrates how some participants navigated father absence through resilience strategies that enabled them to function and pursue their life goals while still carrying unresolved emotional pain.

Faith and spirituality emerged as another central way of coping with the emotional pain caused by biological father absence. Abongile described how becoming a born-again Christian helped him deal with the anger, sadness, and feeling of abandonment, as his biological father was absent: '*as I was growing up, I changed. I accepted Jesus in Grade 9, and that changed my life*.' (Abongile, 24). He explained that before turning to faith, he struggled deeply with emotional distress and suicidal thoughts linked to his father's absence: '*I used to have these thoughts that whenever I fell [symbolically] or was [emotionally] rhurt, I'd feel like I wanted to kill myself… But I wouldn't actually do it. I can't say, maybe it was accepting Jesus, but it stopped now'.* (Abongile, 24)

Focusing on education became a way of coping with the absence of their biological father for some participants. They described education as having provided a sense of purpose, direction, and motivation in their lives. Mandla explained that not having a biological father present pushed him to become more self-driven: '*Since I didn't have a father, I told myself to focus on school and on my future*'. (Mandla, 23).

Among the various coping strategies described by participants, sport emerged as an important source of emotional wellbeing for some. Mandla explained that participation in sport helped him manage difficult emotions and provided a positive outlet for coping with his father's absence: *I decided to start playing sport, and I grew up being active in sport. I think that's what helped me the most. It made me feel happy.*' (Mandla, 23). Abongile described having learned to regulate his emotions and behaviour as part of coping with the pain of his father's absence. He reflected on how he consciously worked to change his temper: '*When I was growing up, I was very loud and quick-tempered… but I changed… I avoid anything with violence in it*.' (Abongile, 24). Similarly, Kamva described how he actively shaped his masculine identity in response to growing up without his biological father: '*I gave myself a motto: 'Don't just live to exist. As a man, you have to be a protector; you have to be a leader.' I started reading quotes, books, and things that could shape me*'. (Kamva, 22).

4. Discussion

This study explored the lived experiences of male college students (aged 18–30 years) who grew up without their biological fathers. The findings revealed that biological father absence had important emotional, social, cultural, and economic consequences in young men's lives in our study. Many of them described experiences of grief, abandonment, emotional distress, and financial hardship, which they linked to their biological fathers' absence. Furthermore, they spoke about the absence of paternal guidance, cultural affirmation, and support, attributing this to the absence of their biological fathers in their lives. Additionally, young men spoke about a sense of loss that they felt or experienced as they grew up without a biological father, particularly in relation to identity formation and understandings of

manhood. The findings also revealed important sources of support and resilience that shaped these young men's experiences of gender socialisation. While dominant masculine norms were often learned through male role models and broader societal expectations, mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and other family members were particularly influential in shaping these young men's masculinity. Through consistent care, emotional support, guidance, and stability, family members created nurturing environments that helped young men to cope with adversity, develop positive values, and build resilience. This, in turn, enabled the young men to construct alternative forms of masculinity characterised by responsibility, care, empathy and respect for others. Together, these findings illustrate both the challenges associated with biological father absence and the relational resources that enabled many young men to adapt and negotiate positive identities despite the challenges they faced.

Although participants demonstrated considerable agency through education, spirituality, sport, supportive relationships and positive constructions of masculinity, these coping resources did not necessarily mean that emotional difficulties were absent. Participants could demonstrate resilience while simultaneously experiencing loss, longing and psychological distress related to biological father absence. Evidence from South Africa similarly highlights the role of supportive relationships, social support, purpose and confidence in strengthening resilience among young adults experiencing mental health difficulties (41, 42).This suggests that responses should build on young men's existing strengths while ensuring that appropriate psychological and psychosocial support remains available when needed.

Importantly, young men need opportunities to talk openly about emotional difficulties and seek support without experiencing help-seeking as incompatible with masculinity. Research among South African college men has shown that gender socialisation and idealised masculine expectations can discourage emotional expression and help-seeking, highlighting the need for culturally appropriate psychological support services (43). Research among South African adolescent boys and young men has similarly called for gender-sensitive and culturally grounded mental health programming that normalises emotional expression, builds on familiar coping resources and improves engagement with psychosocial support (44). These findings support mental health promotion approaches that strengthen emotional literacy, help-seeking and social connectedness alongside the positive forms of masculinity identified among participants in the current study.

A key finding of this study was that biological father absence was linked with feelings of emotional insecurity and psychological distress among participants during childhood and adolescence. This finding can be explained by the attachment theory, which proposes that early relationships with caregivers play a central role in shaping emotional security and psychosocial development across the life course (30, 45). Research has shown that insecure attachment relationships can contribute to emotional dysregulation and psychosocial vulnerability (31, 32). In this study, attachment theory provided a useful lens through which to understand both the emotional consequences of father absence and the protective role of alternative caregivers. Young men frequently described mothers, grandmothers, and aunts as sources of emotional support, care, and guidance, and these relationships appeared to provide a sense of stability and security during childhood. However, despite the presence of

these supportive caregiving relationships, many young men continued to report emotional distress linked to the absence of their biological fathers. This suggests that while secure attachments to alternative caregivers may have promoted resilience and provided important emotional support, they did not fully offset the impact of an absent or unstable father-child relationship. The findings therefore highlight the importance of considering multiple attachment relationships simultaneously, while recognising the unique and enduring influence that fathers may have on children's emotional development and well-being.

Our findings also demonstrated the links between growing up with an absent father and experiences of material hardship in the lives of some young men in this study. Young men described experiences of food insecurity, inadequate school resources and disruptions to their education, experiences that have been shared by young men in previous research (4) However, beyond the material consequences of father absence, a particularly important finding was the sense of resentment and injustice expressed by some participants. Several young men felt that they had been deprived of resources, opportunities and forms of support that should have been available to them through their fathers and paternal families. Feelings of exclusion were especially evident when young men compared their circumstances to those of their peers with actively involved fathers. Moroever, these young men’s experiences suggest that the effects of father absence was not limited to economic deprivation but also invoked feelings and perceptions of unfairness, loss and denied entitlement. In this regard, patriarchal norms, and cultural practices compounded these young men's experiences of exclusion and disadvantage, shaping not only their material circumstances but also their sense of belonging and social worth (3, 46). Despite this, some young men reportedly developed resilience to withstand these adversities.

In this study, resilience theory provided a useful framework for understanding how some young men adapted to the social and emotional challenges associated with growing up without their fathers. These adaptations were reflected in strategies such as seeking support from mothers, extended family members, mentors and peers; developing self-reliance and independence; engaging in educational, religious, or community activities; and drawing on personal determination to overcome adversity. These coping mechanisms enabled these young men to navigate challenges and maintain positive developmental outcomes despite father absence.

However, some young men’s experiences suggest that resilience was not simply the result of individual coping strategies. Rather, resilience was clearly nurtured through the active involvement of mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and other family members who assumed parenting roles in their lives. Young men in our study described how these family members provided practical support such as meeting their basic needs, monitoring their behaviour, assisting with school-related matters, offering advice on life decisions and serving as positive role models. Mothers and grandmothers, in particular, were often credited with encouraging perseverance, instilling discipline and values, and providing reassurance during difficult periods, which helped participants cope with the challenges associated with father absence.

An important contribution of this study is the recognition of the role played by female caregivers in shaping masculine identities.The findings suggest that biological father absence influenced how some young men understood and negotiated their masculine identities. For many, while the absence of a father created uncertainty regarding masculine roles and limited opportunities to learn about manhood through direct father–son relationships, some young men's experiences demonstrated that the construction of masculinity was not dependent solely on male role models. Mothers, grandmothers, aunts and sisters played a central role in shaping these young men's understandings of responsibility, respect, perseverance, and care for others, accountability and empathy. Through everyday interactions, guidance, discipline and emotional support, these female caregivers provided alternative models of manhood and contributed significantly to these young men's identity development.

While some literature suggests that failure to attain dominant masculine ideals may lead young men to adopt hypermasculine practices such as aggression, violence or substance use as alternative sources of masculine status (19, 28, 47), the experiences of some young men in this study pointed towards a different trajectory. The masculinity that emerged from their relationships with female caregivers was characterised by caring for others, taking responsibility for one's actions, showing empathy and treating women with respect. This aligns with the concept of gender-equitable masculinity(48), which challenges traditional notions of masculinity based on male dominance and authority over women (49) Drawing on these findings, we add our voice to the growing view that masculinities in African contexts are produced and negotiated within broader family and social relationships, and that women can be influential agents in transmitting and shaping positive masculine values. Rather than reproducing ideals of control and power, young men in our study emphasised relational values and positive interpersonal relationships in their descriptions and enactments of manhood.

Beyond the challenges associated with biological father absence, young men described a range of strategies that enabled them to cope with adversity and build resilience. Rather than viewing themselves solely as victims of father absence, many demonstrated considerable agency in responding to the emotional, social, and material difficulties they encountered. These young men drew on a variety of personal and social resources, including faith, education, sport, supportive family relationships, and self-reflection, to navigate their circumstances, maintain a sense of purpose and direction, and build resilience. Importantly, for these young men, resilience was not limited to managing emotional distress. For several of them, growing up without a biological father prompted active reflection on the kind of men they wanted to become. In the absence of paternal guidance, some young men spoke about developing their own moral values, cultivating emotional self-control, and striving to avoid behaviours that they perceived as harmful or destructive. These processes suggest that resilience involves not only coping with adversity but also actively shaping personal identities and life trajectories.

Our findings further show that biological father absence can create conditions in which young men become active agents in their own gender socialisation. Rather than simply reproducing dominant forms of masculinity, some young men reflected critically on the men around them and made deliberate decisions about the values and behaviours they wished to embody. Their narratives point to forms of

masculinity grounded in responsibility, self-discipline, perseverance, emotional restraint, and care for others. In this way, resilience was closely linked to identity formation, as participants actively constructed positive understandings of manhood despite the challenges associated with father absence. We therefore contend that resilience should not be understood merely as the ability to withstand hardship. Rather, it should be understood as a dynamic process through which young men draw on available resources, make meaning of difficult experiences, and create alternative pathways into adulthood.

While South African scholarship on father absence has often highlighted the importance of social fathers and male role models in the lives of young men (29, 50, 51), our findings draw attention to the significant influence of mothers, grandmothers, aunts and sisters in the development of gender-equitable masculinities (24, 52, 53). Their caregiving, guidance and everyday interactions influenced the kinds of men some young men became or aspired to be. These findings reinforce arguments within critical scholarship on men and masculinities that masculinity is relational and produced through social interactions rather than being an inherent male characteristic (16, 54). Moreover, these findings extend existing understandings of masculinity formation by demonstrating how female caregivers can shape caring, responsible and gender-equitable masculinities, particularly in contexts where biological fathers are absent. our The findings presented in this article thus contributes to existing masculinity literature by drawing attention to the often-overlooked role of female caregivers in shaping masculinities. This article also challenges narrow assumptions that male role models are the primary influence on young men's gender development and highlights the important role of female caregivers in fostering alternative and more egalitarian masculine identities. Moreover, in this study, we have shown how digital platforms have been shown to shape contemporary masculinities by exposing users to both educational and hyper-masculine discourses (55).

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We have presented an important finding that supports existing literature which has suggested that biological father absence shapes boys' and young men's cultural identity, family belonging and sense of self (21, 56). Beyond the emotional consequences of father absence, our findings highlight how the lack of a relationship with a biological father can disrupt young men's connection to paternal kinship networks, family histories and cultural heritage. For several young men, this resulted in feelings of incompleteness and uncertainty regarding who they were and where they belonged, generating a strong desire to establish connections with their biological fathers and paternal lineage. Access to paternal family ties was viewed as important not only for building relationships but also for understanding family origins, cultural traditions and identity. These experiences closely align with (13), who argues that father absence can have significant implications for young people's cultural and symbolic identities, including issues relating to surnames, family legitimacy and belonging. Consistent with this perspective, young men's narratives in our study suggest that the absence of paternal recognition and involvement extended beyond the loss of a father-child relationship to include exclusion from broader systems of kinship and identity.

Strengths and limitations

This study provides valuable insights into young men's experiences of biological father absence. A key strength of the study is that the narratives of father absence emerged organically during interviews conducted as part of a broader qualitative study. In the larger study, participants reflected on these experiences without being directly prompted to do so, suggesting that father absence was a salient aspect of their lived experiences. This allowed the findings to be grounded in issues that participants themselves considered meaningful. Several limitations should nevertheless be acknowledged. The interview guide used in the larger study was not specifically designed to explore father absence, which may have limited the depth of exploration of this phenomenon. Consequently, this secondary analysis was limited to data gathered from participants who discussed father absence during their interviews. It is possible that other participants who grew up without their biological fathers did not disclose these experiences, resulting in their exclusion from the analysis. As such, the findings may not have captured the full range of experiences and perspectives related to biological father absence among the study participants.

Implications for programmers

Higher education institutions, including TVET colleges, therefore represent important settings for mental health promotion, early identification and psychosocial support. Campus-based responses could include accessible psychological counselling, peer support, mentorship, mental health education and referral pathways for students requiring more intensive care. These services could also promote emotional literacy, supportive relationships and positive approaches to masculinity. Public health approaches to student mental health emphasis that traditional one-to-one treatment alone is unlikely to sustainably address the needs of large student populations and point to the potential contribution of scalable approaches, including peer-to-peer and digital interventions(57).This is particularly relevant in South Africa, where substantial practical and psychological barriers to the utilisation of mental health services have been documented among university students (58). Consequently, services should not only respond once significant psychological difficulties emerge but should also priorities' prevention, mental health promotion, early support and accessible pathways to care.

These implications also require attention to the broader social and structural circumstances surrounding young men's mental health. Psychological wellbeing does not develop independently of family relationships, educational opportunities and socioeconomic conditions. Research among South African students has demonstrated associations between mental ill-health and multiple forms of adversity, including childhood trauma, food insecurity, experiences of violence and other traumatic life events (59). Although this evidence does not specifically examine biological father absence among young men, it reinforces the importance of understanding psychological distress within wider social and economic environments. A public health response to the experiences identified in the present study should therefore combine psychosocial support with efforts to strengthen family and social relationships, educational opportunities, social connectedness and existing sources of resilience.

5. Conclusions

This study showed that growing up without a biological father had emotional, social, cultural, and economic impacts on the lives of some young men in our sample. Many young men described experiences of emotional pain, identity uncertainty, lack of guidance, and financial hardship. Despite these challenges, several of them demonstrated resilience through coping strategies such as spirituality, education, sport participation, emotional self-regulation and positive identity construction. Recent research and national statists from South Africa has highlighted high levels of mental health challenges among young men in the country, including high rates of depression, psychological distress and suicide ideation and attempts (60, 61). Together with the findings presented in this article, these statistics underscore the need for evidence-based mental health promotion and gender-transfromative interventions that aim to challenge and transform harmful masculine norms that discourage mental health-seeking, while promoting more inclusive, emotionally expressive, and caring forms of manhood. Such approaches are essential for strengthening young men's positive identity development, enhancing their psychological wellbeing, and reduce mental health vulnerability among young men in South Africa.

Declarations

Availability of Data and Materials

The data analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to ethical and confidentiality restrictions.

Author Contributions

YS and AG designed the research study. AB, SM and NM performed the research. AB analyzed the data. LW, SK, SM and NM provided methodological support and advice. AB, YS, and AG wrote the manuscript. All authors contributed to editorial revisions. All authors read and approved of the final manuscript.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The study was approved by the South African Medical Research Council Human Research Ethics Committee (approval No. (E006-5-2024). All participants gave written informed consent. Participants were reimbursed with R150 for their time completing the interview. For this analysis, we ensured confidentiality and anonymity by removing all identifiers in the transcripts and replacing participants' real names with pseudonyms.

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Clinical trial number Not applicable.

Data availability the datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the South African Medical Research Council's Ethics Committee (approval No. E006-5-2024). All methods were performed in accordance with the relevant guidelines and regulations (e.g., Helsinki declaration and the South African Department of Health Ethics in Research 2015 guidelines). All participants provided written informed consent for study participation and the publication of the study findings.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest related to this study.

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- SupplementaryFile1SemiStructuredInterviewGuide.docx