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Father-Child (Dis)connections: Expectations and Practices of Young Un(der)employed Fathers in Johannesburg

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Abstract

Despite a growing body of research on fathers and fatherhood in South Africa, we know relatively little about un(der)employed Black fathers' experiences, perspectives, and patterns of involvement in their children's lives. This article uses Johnson-Hanks' concept of "vital conjunctures" to examine the divergent ways in which young Black men practice fatherhood under conditions of profound economic uncertainty. Three modes of father-child (dis)connections are presented to show how different patterns of paternal involvement are steered by men's economic conditions, the complex relational dynamics they occupy, as well as shifting cultural expectations and gender norms. The article shows how the quality of men's relationships with the mothers of their children plays an important role in differentiating fatherhood practices. Ultimately, this article argues that being a respectable father in conditions of economic uncertainty is a complex and convoluted endeavour involving intense negotiation and improvisation.

Keywords

Africa, anthropology, economy, fatherhood, gender equality, family, parenting, work, youth, patriarchy

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Introduction

Unemployment is widely regarded as more than an economic issue but a profoundly social and existential one. In South Africa, where unemployment is endemically high, it is often tantamount to a fragmentation of the social fabric and a perceived "crisis of paternal responsibility" (Seekings 2008, 21; see also Bray et al. 2010; Hunter 2006; Morrell and Richter 2006). The literature has tended to view unemployment as a major contributing factor to the high numbers of Black[1] children who live with their mothers or maternal kin and have limited (if any) physical contact with their fathers or paternal kin (Bray et al. 2010; Mavungu, Thomson-de Boor, and Mphaka 2013; Sikweyiya et al. 2017; Malinga 2015).

There is no doubt high levels of un(der)employment are shaping the care arrangements of children and constraining men's ability to financially support their children in South Africa. However, the "crisis" narrative that dominates public and academic discussions of fatherly involvement tends to depict men in simplistic and stereotypical terms as "irresponsible" and "failing" in their social role as "providers." The consequence of this "crisis" narrative is that we know a lot about what Black un(der)employed fathers are *not* doing and little about what they *are* doing to maintain ties with their children under conditions of widespread economic uncertainty.

A growing body of research has challenged the widespread negative image of Black fathers as deficient while also encouraging an approach to studying fatherhood and fathering as situational and relational processes (Gutmann 2007; Inhorn and Wentzell 2011; Mavungu, Thomson-de Boor, and Mphaka 2013; Morrell and Richter 2006; Smith 2018; Malinga and Ratele 2022). More recent research also challenges co-residence as a meaningful measure of father support and involvement in South Africa (Madhavan, Townsend, and Garey 2008; Madhavan, Richter, and Shane Norris 2016), and underlines how South Africa's colonial and apartheid past continues to have a profound effect on the expectations and patterns of fatherly involvement today. This body of work highlights the importance of studying Black men's experiences and perspectives on fatherhood in contexts of economic marginality (Abdill 2018; Malinga and Ratele 2022).

This article examines the divergent ways in which young un(der)employed Black men in Johannesburg "practice fatherhood" (Abdill 2018). It uses Johnson-Hanks' concept of a "vital conjuncture" (2002) to examine fatherhood and fathering as an everyday practice and a horizon—tied to men's aspirational life projects—where specific lived contexts and structured expectations intersect. The concept of a "vital conjuncture" is useful precisely because it allows us to see how wider socio-economic transformations shape the expectations and practices of fathering but also how changes in fathering practices intersect with changes (or the lack thereof) in gender structures and norms.

The article begins with a brief discussion on the changing context of fathering over the past half-century and a review of the literature on fathers and paternal involvement in South Africa. Johnson-Hanks' (2002) concept of "vital conjunctures" is then outlined. This is followed by an analysis of young men's conceptions of fatherhood as well

as the range and patterns of fathers' involvement in their children's lives—what I have termed father-child (dis)connections. I pay particular attention to the quality of men's relationships with the mothers of their children to show how the relational dynamics men occupy play an important role in differentiating fatherhood practices. Ultimately, this article argues that the terms and expectations of fatherhood are no longer structured by a set of clear or consensual norms but are the site of intense negotiation and improvisation.

The Shifting Context of Fathering in South Africa

South Africa's colonial and apartheid history, along with the coercive migrant labour system that accompanied it, has had a long and profound influence on the expectations and patterns of fatherly involvement amongst Black South Africans. The migrant labour system not only separated Black men from their families and children for much of the year but also resulted in fatherhood being intricately tied to financial provision rather than hands-on caregiving and emotional support (Hunter 2006). This legacy is especially evident in the large number of Black children who do not grow up in the same household as their biological fathers. The most recent data shows that less than one-third (29%) of Black children live with both their parents and a further 46% live with their mothers but not their fathers (Hall 2019, 217). The physical absence of fathers in the everyday lives of children is perceived to have detrimental social, psychological, emotional, and cognitive consequences for children and families (Morrell and Richter 2006; Richter, Chikovore, and Makusha 2010).

Recent studies on fathers and fatherhood in South Africa have challenged the focus on co-habitation as a meaningful predictor of father support and involvement, showing how many fathers continue to be in contact with and support their children even if they are not members of the same household (Madhavan, Townsend, and Garey 2008; Madhavan, Richter, and Shane Norris 2016; Mavungu 2013; HSRC and Sonke Gender Justice 2018). While many father-child connections are limited to financial provision, several studies show that a substantial proportion of fathers fulfil a range of roles in their children's lives that include emotional support and hands-on nurturing (Madhavan, Townsend, and Garey 2008; Makusha et al. 2013; Morrell et al. 2016; Malinga and Ratele 2022). Many studies emphasize the variability of father-child connections and the myriad of factors that mediate men's relationship to, and involvement in, their children's lives. These include poverty and unemployment, a father's proximity to his child, the quality of the relationship a father has with the mother of his child, and various cultural processes (HSRC and Sonke Gender Justice 2018; Hunter 2006; Mavungu 2013; Morrell and Richter 2006; Morrell et al. 2016; Malinga and Ratele 2022).

South Africa has had high rates of structural unemployment from the mid-1970s. The situation has only been exacerbated in the nearly three decades since the transition to democracy. Currently, unemployment stands at 35%, and on the expanded definition, which includes people who have given up looking for work, is at 47% (StatsSA 2021).

Young Black South Africans are disproportionately affected by unemployment. The situation of growing joblessness is compounded by high levels of underemployment and working poverty with many jobs offering wages too meagre to escape racialized poverty (Feder and Yu 2020; Paola and Pons-Vignon 2013). Growing un(der)employment is not only constraining men's ability to financially support their children. It is also fundamentally changing patterns of social reproduction including marriage patterns, customary care arrangements and gender norms—what Mark Hunter calls the "political economy of intimacy" (Hunter 2010; 2016).

National data in South Africa shows decreasing rates of marriage, particularly among Black South Africans (Posel and Rudwick 2014). Some scholars attribute the decline in marriage to men's incapacity to pay the high costs involved in the customary practice of *ilobola* or bridewealth (Posel, Rudwick, and Casale 2011). Others draw attention to the growing significance of cash transfers (known as social grants in South Africa) that go predominantly to mothers and the elderly (Dubbeld 2013). Still others point to the increase in the number of women entering the labour market, albeit at the lower and more poorly paid end (Casale and Posel 2002). What is clear is that persistently high rates of un(der)employment impinge on men's ability to get married, build a home, and fulfil the 'provider' role that is still closely associated with fatherhood (Hunter 2010; Posel, Rudwick, and Casale 2011).

Beyond the economic difficulties many men face, studies show that various cultural processes mediate men's ability to practice fatherhood (Hunter 2006; Mavungu 2013; Morrell and Richter 2006; Morrell et al. 2016; Malinga and Ratele 2022). Under the customary system, contributing biologically to the conception of a child does not necessarily make a man a father (Malinga and Ratele 2022). The customary practice of paying *ilobola* (bridewealth) or "damages" if the child is born out of wedlock are important processes in some ethnic groups for men to be recognised as the father and gain access to their children. High levels of un(der)employment have made it increasingly difficult for men to afford these cultural rituals with consequences not only for father-child connections but also for a wider set of social relationships (Malinga and Ratele 2022). There is some evidence that men's failure to pay "damages" leads to fathers being barred from seeing and visiting their children. However, this form of gatekeeping appears to be much more common when a child lives with maternal relatives and when a father fails to financially support his children (HSRC and Sonke Gender Justice 2018; Sikweyiya et al. 2017). Recent research suggests the customary system of recognising paternity rights is not only fragmenting but becoming more flexible in a context where stable work and marriage are out of reach for many (Hunter 2015; 2016; Malinga and Ratele 2022).

The customary system of recognising paternal rights exists in tension with the expectation, strengthened by the child maintenance laws, that biological fathers must financially contribute to the upkeep of their children irrespective of the status of the relationship with the mother, or whether "damages" have been paid or not. The maintenance system, as Grace Khunou (2006; 2012) shows, has reinforced the idea that the primary role of a father is financial provision. Despite a growing body of work on

fathers and fatherhood in South Africa, we still know relatively little about how young un(der)employed Black men practice fatherhood. The research has tended to be quantitative (Madhavan, Richter, and Shane Norris 2016; Madhavan et al. 2014; Madhavan, Townsend, and Garey 2008) and, with a few exceptions such as Malinga (2015), Khunou (2006), and Swartz and Bhana (2009), privileged women's or mothers' views rather than fathers'.

This article draws on Johnson-Hanks' concept of a "vital conjuncture" to analyse fatherhood as a series of actions and practices where specific social interactions and structured expectations intersect. Johnson-Hanks developed the concept of a "vital conjuncture" as an alternative to the widespread and relatively old concept of life stages to understand critical points in the life course—such as the birth of a child—in contexts of profound uncertainty. Johnson-Hanks defines a "vital conjuncture" as a "socially structured zone of possibility that emerges around specific periods of potential transformation in a life" (2002, 871). The concept allows us to see fatherhood practices as a dynamic social process and interaction that is neither pre-determined by men's socio-economic circumstances nor entirely independent of it. It allows us to examine how particular socio-economic processes, such as mass joblessness and the decline in marriage rates, shape the practice of fatherhood in specific lived contexts and situations (Sieveking and Dallywater 2017).

Methods and Context

This article uses data from ethnographic research with unemployed and marginally employed young Black men in Zandspruit—an informal settlement on the outskirts of Johannesburg. The article draws specifically upon repeat in-depth interviews with ten cismen who identified as fathers in 2015–2016 when the study was conducted. The interviews included broad questions on what they considered the role(s) of a father and, once enough trust and rapport had been built, more detailed discussions about their relationships with their children and their children's mothers. I met four of the ten fathers in 2011 during an earlier period of research (Dawson 2014) and have remained in contact with them ever since. Although the focus of this article is on the experiences and perspectives of fathers, and my data on mothers is much more limited, I have included the views of mothers whenever possible due to the important role they play in shaping father-child (dis)connections.

The fathers in this study were all indigenous African men. Some had migrated to Zandspruit as children with a parent or grandparent and others as adults in search of jobs and better lives. None of these men had permanent wage employment at the time of the research. Their incomes, like many urban dwellers, were sporadic and unpredictable. Most relied upon a diverse range of livelihood strategies to get-by that included temporary low-paying jobs, informal money-making activities, and support from people both inside and outside of their households (Dawson 2021, 2022).

None of the fathers were married. The majority lived alone or with a girlfriend, normally in a rented shack, but these cohabiting arrangements rarely transitioned into a

more stable partnership. Only one of the fathers was in a co-habiting relationship with the mother of his child and none lived with their children at the time of the research. Approximately half of the fathers had lived with their children, but this period of cohabitation was short-lived and usually in the first year of their child's life.

Fathers and fatherhood are contentious subjects in South Africa and my positionality as a White English-speaking woman in my 30s studying Black men's fathering practices merits mention. My identity had both limitations and privileges. While it favourably influenced my interlocutor's decision to interact with me it also limited my insertion within these relationships and constrained my understanding of key aspects of their experience. The interviews were conducted in English and although all the participants were fluent in English, this was not their first language. This can be seen as an important limitation as men's home language forms an integral part of their understanding of the concept, cultural practices and rituals surrounding fatherhood (see Malinga 2015, 80, 106). The data collected for this study is not only fundamentally shaped by the relationships and knowledge I had access to but also reflects the limits and power dynamics therein. This affirms what Haraway (1988) calls the "situated [ness] of knowledge." The challenge of writing this article has been to try and capture the dynamism of my interlocutor's experiences of fathering while abstracting enough to document different patterns of father-child (dis)connection. I have sought to reflect honestly on the data I draw upon in this article while also recognising the work of others this article benefitted from and builds upon. In line with maintaining anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of the fathers in this study.

Findings

Young Black Fathers' Conceptions of Fatherhood

Fatherhood remains closely linked to financial provision despite persistently high levels of unemployment and economic insecurity. All the fathers in this study associated "good" or "real" fathers with those who provide material support for their children's maintenance and upbringing. Arnold (age 31), a father to a six-year-old boy who lived with his maternal grandmother, told me that men's responsibilities to their children are all "from the pocket [wallet]." "You can't be a real father without cash," he told me. Likewise, Senzo (age 27), who had two daughters, insisted that a man could not be considered a father if he did not provide economically for his children. "When a child comes into the world, they come naked," he told me, "you cannot be a father when the child is naked."

While most of the men considered financial provision to be the primary role of fathers, they recognised the importance of their children spending time with, learning from, and being guided by their fathers. Some of my interlocutors emiphasised the importance of fathers playing a "fatherly role" in their children's lives, especially if they could not support their children financially or live with them consistently. "Even if I

don't have money, I can still have access to the child," Senzo told me, describing the importance of him spending time with and building emotional intimacy with his daughter. "It's a matter of me bonding with the child," he continued. Prince (age 28), whose daughter was four at the time of the research, explained the importance of fathers "being there" for their children and taking an active interest in their development and education. The importance of fathers "being there," as Kopano Ratele, Shefer, and Clowes (2012) note, is perhaps less, or not only, about the quantity of time spent together but rather the quality of time and relationship between child and father.

Senzo and Prince's emphasis on the importance of fathers spending time with their children is echoed in a growing media campaign and emerging public discourse—spearheaded by non-governmental organisations such as MenEngage—that encourages more care-related forms of fatherhood (HSRC and Sonke Gender Justice 2018; Berg et al. 2013; Richter, Chikovore, and Makusha 2010). In several interviews, my interlocutors drew a connection between their own experience of growing up with little physical contact (if any) with their biological fathers and a desire to be more present in their children's lives. That most fathers in this study had grown up with little physical contact with their biological fathers is another reminder of the legacy of South Africa's apartheid and colonial past on Black family life. Several fathers spoke about wanting to save their children from the pain they experienced growing up without the active involvement of their fathers. Senzo, who lived with neither of his daughters, feared they might hold a grudge towards him similar to the one he holds towards his biological father who was neither physically nor emotionally present for much of his childhood.

Men's aspiration to be more physically present and involved in their children's day-to-day lives was often hampered by their social and economic circumstances. None of the men lived with their children at the time of the research. Some men's children lived with their mothers or maternal kin in other provinces. This made it very difficult for them to spend time with their children on a regular basis or provide emotional support and hands-on caregiving.

In the section that follows I present three modes of father-child (dis)connection—regular, intermittent, and non-existent—as a heuristic to examine the range of ways young men practice fatherhood while also discussing the factors that enable and constrain their involvement in their children's lives. In doing so, I show how practicing fatherhood is a dynamic social process mediated by men's economic circumstances and the relational dynamics they occupy.

Father-Child (Dis)connections

Regular connections—creative collaborations and school fees. Tshepo (age 26) was the only father in a co-habiting union with the mother of his child. When I met Tshepo in 2011 he was single, without children, and without work except for the occasional day when he worked as a gardener. In mid-2013 he got a job as a petrol attendant. In June 2015, when I returned to Zandspruit, he was still working at the petrol station but lived with his girlfriend (Lerato) and their ten-month-old son (Nzwako). Before Lerato moved into

Tshepo's shack, Tsepho sought the "permission" of her family. This involved discussions and the exchange of what Hunter (2016) calls "bridewealth-related payments." It reflected Tshepo's desire to do things "right" as he put it, but also the couple's intention to marry. This payment not only legitimised their co-habitation but also stood in for the cultural practice of "damages" and thus helped recognise Tshepo's paternity rights as part of the customary system.

On a warm afternoon in June 2015, sitting at the back of Motswako (a popular buy-and-braai restaurant in Zandspruit), I asked Tshepo how things were with Lerato and their son. "We're still living here [and] eish, it's not good," he said, sharing his anxieties about raising a child in Zandspruit and his struggle to make ends meet. Before Nzwako was born Lerato had a part-time job with a catering company. Though their wages were small their combined income covered their everyday expenses while also allowing Tshepo to send money to his unemployed siblings in the village where he grew up. This became more difficult after Lerato left her job and Nzwako was born. "Even though I'm working," he told me, "I'm always left with nothing […] sometimes I feel like I'm drowning." The pressure to financially support his girlfriend, son, and unemployed siblings weighed heavily upon Tshepo and propelled him to start an informal car wash venture to supplement his wages.

On one of Tshepo's off-days in October 2015 I sat with his son on my lap at the car wash stand. Our conversation that day turned to the "stress" he felt from the competing demands on his limited earnings. The burden of meeting familial obligations is popularly referred to as "Black tax" in South Africa (Mhlongo 2019). Lerato and Tshepo were struggling to live off Tshepo's salary and had been forced to take out a loan the previous month to get by. Lerato's sister, who lived nearby, had offered to take care of their son to allow Lerato to look for work again. Two months later Lerato found a job at a nearby grocery store and Nzwako went to live with Lerato's sister. Lerato bought nappies and porridge from her wages and Tshepo agreed to pay Lerato's sister R300 ($20) each month for taking care of their child. This arrangement worked well but with Tshepo's work schedule, and a car wash venture that required him to work weekends, he was not able to visit his son as often as he would have liked. Tshepo regretted spending so little time with his son and expressed sadness at missing his son take his first few steps.

Eric (age 30) lived with his mother and made a living running a small IT business and renting back rooms. Eric had a 5-year-old daughter who—at the time of my fieldwork—lived with her mother (Naledi). Eric and Naledi met in 2010, had their daughter Fikile in 2011, and lived together from 2013–2015 in the front room of Eric's mother's house. In early 2015, Naledi went to live with her sister in a neighbouring suburb. Eric told me that Naledi moved out to "pressurise" him into finding better paid work, paying *ilobola,* and moving into a house of his own. It was, as he put it, a test for him to "prove" his commitment to them. It is possible that Naledi's decision to move out was also tied to a desire to not live as a quasi-daughter-in-law without the respect or change of status that marriage (or partial *ilobola*) would bring to her. In other words, when living under Eric's mothers' roof, Naledi had to do all the work of a *makoti* (married woman)—such as cooking and cleaning—with little or none of the benefits.[2]

The status of Eric and Naledi's relationship was unclear for much of my fieldwork. Eric's daughter spent occasional weekends with him and a week or more during most school holidays. Eric was reluctant to give Naledi money to care for their child after she moved out and opted instead to pay for Fikile's day-care. In 2015 he was paying R500 ($32) each month towards her school fees at a low-cost private school in Roodepoort (10 km away). Eric preferred to support his child through school fees, which he paid directly to the school, instead of giving money to Naledi who was now in a relationship with another man. Eric's payment of school fees was critical to him having more consistent access to his daughter, confirming Mark Hunter's observation that school fees provide an important way for fathers to maintain links with their non-resident children (Hunter 2014, 2015).

If Eric's regular financial support was critical to him spending time with his child, Tshepo's story shows how fulfilling the economic role of fatherhood can also come at the expense of spending quality time with one's child. In recognising there are many ways to practice fatherhood, it is important to note that success in one domain or register of fatherhood can exist alongside, and contribute towards, a feeling of failure in another.

Intermittent Connections—"Daddy weekends" and christmas gifts. Tshepo and Eric's regular financial support and access to their children was not typical amongst the fathers in this study. Most of the fathers did not see their children on a regular basis or make a regular contribution to their children's up-keep or school-related expenses. Some lacked the resources to do so. Others simply had too many competing demands for financial support from intimate partners and family members. Still others refused to support their children. In the place of regular financial provision, most of the fathers maintained ties with their children through sporadic meet-ups and irregular or once-off gifts.

Senzo (age 27), who in 2015 when we met, had been unemployed for 6 months after abandoning his job as a driver amid a disciplinary hearing, lived alone in a one-room rented shack. He had two daughters (age 8 and 3) with different mothers and lived with neither of them. In several conversations, Senzo criticised the mothers of both his children for only contacting him to "demand" money and expressed frustration at only being able to spend time with his daughters if he could "spend money." "They won't phone me saying we miss you, come and visit us," he told me, "No, no no. The only time they give me a call is when there is a reason [like a] school trip or something." Senzo's relationship with his first daughter was limited to short meet ups at shopping malls where he is expected, as he put it, to "buy nice ice-creams and shoes." The situation with his younger daughter (who he lived with for the first year of her life) was slightly different. Her mother phoned him, sometimes daily, demanding financial support. "When I see the phone call, I just switch off my phone," Senzo told me, describing the endless requests for money for nappies, school fees and other expenses.

Senzo's decision to turn off his phone was an attempt to not only sidestep these economic claims but also to circumvent the humiliation and feeling of failure that accompanied being unable to offer financial support to his child. It was this feeling of failure that led some fathers to purposefully avoid seeing their children until they had money again and, in some cases, become estranged for long periods of time.

While fathers without stable income often criticised the mothers of their children for only contacting them to "demand" money and limiting their time with their children to short meet-ups, the purchase of irregular gifts was also one of the only ways they *could* maintain ties with their children. Some of my interlocutors took great pride in buying their children new clothes or shoes for Christmas or to congratulate and encourage them for doing well at school. The purchase of new clothes or shoes provided tangible evidence of a father-child connection and signaled a father's desire to be more involved in his child's life.

Eric bought his daughter a R700 ($45) pair of Nike trainers for Christmas in 2015. He had been saving for a number of months to purchase these shoes for his daughter. He gave his daughter the shoes at the beginning of her school holidays when she came to visit him for a few days. This was shortly before she went to her maternal grandmother's house for the bulk of the Christmas holidays. Eric's neighbour told me that the shoes Eric bought would have "everyone talking [about Eric]" at his daughter's school and in the village where she would spend Christmas. "You'll be the topic of the day" he said, describing how the child's mother and her relatives will be happy "because you spend." The shoes provide a visible marker of Eric's connection with his child, something that is not attained through his routine payment of school fees.

It was common for young men to post pictures on social media of them with their children at a fast-food restaurant like Burger King or at a shopping mall. Sibongile (age 31), who had one daughter (age 7) and made a meager living through his involvement in a local NGO, posted two pictures on Facebook of his daughter (who lives with her mother in another province) and him at a shopping mall in Johannesburg with a bag of clothes he bought her. The first picture had the caption: "This daughter of mine humbles me, she is the reason for my hustle. Daddy loves you." The second picture had the following caption: "[My daughter] engaging me on the matter of her benefits regarding her performance of school." These posts allow Sibongile to demonstrate his efforts to see his daughter and "spend money" on her. Pictures like these often-received positive feedback on social media. "Proud of you brother," read one of the first comments. The purchase of clothes or shoes for one's child, and the Facebook posts that often accompanied these infrequent meetups, had important symbolic value in a context where men are regularly criticised for "failing" in their responsibilities toward their children.

Women did not always view these voluntary and erratic forms of financial support favourably. Precious (age 26), who had a five-year-old daughter, referred disparagingly to her ex's attempts to maintain a relationship with their child through sporadic gifts, and what she called "Daddy weekends." At the time of my fieldwork, Precious had a part-time retail job and lived with her daughter in her mother's house along with her stepfather and two siblings. Precious had ended the relationship with her daughter's

father 4 years earlier and had no desire to re-establish any sexual or romantic relationship with him. "He wasn't taking 'responsibility', she told me, when I asked why their relationship had ended, "he was [only] thinking for himself." At the time of my research, and after a period of estrangement, the father was trying to re-establish contact. Precious did not approve of her ex's attempt to re-assert his status as father through these one-off forms of support. "If you can't be there all the time then rather keep your money and stay away," she told me.

Precious was sceptical about her ex's intentions and suspected him of wanting to "spend money" on his child to get back into a sexual or affective relationship with her rather than any genuine interest or concern for their daughter. Precious told me that her ex still wanted to control her and did not like her dating other men. It is important to note that while many single-mothers might share Precious's concern and not want the father to have any role in their child's life (especially where there is a history of domestic violence), it was rare for women to have the resources, or family support, to be indifferent towards, or refuse, offers of financial support from the biological father, however small or infrequent. In fact, many women spent valuable time and effort hounding, even begging, the father of their children to support them and their children. This could put women (especially poor single mothers) in a vulnerable position when financial support was seen to involve the reciprocal expectation of a sexual or affective relationship (G'sell 2016).

Non-Existent connections—evading claims and blaming women. There were also fathers who disengaged from their children's lives and evaded their financial responsibilities to them. This took different forms from men simply ignoring phone calls and requests for financial support to, at least in one instance, men going to great lengths to conceal their income and evade court-ordered maintenance payments. This was the case with Walter (age 32) who, at the time of my fieldwork, made a sizable amount of money through letting out property in Zandspruit. The mother of his young daughter was a woman called Nombusa. Walter had made *ilobolo*-related payments to Nombusa's family before their child was born. In mid-2015, when we met, Nombusa had ended the relationship due to Walter's controlling and physically abusive behaviour. She had moved back in with her parents and taken Walter to the maintenance court to demand financial support for their child.

Walter's resentment towards Nombusa for breaking off their engagement and taking him to the maintenance court was palpable in our conversations. He went to great lengths to obscure the significant sum of money (close to R20 000 ($1284)) he made each month and delay the court proceedings. He got his tenants to pay him in cash instead of depositing money into his bank account as he had done before. "I was hiding," he said, "I didn't want the maintenance guys to know what was going on." It is much easier for the court to enforce the maintenance laws when the defaulting parent has a formal wage job as an emolument order can be attached to a salary. It is especially difficult when the defaulting parent earns money in the informal economy, and like

Walter switched to operating a "cash business" to avoid any formal record of his earnings.

Walter expressed little remorse about his lack of involvement in his daughter's life or his refusal to pay maintenance. His lack of remorse was closely tied to the resentment he felt towards Nombusa for leaving him and taking him to court. Walter not only dodged his financial responsibilities to his child but also continuously discredited Nombusa. He regularly accused Nombusa of being unfaithful and promiscuous by "having boyfriends outside" and "doing business" with him. When I asked Walter what he meant by "doing business" he told me that "[women] make a baby with us and then run away and tell us we must pay maintenance." Although Walter's near complete evasion of his paternal responsibilities was an exception amongst the fathers I interviewed and spent time with, his view that women are "doing business" with men and only enter (or remain in) relationships for material benefit was shared by a number of them. Many felt their role as fathers was reduced to an "ATM" and were frustrated that they had to "spend money" to spend time with their children (Mavungu, Thomson-de Boor, and Mphaka 2013).

Walter's feeling that Nombusa was "doing business" with him fed into his criticisms of the maintenance system which he said was biased against men and gave women, in his words, "more power [than men]." Walter was not alone in these views. Vusi (age 34), whose daughter lived with her mother's family in another province, shared Walter's grievances about the maintenance court. "When we broke up," he told me, "it's obvious the maintenance court granted the mother the child. They don't even figure out what is the problem between us […] they just say the father cannot take care of the child. And when I want to see my daughter, I have to call first."

Walter and Vusi also viewed the child support grant (CSG), a cash transfer paid to the caregivers of over 13 million children in South Africa, as coming to substitute men's role as "provider." The overwhelming majority of child support grants are received by women on behalf of their children. As little as 2% of CSG recipients are men (Khan 2018). Walter told me the mothers of his children (he also had a son with a different mother) were "get[ting] a lot of money from the government" to look after them. He saw their receipt of the CSG as justifying his refusal to financially support his children. He was not troubled when I insisted that R380 ($25) (the value of the CSG in 2015) was barely enough to feed a child for a month. "[If the government] cancels this thing of giving them [women] money," referring to the CSG, "we [men] will support our children," he blurted out. While there is some evidence that social grants are perceived to "empower" women at the expense of "tradition" and to "absolve men of the responsibility of fatherhood" (Dubbeld 2013, 197, 198), we know relatively little about how widespread this perception is or how social grants shape men's fatherly practices. Men's views on the CSG, and its impact on gender norms and caretaking responsibilities, is an important topic for future research.

Although Walter's contempt for the CSG (much like the maintenance laws) was fuelled by Nombusa leaving him and restricting his access to his child, it was also coloured by a hegemonic construction of masculinity centred on men's power and control over women. Walter often accused Nombusa of wanting to "be the man of the

house" and complained about her being "rude" and having an "attitude." His disdain towards women's aspiration towards more autonomy and financial independence not only impeded his access to his daughter. It is also underpinned his controlling behaviour and use of violence that resulted in Nombusa leaving him. A study on child maintenance supports this claim. As Grace Khunou (2012) points out, women asking for maintenance—money women are entitled to receive from the fathers of their children as per the maintenance laws—has been found to be equivalent to "asking for violence" (Khunou 2012, 10).

Although Walter's disengagement from his fatherly responsibilities was exceptional amongst the men I interviewed, I felt it was important to include for two reasons. First, it illustrates how relational dynamics and gender norms can be, at least in certain instances, more relevant than economic factors in shaping men's involvement in their children's lives (or lack thereof). It also highlights the difficulty some men are having in relating more equitably to women. This not only put Nombusa and her child in harm's way but also impeded Walter's ability to find alternative ways, as we saw with Eric and Sibongile, to stay involved in his non-resident child's life. Other research has shown that men who are more egalitarian in their gender attitudes are more likely to be involved fathers and, conversely, men who do not have gender equitable views are the least likely to be hands-on or involved fathers (Morrell et al. 2016). The second reason I included Walter's story is precisely because it illuminates—albeit in a relatively extreme form—the conflicts and tension that surround the dissolution of a gender and age hierarchy centered on men as "providers." This dissolution is said to contribute to men's hostile attitudes to women and high rates of domestic and sexual violence in South Africa (Hunter 2010; Morrell et al. 2013; Walker 2005; Helman and Ratele 2016). I recognize that in including Walter's story I risk affirming rather than disrupting the "crisis" narrative this article set out to complicate and qualify. Yet, as should be apparent by now, this article has sought to detail the diverse ways in which men practice fatherhood, their reasons for both seeking out and denying their relationship and responsibilities to their children, and the interconnection between these choices and shifting gender norms and orders.

Conclusion

Young Black men are practising fatherhood in a context where long lasting ideals about men's roles and responsibilities as "provider" persist amid new provisional social formations and gender norms. It is for this reason that the categories of regular, intermittent, and non-existent connections are best understood as particular moments in a father's life rather than a fixed or permanent choice or set of circumstances. By viewing father-child (dis)connections as a 'vital conjuncture' in and through the life course this article demonstrates how being a father and fathering is never fully obtained but rather always in the making. A life course perspective also allows us to see how the practice of fatherhood is plural rather than singular and contingent upon specific socio-economic conditions, relational dynamics, and cultural expectations. Similarly, it demonstrates

how gender norms and hierarchies are being reproduced and challenged through the everyday care of children within diverse family configurations.

Most fathers in this study did not live consistently with their children nor had they abandoned them. Their social and economic circumstances made it difficult for them to regularly spend time with their children or financially support them. When this did occur the father was much more likely to be in a relationship with the mother of his child, live nearby, and have regular wage work—all of which are increasingly rare. It was much more common for fathers to maintain relationships with their children through holiday visits and short meet ups that involved them "spending money." The direct and sporadic nature of men's financial support for their children is only partially explained by men's financial difficulties or the fact that very few of them reside with their children. I have shown how the quality of the relationship men have with the mothers of their children also has a significant impact on men's involvement in their children's lives.

While there were cases of men distancing themselves from their children, often, although not always due to their inability to provide material support, most of the men wanted to be more physically present and involved in their children's lives. Women also limited men's access to their children. This was most often done to either punish men for not fulfilling the "provider role" or to strong-arm them into doing so. The conflicts and tensions that characterise men's relationships with the mothers of their (non-resident) children are, at least in part, an expression of a general reluctance on the part of men to give money to women they are no longer in a romantic or sexual relationship with for their children's upkeep. This reluctance was especially acute after a bitter break-up and when the mother of men's children was in a new relationship with another man. I suggest this hesitance to provide financial support stems from the still prevailing idea that men's provision should not only involve the exchange of sexual and care attentions from women (G'sell 2016), but also their submission to men's authority. It is this same reluctance that also underpins some men's preference to support their children directly through gifts and pocket money or through school fees (Hunter 2015).

The increasing unavailability and insecurity of wage work has all but removed old pathways into respectable manhood that involved young men getting married, building a home, and reliably supporting a spouse and kids. Many young men have the impression that the normative frameworks they are operating within are relentlessly up-for-grabs. Consequently, men feel their role and responsibilities as fathers are no longer structured by a set of clear or consensual norms but are rather the site of intense disquiet, contestation, and improvisation. This article consolidates work that challenges the use of co-residence as a proxy for father involvement and support in South Africa (Madhavan, Townsend, and Garey 2008; Madhavan et al. 2014; Malinga and Ratele 2022) and calls for more historically and contextually informed research into the everyday "practices and ethics of responsibility" (Seekings 2008). The concept of "vital conjunctures" allows us to appreciate how the practice of responsibility towards a child never concerns individuals alone but rather a constellation of different social relations interacting over the life course. While this article focused on fathers, further research could examine the

perspectives not only of mothers, but also children, grandparents, siblings, and neighbours, to better understand how the norms and practices of responsibility and care are responding to severe material constraints and the profound shifts taking place in family forms and gender relations in South Africa.

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Notes

1. I have chosen to capitalise the racial identity markers 'Black' and 'White' to highlight the ways in which racial categories are socially produced rather than naturally occurring. It also done to emphasise the endurance of racial ideologies and discourses in discussions on fatherhood and fatherly absence in South Africa.
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