

ABSENT FATHERS: AN ECOSYSTEMIC EXPLORATION OF CONTEXT

by

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I declare that **Absent fathers: An ecosystemic exploration of context** is my own work and that all sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

Moipone Mabusela

Date

DEDICATION

This research study is dedicated to my late mother who lived her life to the fullest and with purpose. She journeyed with me in life beyond all boundaries, and our relationship was a profound one. I remember vividly when she asked me: “When are you going to graduate?” and my response was: “Soon.” I was not aware that her time in life was limited and that she would not be around for the graduation she was looking forward to attending. I am grateful for her presence in my life, and she left me a legacy to pursue what I believe in. “*Robala ka kgotso moradi wa Bataung, ngwetsi ya Bahlakoana ba maphula disema. Mmasetjhaba!*”

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CONTENTS

	Page
SUMMARY	xiii
CHAPTER 1: OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY	1
1.1 MY PERSONAL ACCOUNT	1-3
1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY	3-7
1.3 RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY	8-10
1.4 AIM OF THE STUDY	10-11
1.5 OUTLINE OF THE STUDY	11
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	12
2.1 DEFINITIONS OF CONCEPTS	12
2.2 INTRODUCTION	12-14
2.3 THE EXTENT OF FATHER ABSENCE	14-18
2.4 THE FAMILY UNIT	18-22
2.5 THE ROLE OF THE FATHER	22-23
2.5.1 Father-infant relationship in the first year of life	23-24
2.5.2 Father and preschool-aged child	24
2.5.3 Father and school-aged child	24-25
2.5.4 Father and adolescent	25
2.6 THE EFFECTS OF FATHER ABSENCE	25-27
2.7 A CALL FOR FATHERS' INVOLVEMENT IN CHILDREN'S LIVES	28
2.8 THE ECOSYSTEMIC APPROACH	28-30

2.9 CONCLUSION	30
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	31
3.1 INTRODUCTION	31-33
3.2 THE STUDY SAMPLE	33
3.2.1 Sampling method	33-34
3.2.2 Sampling profile	34
3.3 DATA COLLECTION	34-35
3.4 DATA ANALYSIS	35
3.4.1 Familiarisation and immersion	35
3.4.2 Inducing themes	36
3.4.3 Coding	36
3.4.4 Elaboration	36
3.4.5 Interpretation and Checking	36-37
3.5 TRUSTWORTHINESS	37
3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	37-38
3.6.1 Respect for persons	38
3.6.2 An Informed consent	38
3.6.3 Beneficence	38-39
3.6.4 Confidentiality	39
3.6.5 Justice	39
3.7 CONCLUSION	39
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH RESULTS	40

4.1 INTRODUCTION	40
4.2 RESULTS OF THE STUDY	40
4.2.1 THE FATHER WHO DENIED PATERNITY	40
4.2.1.1 Background	40-41
4.2.1.2 Family dynamics and relationship with his father	41
4.2.1.3 Perceptions of fatherhood	41
4.2.1.3.1 Shaping children’s behaviour	41-42
4.2.1.3.2 The provider of finance, security, and safety for the children	42
4.2.1.4 How he became a father	42
4.2.1.5 Reactions towards fatherhood	43
4.2.1.5.1 Distancing himself from the event	43
4.2.1.5.2 Rejection of role of father	43
4.2.1.5.3 Abdicating responsibilities	44
4.2.1.5.4 Avoiding new identity of father	44
4.2.1.5.5 Creating a false impression	44
4.2.1.6 Impact of being an absent father	45
4.2.1.6.1 Emotional challenges	45-46
4.2.1.6.2 Behavioural challenges	46
4.2.1.6.2.1 Destructive behaviour	46
4.2.1.6.2.2 Disconnection	46
4.2.1.6.3 Occupational challenges	46-47
4.2.1.7 Conclusion	47
4.2.2 THE FATHER WITH CHILDREN WITH FIVE WOMEN	47-48

4.2.2.1 Background	48
4.2.2.2 Family dynamics and relationship with his father	48-49
4.2.2.3 Perceptions of fatherhood	49
4.2.2.4 How he became a father	49-50
4.2.2.5 Reactions towards fatherhood	50
4.2.2.5.1 Distancing himself from the event	50
4.2.2.5.2 Abdicating responsibilities	50-51
4.2.2.5.3 Avoiding new identity of father	51
4.2.2.6 Impact of being an absent father	51
4.2.2.6.1 Emotional challenges	51-52
4.2.2.6.2 Behavioural challenges	52
4.2.2.6.3 Occupational challenges	52
4.2.2.7 Conclusion	52
4.2.3 THE LONELY FATHER	53
4.2.3.1 Background	53
4.2.3.2 Family dynamics and relationship with his father	53
4.2.3.3 Perceptions of fatherhood	54
4.2.3.3.1 Provider	54
4.2.3.3.2 Spiritual teaching	54-55
4.2.3.4 How he became a father	55
4.2.3.5 Reactions towards fatherhood	55
4.2.3.5.1 Distancing himself from the event	55
4.2.3.5.2 Accepting responsibilities	55-56

4.2.3.6 Impact of being an absent father	56
4.2.3.6.1 Emotional challenges	56
a. Disconnection	56
b. Loneliness	57
c. Guilt and regret	57
d. Loss	57
4.2.3.7 Strengthening relationship with God	57
4.2.3.8 Conclusion	58
4.2.4 THE SAD FATHER	58
4.2.4.1 Background	58-59
4.2.4.2 Family dynamics and relationship with his father	59
4.2.4.2.1 Demanding and insensitive mother	59
4.2.4.3 Perceptions of fatherhood	60
4.2.4.3.1 Being a role model	60
4.2.4.3.2 Instilling moral values	60
4.2.4.4 How he became a father	60
4.2.4.5 Reactions towards fatherhood	60
4.2.4.5.1 Father readiness	60-61
4.2.4.5.2 Accepting responsibilities	61
4.2.4.5.3 Embracing his new identity	61
4.2.4.5.4 Frustrated by the wife's lack of involvement in parenting	61-62
4.2.4.6 Impact of being an absent father	62
4.2.4.6.1 Emotional challenges	62

a. Loneliness	62
b. Loss	62-63
4.2.4.6.2 Behavioural challenges	63
a. Social networks	63
4.2.4.7 Conclusions	63
4.2.5 INTEGRATION OF THE FOUR PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCES	63
4.2.5.1 Participants' background	63-64
4.2.5.2 Participants' perceptions of fatherhood	64
4.2.5.3 Participants' reactions towards fatherhood	64-65
4.2.5.4 The impact of being an absent father on the participants	65
4.2.6 CONCLUSIONS	65
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS	66
5.1 INTRODUCTION	66
5.2 CONCLUSIONS	66-69
5.3 IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY	69-72
5.4 THE STRENGTHS OF THE STUDY	72
5.5 THE LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY	72-73
5.6 THE ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER	73-74
5.7 RECOMMENDATIONS	74
5.8 CONCLUSIONS	74-75
LIST OF REFERENCES	76-83
ANNEXURES	84-94

Annexure A: An example of an interview with a participant.	84-90
Annexure B: Request for consent to participate in the research.	91-92
Annexure C: Request for permission to conduct research at the Institution.	93-94

Tables

Table 1.1 Number of marriages in South Africa in 2003	4
Table 1.2 Number of divorces in South Africa in 2003	4
Table 1.3 Report (03-07-01) Stats SA on the number of divorces by population groups	5
Table 1.4 Minor children whose parents are involved in divorces in South Africa in 2003	5
Table 1.5 Stats SA: minor children whose parents are involved in divorce by population groups and ages of children between 2006 and 2009	6-7
Table 2.1 A survey conducted on the percentages of children under 15 years of age living with their fathers in 2009	16
Table 2.2 A survey conducted on the percentages of children under 15 years of age living with their parents in 2008	16
Table 2.3 The comparison of population groups of single parents and single female parents in urban areas in 2007	17
Table 3.1 The comparison between qualitative and quantitative approaches	31-32

SUMMARY

The aim of this study was to explore absent fathers' experiences. This involved determining absent fathers' conceptualisation of fatherhood, exploring the psychological well-being of absent fathers, and how absent fathers cope with being absent from their children's lives.

An ecosystemic approach was employed as the epistemology to understand the participants in terms of organisation of their behaviour in social contexts. Qualitative research was used, and in-depth interviews were conducted to collect the data. The research found that these fathers' experiences of being absent from their children's lives have negatively affected several aspects of their lives, both emotionally and behaviourally. Furthermore, the study concluded that fathers who are absent from their children's lives, while aware of the roles they need to play, seem unable to fulfil these roles. Lastly, the absent fathers revealed a tendency to react ambivalently towards their identities as fathers.

Key terms:

Absent fathers; Psychological impact; Behavioural impact; Ecosystemic approach; Single parenthood; Children

CHAPTER 1

1. OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

1.1 MY PERSONAL ACCOUNT

I came from a background where my parents divorced when I was a toddler. They both remarried, and my father and stepmother had five children. I was brought up by my mother and step-father. My relationship with my mother was close and with my stepfather was distance. I also continued the pattern of an absent father with my own children. Both my children were born out of wedlock, and their fathers are not physically, emotionally and financially contributing to their upbringing. My experience of being a single parent is very challenging, nerve-racking, and hard work, though fulfilling, and at times, joyful. The challenges include material and emotional support for the family. The single parent needs to provide shelter, food, and clothing, and has to meet emotional needs, such as love, and security, as well as mental, educational and social needs. It becomes more challenging if the father does not contribute financially. Time management is another challenge. Amidst work obligations, a single parent needs time with and without children. It becomes difficult to achieve both. Disciplining of the children overlaps with the caring, and is gender and age specific. While I reprimand the children, I also feel guilty about it. I am often more firm on the elder child than the younger one. As a parent, you are inclined to feel more responsible for your family. You become enmeshed with your children. I find myself being a mother, guider, emotional supporter, and the leader of the family. In some instances, you become overwhelmed and overburdened with responsibilities. You also share your children's joys and tears. Fulfilment comes with your children being physically, mentally, emotionally and socially stable; academically progressive and contributing towards societal wellbeing.

I lost my mother a few years ago, and was left with three parents (biological father, stepfather and stepmother) with whom I had to redefine my relationship. As a child growing up with an absent father, you are continuously searching for your identity and you do not know your roots. You always have a void in your heart. The relationship with the absent parent is distant. You have lost a parent, yet he is still around. It is hard to comprehend the loss and find closure. You find ways of coping with the distant relationship, especially when the father is not interested in reconnecting with you. You are also left in the dark in terms of how you form a lasting relationship with him. As an adult, I am coping with how to live without a

mother. I am of the opinion that, as parents, we need to invest in our children's upbringing, so that, later in our lives, they can reciprocate the caring.

I regret not being able to provide an example to my children of how men and women relate in a home environment. Each stage of a child's development comes with its own challenges and achievements. It is apparent that the absent father leaves a void in the children's lives. If the father is present, he can be supportive to the mother and the children. There are gender roles that are role modelled by mothers and fathers, which are not transferable. The mother's role of nurturing, caring, and loving creates a sense of belonging and security. The father brings about the children's sense of identity and industry, which commence with academic achievements and continue to job fulfilment.

The experience of being a single mother has led me to conclude that women who raise children without fathers exhibit extraordinary strength, resilience, and independence of spirit.

During my clinical practical at the Unisa family clinic, I consulted with a family that was referred by a school for therapy in supporting a grandmother to parent her three grandchildren and for the family as a whole. Both the parents of the children had relegated their parental responsibilities. The father was incarcerated for a crime committed at his workplace, while the mother was dependent on her mother (the grandmother of the children) for emotional and financial support. The family lived in the grandmother's house, because they could not afford to buy their own house. Prior to the father being in jail, the family experienced physical violence. The father often fought with the mother while the children were watching. This disturbed the grandmother so much that she decided to take the children for therapy. They also received feedback from the school about the second child being aggressive towards fellow learners and teachers. The mother of the children was physically present but emotionally absent. She also missed some of the therapy sessions. This family had experienced physical, emotional, and verbal abuse. The boys wanted to be with their father. The trauma and the emotional void in these children were considerable and ran deep; it manifested in their behaviour and in their interactions with others. Therapy continued, and there was some improvement in the children's behaviour. Later, the children were referred to social services. They were ultimately placed in a home, because the grandmother could no longer cope. The grandmother was the strong person in this family. Despite the grandfather being present, he did not give enough support to the grandmother. The children's situation was exacerbated by the effect of the father's absence, both physically and emotionally,

coupled with a lack of financial support. One wonders how the father has experienced his absence in his children's lives.

There is a growing trend in society of young adults having children out of wedlock. The majority of these young women end up being single parents, with the fathers of their children being excluded or not involved in the upbringing of their children. Thus, children are subjected to growing up in female-dominated homes. The impact of this on boys is more pronounced than in the case of girls because the boys lack a role model at home. McCarthy and Edwards (2011) describe these dysfunctional families "as failing to instil acceptable family values and behaviour, as well as economic and work values". Furthermore, the authors state that "lone parents, dual-earner or welfare-dependent families are unable adequately to socialize and monitor their children or make community-based links with families who are functioning in a socially acceptable manner" (pp.162-163). The repercussions for communities are that young people tend to academically underachieve and engage in delinquent behaviours.

Shapiro, Diamond and Greenberg (1995) allude to psychiatric problems in the emotional growth of children usually being attributed to the mother, who is largely held accountable and blamed for the pathology of her children. This statement is supported by the Ecosystemic theory's views of the schizophrenic mother who sends double-bind messages resulting in a child becoming pathological (Becvar & Becvar, 2009). Thus the researcher is looking at how the absent father functions as a system.

As a black, single mother and Christian I have had both challenging and fulfilling experiences of absent fathers both in my life and my children's lives. My primary family has been mothers and children with no fathers or with stepfathers. As a single parent you experience emotional and financial stressors hence you always need the support of the father. This is what motivated me to embark on the study to explore the experiences of absent fathers and to promote father involvement in their children's lives.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

According to a study conducted by Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) (2005), the number of officially recorded marriages in South Africa for 2003 was 178 689. This represented a small increase of 1 487 from 177 202 in 2002 bearing in mind that the population has increased. The table 1.1 below shows the number of marriages in five provinces in South Africa. There

is a discrepancy of numbers because on the table Western Cape is recorded as having the highest marriages and yet Kwazulu-Natal is having highest population, yet is not recorded. Stats SA did not record some of the provinces. However, the numbers indicate that while people of South Africa are not keen to get married, childbirths are increasing. According to Stats SA, on average 50 babies are born per day in each province.

Table 1.1 Number of marriages in South Africa in 2003

Province	Number of marriages
Western Province	621 per 100 000
Gauteng	560 per 100 000
Free State	457 per 100 000
Northern Cape	450 per 100 000
Limpopo	216 per 100 000

Stats SA (2005) further reported that the total number of officially recorded divorces was lower in 2003 (28 587) than in 2002 (31 370). Three provinces' statistics were recorded for both marriages and divorces: Gauteng, Western Cape, and Limpopo. When compared in table 1.1 and 1.2, it is clear that the rates of divorce in Gauteng and the Western Cape outnumber the marriage rates, whilst Limpopo's marriage rate is higher than its divorce rate. Even with these marriage rates, the number of married people declined because of divorce. Information was not provided for other provinces in South Africa.

Table 1.2 Number of divorces in South Africa in 2003

Province	Number of divorces in 2003
Gauteng	797 per 100 000
Western cape	726 per 100 000
Limpopo	141 per 100 000
Eastern Cape	135 per 100 000

Furthermore, when we look at the number of children whose parents were divorced, Stats SA (2005) indicated the following: In 2003 there were in total 30 311 minor children whose parents were divorced. This was lower than in 2002 in which there were 31 370 minor

children. The following table looks at a number of minor children whose parents were divorced across the different racial groups.

Table 1.3 Report (03-07-01) provided by Stats SA on the number of divorces by population groups

Year	Black African	Coloured	Indian or Asian	White	Mixed	Unspecified	Total
2006	9 113	3 451	1 676	11 079	613	5 338	31 270
2007	9 055	3 558	1 715	9 935	865	4 511	29 639
2008	10 110	3 057	1 802	9 481	902	3 572	28 924
2009	10 528	4 016	1 610	9 981	2 912	1 716	30 763

According to the above table 1.3 in 2006 and 2007 the white population group had the highest number of divorce rates, followed by African population, then coloured and Indian population. The mixed population had the lowest divorce rate whilst the unspecified group had relatively high rate of divorce. In 2008 and 2009 the African population took the lead of the highest divorce rate, the white population was second. There is also high significant increase by the mixed population in 2009. Both the coloured and the Indian populations had a steady increase of divorce rates over the period of four years.

Table 1.4 Minor children whose parents were divorced in South Africa in 2003

Population groups	Number of children whose parents were divorced
Whites	11 311
Africans	7 814
Indians/Asians	1 668
Unspecified	4 702

The statistics provided above projected the number of children whose parents were divorced across the different racial groups. It lacks the number of children born out of wedlock. The two indices would have given an indication of how many homes have absent fathers. In 2003 Stats SA showed a high number of married people and low number of divorced people. As

for number of children whose parents were divorced the number is steadily increasing and remains considerable. Rapid social change over the past 20 years has led to a marked increase in the number of single-parent families headed by women (Darbyshire & Jackson, 2004, cited in Lamb, 2007). Children in mother-headed single-parent families may have varying degrees of contact with their fathers. Some will retain frequent contact and be able to enjoy close relationships with their fathers, while others will have little or no contact (Hetherington, Bridges & Insabella 1998).

Table 1.5 Stats SA provided the minor children whose parents were divorced by population groups and ages of children

Population group and year	None	1	2	3	4	5	6+	Unspecified	Total population
Black									
2006	3 243	2 574	2 170	665	159	39	11	252	9 806
2007	3 568	2 652	2 014	645	134	28	9	5	9 345
2008	4 058	3 083	2 151	666	108	25	10	9	10 000
2009	4 221	3 186	2 300	655	120	26	7	3	10 403
Coloured									
2006	1 070	986	1 012	294	46	8	1	34	4 122
2007	1 052	1 103	1 007	331	31	6	1	7	4 350
2008	996	927	845	222	54	2	2	9	3 521
2009	1 268	1 219	1 141	317	66	4	0	1	4 736
Indian or Asian									
2006	665	490	386	92	16	0	0	37	1 602
2007	699	810	398	95	12	1	0	0	1 644
2008	734	543	419	89	14	1	0	2	1 709
2009	687	512	322	79	4	0	1	5	1 415
White									
2006	5 086	2 750	2 429	499	51	6	3	285	9 357
2007	4 719	2 493	2 223	441	41	6	4	8	8 480

2008	4 514	2 388	2 108	402	54	4	2	9	8 058
2009	4 906	2 465	2 146	405	44	3	0	12	8 163
Population group and year	None	1	2	3	4	5	6+	Unspecified	Total population
Mixed									
2006	330	135	95	33	3	1	0	16	441
2007	512	192	120	31	7	0	1	2	559
2008	517	218	125	28	11	1	1	1	607
2009	1 616	703	450	110	21	6	0	6	2 047
Unspecified									
2006	2 286	1 258	1 117	336	80	10	6	245	4 906
2007	2 171	1 041	933	294	52	9	7	4	4 084
2008	1 694	944	705	184	27	6	1	11	3 050
2009	812	409	379	96	15	3	0	2	1 530

The number of minor children whose parents were divorced across the racial groups is high between the ages of zero and two. These numbers of children whose parents were divorced exceeded the population group of divorced parents. Divorces result in nuclear families being reconstituted.

Lamb (1987) defines the nuclear family as “consisting of a father, a mother, and their offspring, while the extended family consists of heads of two or three linearly related kinsfolk of the same sex, their spouses, and offspring, all of whom occupy a single homestead and are jointly subject to the same authority and a single head” (p. 142). The traditional structural unit of African societies is the extended family. The extended family consists of more than two generations and may comprise of grandparents, parents, cousins, children and grandchildren. In the 21st Century, this traditional structure of the family is facing challenges, as evidenced by low marriage rates, high divorce rates, same-sex marriages, polygamy and migration to the cities for better job opportunities and life. The South African Institute of Race Relations (2003) confirmed that both civil and customary marriages have declined by 8% since 2003. People are reluctant to commit to marriage even though they

cohabit and have children out of wedlock. If these relationships are not sustained, single headed families and absent fathers will become prevalent for many years to come.

1.3 RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

Fathers, formerly a misunderstood, misdirected natural resource, who were seldom seen and even less involved in the day-to-day life of their children, have, over the past few years, begun to appear in the consciousness of society in general as salient contributors to their children's development. A popular method of investigating fathers' significance in the family has been through the negative approach of looking at the effects of their absence through single-parent homes. One method of understanding fatherhood is to explore modifying variables such as the quality of the father's relationship with the child at the time of absence, the cause of the father's absence, the family's socio-economic circumstances, and the presence of other male role models in the children's lives (Richter & Morrell, 2006). This implies that the researcher will engage with absent fathers to explore their experiences.

Bradshaw, Stimson, Skinner and Williams (1999) estimated that "between a third and half of all children will experience a period of not living with both natural parents during their childhood. Each one of those children will have a non-resident parent and in most cases it will be the father" (p. 4). Bradshaw et al. (1999) in their research on absent fathers discovered that absent fathers experience financial, emotional, psychological, and industrial challenges. When the absence is as a result of divorce, men tend to lose their material possessions or are left with less; thus, they need to start their lives afresh. They have to rely on their sole incomes, but still have to support their ex-spouse and children. Absent fathers reported that they are less effective at work, and are not easily promoted, or may even lose their jobs. Most of them suffer from psychological disorders such as maladjustment, poor self-esteem and emotional distress especially if the ex-spouse left them without warning. They become resentful towards their children, and do not participate in parenthood. Some experience loss, anger, bitterness and failure because their relationships failed and did not live up to their aspirations. Other absent fathers become severely depressed and end up in mental institutions. It is also mentioned that other fathers adapt to their loss and tragedy by becoming better spouses and fathers in their next relationships (Bradshaw et al., 1999). Despite such observable indicators, male depression often goes undiagnosed. Men frequently mask their symptoms with aggressive or reckless behaviour, such as alcohol abuse, accidental injuries, or physical health complaints (Cochran & Rabinowitz, 2000).

The research above has looked into men from one point of view. Absent fathers have been viewed from the observer's perspective; thus, the researcher will explore absent fathers as experienced by the fathers themselves. Within the discourse of sexism and discrimination, male movements are beginning to emerge in which men are taking the lead in encouraging fathers to be involved in the lives of their children. A spokesperson for Men's Forum in South Africa, Mbuyiselo Botha (2008), who grew up with an absent father and advocates men's involvement in raising their children, has appealed to men to "be involved in their children's development". He further suggested that "men need to liberate themselves first and deal with the pressure that surrounds them and then they can be able to respect women and tackle gender violence." He accused "men of being old-fashioned by harbouring the belief that they are superior to women". He continued to outline the following as important to the success and progress of the society: "Society has a big challenge to teach young boys what it really means to be boys". "Sexism discriminates people on the basis of their gender status and it benefits men and makes them feel powerful". According to Botha "men must acknowledge women and share power with them" (p. 12).

Another South African father and former television personality, Trevor Yamba (2004), contributes to social reconstruction, and urges men to distinctly support their own children and not have to be reminded to do so. He further emphasises that "we need to raise boys in a manner that they become caring towards women, and continue the legacy of caring, loving, and responsibility" (pp.14-16). He shared his story of growing up with an emotionally absent father. He was emotionally attached to his mother and she played a significant role in his life.

Khunou (cited in Richter and Morrell, 2006) explained how the justice system and absent fathers have progressed in enhancing the relationship between fathers and their children. Her research study was conducted with ten fathers, and was titled "Fathers don't stand a chance: Experiences of custody, access and maintenance." Her findings were that all the fathers that she interviewed had a strong sense of family, and believed in the father-child bond. The fathers defined fatherhood as more than financial support and protection of their children. They all blamed the justice system for preventing them from nurturing the bonds that they have with their children. This indicates that the fathers viewed their role as more than that of provider, they also saw themselves as providers of affection.

We have heard the voices of fathers who had experienced absent fatherhood, and who have become involved in their children's lives. These two fathers are not only talking, they are

practically involved, and urge other fathers to be involved in their children's lives. The researcher wonders what impact an absent father has had on these fathers. A lot of research has focused on women and children, both within and outside of the nuclear family set-up, for example, in the context of single parenting. However, such research has neglected men; research on absent fathers is limited in South Africa. Let us look into the aims of the present research study.

1.4 THE AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of the study is to explore fathers' experiences of being absent from their children's lives. Father absence can encompass a range of circumstances, including having a father who is absent in the child's life, lost through death, divorce, or family discord, absent through work commitments, absent from the family residence due to incarceration or institutionalisation, or physically present yet emotionally absent due to disinterest or neglect. The focus of this study is on a father's absence as a result of divorce, physical separation, abandonment, emotional absence rather than separation as result of the death of the father.

The objectives of the current study are to:

- Explore the challenges experienced by absent fathers.
- Determine the absent fathers' conceptualization of fatherhood.
- Explore the impact of being absent father on fathers' psychological well-being.
- How absent fathers cope as being absent in their children's lives.

The results of the study will contribute to the literature on absent fathers in South Africa, giving voice to fathers' experiences of being absent from their children's lives. It will assist in the management of custody issues, promoting the psychological well-being of separated families, and the support of the absent fathers.

The researcher will employ the ecosystemic approach, which emphasises discovering the communication networks in systems and sub-systems, and the transactions that occur within a particular context. The ecosystemic approach indicates the importance of viewing an individual not only as a single person, but also as a member of a family system. It also encompasses the observer as part of that system. The observer will thus reflect on the interaction of the entire system. The application of this assumption to the present study is relevant, because the research is set in the context of absent fathers, the impact of their

absence on the psychological well-being of fathers, and their alienation from family life. Therefore, the researcher's views, relevant literature, and the dialogue with participants characterise the multi-verse of reality. The reader will further co-construct reality in the process (Becvar & Becvar, 2009). The idea that an individual assigns meaning to everything he comes into contact with, and that this meaning represents reality for that person, holds an important place in the ecosystemic approach and in the present study. Thus, reality is valid for the person concerned, although someone else might construe that reality differently. The approach recognises different realities that exist side by side. It is also possible that people can construct a reality together. An absent father is a phenomenon that occurs in single-parent families and vice versa. Thus, A causes B, and B causes A. "A" representing the absent father and "B" representing the single parent family. This is how systems influence one another.

The interaction within the system takes place by means of circular feedback loops, which means that information is feedback to the system by interaction with other systems or sub-systems. These feedback loops can be either positive or negative. Positive feedback results in change within the system, whilst negative feedback results in no change within the system. Positive and negative feedback are therefore associated with stability and change in the system. Negative feedback stabilises the system by minimising any perturbations, and maintains the system in a stable or unchanged state, while positive feedback sets in motion changes in the system. Thus, positive and negative feedback complement one another by protecting the integrity of the system, while allowing a certain amount of flexibility (Becvar & Becvar, 2009).

1.5 OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

The chapter that follows discusses the literature review relevant to the study and the theoretical framework applicable to exploring this topic. Chapter 3 will discuss the research method and design of the study. Chapter 4 presents the research findings. Chapter 5 is the concluding chapter, which consists of the discussion of the findings, strengths of the study, limitations of the study, role of the researcher and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

“All men are sons, however not all men become fathers. Some men are frightened by the responsibility of becoming a father, and assume the role very irresponsibly, with little or no concern about its meaning and impact on their children” (Yablonsky, 1990, p. 46).

2.1 DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS

McCarthy and Edwards (2011) provide the following definitions of concepts:

Father refers to “specific individuals who occupy the position of a male parent.” Thus in this research study a father refers to male who is the biological or natural parent of a child.

Fatherhood refers to "the processes associated with designating specific men as fathers, thereby holding a gendered parental relationship with children" (p. 97).

Furthermore Lamb (1987, cited in McCarthy and Edwards, 2011) defined **fathering** in three ways as **paternal engagement**, meaning “having direct time with the children and emotional engagement”, **accessibility** as "the physical presence of a father in the home," and **responsibility** as "ensuring availability of care and resources" (p. 97).

The Longman’s dictionary (2009) defines **absent** as “someone who is missing or not at the place where they are expected to be”. In this study absent relates to physical or emotional absence of the father or both to his children.

An Ecosystemic approach is defined by Bateson (1972), Keeney (1983) and Maturana (1975) as an understanding that is sensitive to the ideas of contexts, systems and relationships as distinct from an epistemology which emphasizes entities, forces and energy. It radiates from a description of material to a description of pattern. Thus Roberts’ (1993) Systemic perspective of the father is that “he would provide a context and not an effect on the mother/child interaction. Hence the mother/father relationship or mother/child relationship or father/child relationship are all interdependent” (p. 126).

2.2 INTRODUCTION

A father is a sub-system of the family and emerges from the family. Fathers are continuously re-defining themselves by having relationships with their children, stepchildren, nieces, and

nephews. Men become fathers, not simply by virtue of their gender or by procreating, but because of their involvement in bringing up their children (Richter & Morrell, 2006).

Richter and Morrell (2006) described fatherhood as "a role that manifests in a dynamic way or multirole. Fatherhood is essentially a human, social and cultural role". These roles further encompass the biological and economic fathers. "Biological fathers contribute to the birth of their offspring, economic fathers contribute to the financial needs of the offspring and social fathers include a range of fathers who are related to or acquainted with the offspring" (p. 8). Father absenteeism is due to several factors namely fathering out of wedlock, deserting and abandoning his child, divorce, domestic instability such as being physically present yet emotionally absent, work or social dislocations, namely father residing in a different household as the rest of his family members and absence through death. The researcher will not be focusing on the absence of fathers through death, because interviews will be conducted with absent fathers.

The family structure is transforming, what was in the past the nuclear family that consisted of the father, the mother and the children has changed. Families are now defined by relations and not by their constituency. In African families, extended families were dominant, but now they have gradually transformed to become nuclear families. Some families now consist of more than one adult of kinsfolk or blood relation, with or without children, whilst mothers or children head other families. The father becomes the absent parent or family member. Thus, both the traditional and modern families are in a developmental process (Dolgin, 1997).

Father absenteeism is a domain that exists in relation to the family that is headed by a single mother-parent. Therefore increase in single mother families will result in an increase in father absence. Some families are obliged to be incomplete families because of the societal challenges facing them. These societal challenges include divorce, desertion, re-marrying, migration to the cities and other variations that tend to affect interaction patterns and family structures (Hanson & Bozett, 1985).

Furthermore, the decline in marriage rates and high divorce rates, as illustrated in the previous chapter, have become a threat, not only to families, but to children who are raised by single-mothers. This has left the father side-lined or as a secondary member of the family. Thus, the father has lost his primary role within the family, and the children are deprived of

the experience of growing in the presence of a male figure who can enhance their development emotionally, mentally, morally, and socially (Popenoe, 2009).

Absent fathers are being treated firmly by the law to enforce maintenance payments for their children. In South Africa, the government has imposed stricter laws for fathers who are not paying maintenance for their children. This carries the same penalty as for unpaid debts. The father's assets can be attached, and he may serve time in jail for defaulting on maintenance of his children. These fathers are, in most cases, absent from the day-to-day lives of their children. In instances where fathers cannot be traced, the government provides grants for children below the age of 14 who live in poverty and do not have caretakers or guardians. The taxpayers fund these grants. Thus, all, including those who are not involved, experience the impact of the fathers' absence (Morrell, Posel & Devey, 2003).

Other countries throughout the World have also treated absent fathers differently by shaming and name calling them. Different countries also reinforce the law of absent fathers to contribute towards their children's lives. According to Bradshaw, Stimson, Skinner and Williams (1999) "in the United States of America absent fathers are called 'deadbeat dads' because they have neglected their responsibilities towards their children. In the United Kingdom, absent fathers are referred to as 'feckless never-do-well' who are passing on their responsibilities to the taxpayers" (p. 1). If fathers are not contributing financially to their children's upbringing, the governments step in and financially provide for those children; hence, it becomes the responsibility of the taxpayers (Bradshaw et al., 1999).

In this chapter, the focus will be on the extent of father absence, exploration of the family unit, the role that fathers are expected to play in their families' lives, and the effects of father absence on families. The chapter will also elaborate on an ecosystemic approach, which is the overall adopted theoretical framework for the present study.

2.3 THE EXTENT OF FATHER ABSENCE

Statistics South Africa does not provide the demographics of absent fathers in South Africa. This links to the limited research on absent fathers in South Africa, unlike the statistics on single mothers and children with or without parents. Statistics on mothers and children can be acquired through antenatal clinics, labour wards, and censuses. What we know about absent fathers is through the inferred information gathered from mothers and children. Gathering statistics on fathers may be a challenge, because fathers are differentiated into roles

such as economic providers, social carers, and customary fathers. All these fathers may play the role of father while not necessarily being the biological fathers. In South Africa, “the significant roles of uncles, grandfathers, stepfathers and the extended kin network has not been examined nearly as much as the nuclear family of the minority world” (Clowes, Ratele & Shefer, 2013, p.256). Not all men accept the role of fatherhood, and may avoid it through abandonment, flight, and denial (Morrell, Posel & Devey, 2003).

Ratele, Shefer and Clowes (2012) stated that “the problems of families are as the results of family failing to play its critical roles of socialisation, nurturing, care and effective protection of children due to failures in the political economy and the legacy of colonialism and apartheid. The Department of Social Development have further argued that absent fathers, HIV/AIDS, high levels of poverty, inequality, unwanted teenage pregnancies and high number of orphaned children are among the forces that have weakened the family life” (p.553).

Furthermore Richter and Morrell (cited in Shefer, Stevens and Clowes, 2010) noted that ‘fatherhood for men and its social construction in society may be problematic for many men and has to be understood in socio-economic as well as ideological contexts. In some societies pressures imposed on men to provide for their families may undermine their sense of self-value and successful masculinity particularly for poor men’ (p.515).

Data on orphaned children adapted from Stats SA indicates that “approximately four million children are estimated to be either maternal, paternal or double orphans. Of these approximately 859 000 are double orphans, 624 000 maternal orphans and 2 468 000 paternal orphans. About one in every three children lives with both biological parents and a quarter live with neither biological parents” (Ratele, Shefer & Clowes, 2012, pp.553). The above figures indicate that more children have absent fathers; thus, we can estimate that the number of absent fathers is almost equal to the number of absent mothers and both parents being absent combined.

Furthermore, looking at other statistics available in South Africa of children living with their fathers in 2009 compared to children living with their parents in 2008. Comparison of children living with single parents and children living with single female parents yielded the following:

Table 2.1 The percentages of children under 15 years of age living with their present fathers conducted in 2009

Population group	Present father (percentages)
Indians	85%
Whites	83%
Coloureds	53%
Africans	30%

As is illustrated from the table 2.1 above, the Indian population group has more children living with their fathers, followed by the white population, and then the Coloured population, with the African population has the smallest number of children living with their fathers. Father absence varies across the different racial groups. The next table 2.2 shows the percentages of children living with both parents:

Table 2.2 The percentages of children under 15 years of age living with their parents conducted in 2008

Living arrangement	Percentage
Living with both parents	35%
Living with mothers only	40%
Living with fathers only	2.4%
Living with neither of their biological parents	22.6%

Table 2.2 shows that almost half of all children below the age of 15 years in South Africa live with their mothers while a small fraction of children live with their fathers. Less than 40% of these children live with both parents, and 22.6% live with neither. The 22.6% could be living in foster homes, with relatives, on their own, or they may be living in the streets.

Statistics South Africa (2009) noted that, in 2007, some 44% of all urban parents were single. The research indicates that the majority of urban single parents were African, female, and between the ages of 25 and 34 years. They also indicated that this are impoverished communities that are dependent on Government social grants.

Table 2.3 The comparison of population groups of single parents and single female parents in urban areas in 2007

Population group	Single parent	Single female parent
African	52%	79%
Coloured	30%	84%
White	24%	69%
Indians	7%	64%

The above table shows that Africans have a high percentage of single parents, and when it comes to single-female parents the Coloured population takes the lead. The population groups with the fewest single parents are the Indian population although the single female parent is almost at the same rate as other populations. The White population has the second lowest population with single parents. Amongst the Indian population, arranged marriages play a major role in promoting and sustaining marriages resulting in fewer single parenting and absent fathering.

Studies conducted by Jones, 1992 (cited in Richter and Morrell, 2006) provides some the extent to which fathers are absent in an impoverished African community. Jones' fieldwork spanned a period of eight months in 1989 when he was a voluntary teaching assistant at a primary school. He studied the life circumstances of 24 children. All children resided in a complex of migrant workers' hostels. Jones discovered that "the domestic histories of the paternally deprived children were characterised by frequent long-term separation from either one or both of their parents". All 17 children whose parents were married lived separately from their fathers at some stage of their lives for prolonged periods. "There was a mean period of separation from fathers among these children of 55% of their childhood years, most having been separated from them for 70% or more of their entire lives. In all instances, the children's separation from fathers had taken place as a direct result of the fathers' involvement in labour migration. The time for which children had been separated from their mothers, was substantially lower, with a mean period of separation of around 22%" (pp. 238-239).

Fathers are absent in nearly a third of the household in most of the African countries and from more than half of all households in Namibia and South Africa. In South Africa, data

from the 2005 General Household Survey are similar. While the fathers of 14.5% of children under the age of 15 were reported to be deceased, 46.5% of fathers were alive but not living in the same household as their children. Many of these absent men lived in compounds, shacks, and with other families in the towns and cities to which they had migrated to seek job opportunities (Statistics South Africa, 2005).

It is clear that there is significant number of absent fathers and the number is not static, it is steadily increasing not only nationally but internationally. The question that the researcher would like to ask is whether we have become the society that discriminates against the fathers? I also wonder whether the absent fathers are feeling ostracised by family or society?

2.4 THE FAMILY UNIT

This section looks at what constitutes a father, what role he plays in a family context and how this has changed. McCarthy and Edwards (2011) talk about "the new father", "hands-on fathering", "enlightened fathers", "modern fathers", and "third-stage fathers"; this is the father who takes part in the nurturing of his children, is involved in their care, and participates in the house chores. He also continues to play a major role in the corporate world. Thus the modern generation of fathers have become involved in their children's lives despite that their own fathers might not have been involved in their own lives.

Mkhize (2004, cited in Richter and Morrell, 2006) described the fatherhood as "the special role and that in African community a father takes part in child rearing by sharing fathering of children with his brothers through social fatherhood. A man may father a child but never live in the same home with the child, or he may live with a woman and take care of her children from another man while supporting the children of his brother in a different household. Therefore, the African notion of the father is a man who enacts the responsibility of caring for and protecting all children whether he biologically fathered them or not" (p. 187). This is supported by Lamb (1987) defined a father's role in West Africa as follows: "a father is a central figure in the life of his family. His power and control of family members is enormous because culture backs his authority. He literally dominates the personalities of the members of his family and wields virtually unlimited control over family resources. The father values children for the prestige and respect they bring, the help and assistance they offer and the support and companionship they provide particularly during old age" (p. 286). The researcher

will look at how other parts of the world view their family units and the role that fathers play in those units.

Heady and Schweitzer (2010), in their study on family and kinship in Europe, stated that, in Australia, women are responsible for family life and the household, although this has become a challenge for women. Because these women have to work, they opt for institutional or private care for their children.

Croatian families still emphasise the importance of young adults marrying in their mid-twenties, together with the expectation of children. They maintain close family ties, and often come together as families to share news of individual family members, and to redefine their status and position within the extended kin group (Heady & Schweitzer, 2010). Furthermore, the care of children is still the women's task, and working mothers have to stay at home for the first three years after the birth of their children. Thereafter, the grandmothers take over the care of the children.

In Germany, fathers' professional obligations used to take precedence over childcare; young men had great difficulty showing paternal feelings towards their children; singing to and playing with their children caused them to feel embarrassed. However, fatherly involvement has undergone dramatic changes. German fathers are now involved pregnancy of the spouse, attend perinatal activities, and participation in the lives of their children (Lamb, 1987).

Fathers are becoming involved from the early stages of the pregnancy and are re-defining their role. Heady and Schweitzer (2010) discovered that "the nuclear family is highly regarded and care obligations are acknowledged as normal. Kinship relationships beyond those within the nuclear family are based on emotional and physical closeness" (p. 262).

The Swedish community has always emphasised the relationship between father and the child, and the family as a whole. Lamb (1987) highlighted that "this goes as far as advertising campaigns and pamphlets to convince fathers that it is good for them to learn to take care of their children right from the start and to share responsibility for the children with the mother" (p. 115). The father shares many responsibilities with the mother. He is no longer the teacher and mentor of his children, he has shared the roles with the mother, and he has taken up more of the social duties for the whole family. Consequently, fathers have the same paternity benefits as mothers in Sweden. Sweden families are not kinship orientated, they form

relationships based on personal interests and emotional connection (Heady & Schweitzer, 2010).

In Italy civil laws assigned important powers and functions to the head of the family, the father. However over the past years, these laws were revoked, and now encompass egalitarian principles and individual rights. In spite of modernisation processes throughout the country and a progressive decrease in family sizes and the rise in the social status of women, the contemporary family continues to play a central role throughout the country. In general, Italy is described as country of families by Lamb (1987), because family still takes priority in the social life of Italians. Hood (1993) reported that Italian families continue to provide for their adult children even when the children have moved out of their parents' homes. Women maintain the female-centred kinship between mothers, daughters, and aunts.

In the Chinese community the father's role has undergone similar changes as in other communities. Chu, cited in Lamb, (1987) mentioned that "they put less emphasis on the child's respect for elderly people as it was a norm in the past and more emphasis on the child's expression of opinions, independence, self-mastery, creativity, self-respect, and all-round development. Younger fathers are becoming involved in their younger children's potential for learning whilst the mothers of the children are employed" (pp. 236-237). Hood (1993) disagreed with the above assumptions; and observed that in Japan fathers are spending less time with their children compared to the United States and Germany. A national survey conducted in Japan revealed that on average a father spend three minutes per day on weekdays and 19 minutes per day on weekends with their children" (Hood 1993, p. 47).

Lamb (1987) observed that "in Great Britain there are three trends taking place namely: an increase of married women working outside of their homes, a rise in divorce rates and an increase in unemployment. Thus, the ideology of the family has changed from the man being the powerful adult to that of equal power sharing with their wives. Men in general have embraced the new challenge of being participant fathers in their children's lives, but it has also brought some uncertainty and contradictory messages from those around them. There are support systems in place for men, such as ex-wives, grandparents, nurseries, and pre-schools, which are on stand-by in case the father needs help. However, there are still fewer single fathers than single mothers" (p. 29). Allan and Crow (2001) stated that British society had recently experienced significant changes within traditional families. Theirs is ethnically mixed, multicultural society, with an increasing population of the elderly and those who have

altered their gender. Different views on sexuality, marriage, and childhood have fostered the emergence of divergent family experiences (p. 34).

Solodova, Turchik, and Polukhina (cited in Heady and Schweitzer, 2010) described Russian families as characterised by five sub-types. The first is the parent or nuclear family. This includes the married couple, their adult children, and one spouse's parents. The husband's role is to provide for the family, whilst the mother looks after the children and creates a pleasant home environment. The second family sub-type is the parents living with their child and spouse. In this family, the man brings a wife home and he is the sole provider. The third sub-type is the family expecting a child. This family is independent, although the parents of the couple may help if there is a need. The fourth family is called the ancestors. The middle-aged couple takes care of the elderly and, in Russia, no elderly person is expected to live alone; the elderly therefore take over the role of children in the family. The last family sub-type is an instance of gravitation towards the first type. In this family, the grandparents are deceased, and the children are adults all these forms of a family the father remains the custodian, while the mother is the caregiver.

Several studies were conducted in Israel to assess the impact of a father's involvement or absence in traditional and non-traditional families. The studies indicated that the father's early history with his infant may have formative significance for the development of early paternal bonding. Infants can form secure attachments with their fathers as well as their mothers. In traditional families the father assumes the breadwinner role whilst the mother is the primary care-giver to the children. While in the non-traditional family the two responsibilities are shared equally by both parents and there is high paternal involvement. Thus the benefits to the children seem to be extensive, including cognitive competence, moral development, empathy, achievement, motivation, sex role development, and adjustment. Other factors that may also contribute to children's development include high compatibility between family needs and employment arrangements, high congruence between maternal and paternal values concerning childrearing, and low marital conflict (Lamb, 1987).

Research conducted on men's relative contribution to childcare and family life could suggest that socio-cultural discourses about childrearing being women's work remained largely intact through the mid-1980s. They may also echo popular discourses regarding men deriving the greatest satisfaction from their work lives, and thus not desiring greater involvement in family life. Other studies have found otherwise. Pleck, cited in Lamb, (1997) reported that

men derive greater satisfaction from their involvement in family life than from their work. Whilst Bloom-Feshbach, (cited in Lamb, 1997) also noted that, although it can increase the stress experienced in balancing family and work, increased family involvement is generally satisfying for men.

From above discussions it is clear that parents across the Globe are trying to maintain the family units even though it seems to be a challenge to changing roles of mothers and fathers. Child rearing has become the responsibilities of both parents. Mothers and fathers share or interchange the primary care giving role and the breadwinner role.

2.5 THE ROLE OF THE FATHER

There is considerable evidence that the presence of a father in the home has generally positive consequences for a child. The beneficial effects are of several kinds. Children whose fathers live at home enjoy better physical conditions, are less likely to be recipients of welfare, less likely to suffer neglect and also less likely to be abused. The best adjusted and socially competent adults are those who, in childhood had warm relationships with effective mothers and fathers, or any substitute parental figure. The father's masculinity and his status in the family are correlated with the masculinity of sons and the femininity of daughters. Fathers are also an asset when they rear other people's children. As stepfathers, adoptive, and foster fathers, they assume a parental role other fathers have vacated or never filled (Carlson, 2006).

South Africa continues to undergo political, economic, and social transformations, which have had an impact on role male caregivers, as well as ways of parenting children. The study conducted by [Ratele, Shefer, and Clowes \(2012\)](#) highlights that non-biological father figures and male relatives in the form of extended family members have played a critical role in fathering South African children, especially boys. The findings of their study confirmed that these sample of men valued more nurturing forms of fatherhood (p. 561).

[Swartz and Bhana \(2009\)](#) have also studied teenage fathers that have experienced absent fathers in their lives. Even though these young fathers did not have father role models they did not relinquish their roles in being present in their children's lives. They assumed a sense of responsibility for their partners' pregnancies, parenting and articulating that the sentiment getting your girlfriend pregnant may even be a beneficial illustration of one's sexual prowess. Average levels of paternal responsibility have increased over time and there appears to be

steady increases over time in the average levels of all types of paternal involvement. In two-parent families with employed mothers, the average levels of paternal engagement and accessibility are both substantially higher than in families with unemployed mothers.

In another study, conducted by [Langa \(2010\)](#) young men aged between 14 and 18 years talked about their experiences of their fathers. The study revealed that, even though most of these young men did not know or had very limited contact with their fathers, they became present fathers with their own children. All these young men aspired to be ‘different’ from their own fathers, and they resisted following the model of their own fathers, hoping to embrace alternative visions of adult masculinity and a more engaged and present fatherhood.

Fathers have embraced the practice of fatherhood in recent times. Fathers are becoming more involved in their children’s lives from pregnancy onwards. Fathers are sharing the role of care-giving and relieving the mothers of looking after the baby. The fathers assist with nappy-changing, feeding, bathing, or an activity-based routine. They have struck the balance between work and the home environment [\(Miller, 2011\)](#). Some fathers continue to support their school going children by attending extra-mural activities at their children’s schools. They continue to support their children through adult life.

Amidst these positive discussions about fathers who are present in their children’s lives; there are still a number of fathers who have deserted their roles as fathers. The researcher identified and had a dialogue with the latter group of fathers. South African law reinforces the obligation of fathers to support their children through [maintenance courts \(Morrell, Posel & Devey, 2003\)](#). Thus, the legal fraternity defines a father as provider for the financial needs of their children. Both parents have to meet the other needs of their children, i.e. emotional, physical, social, and academic needs.

The next sections discuss the role of fathers from infancy to adolescent phases.

2.5.1 Father-infant relationship in the first year of life.

Jones (cited in Hanson and Bozett, 1985) describes “the first year of life being of paramount importance to any infant. It facilitates the growth, development, and survival of the infant. At this stage of the infant’s development, he/she is fully dependent on the caregiver, especially the primary caregiver. In most cases, the mother takes up the role of the primary caregiver, and successful attachment will further result in good relationships with others and the child’s

ability to emotionally regulate his/her feelings” (p. 92). The Bowlby’s attachment theory suggests that “babies and young children need to create satisfactory emotional bonds with their caregivers if they are to develop as healthy children and adults. Fathers may have just as significant part as mothers do play” (McCarthy & Edwards, 2011, p. 11).

2.5.2 Father and pre-schooled-age child

Hanson and Bozett (1985) elaborates that as “children develop; they experience interaction with both parents. They discover that both parents can nurture in the home and school environments. The father is perceived as not always being in control, and he also exhibits humanness. He can make mistakes, take risks, and learn from them. The presence of the father explores the child’s life in ways that the child can extract different approaches to life. The child can then compare racial, ethnic, religion, socioeconomic backgrounds, and disabled children outside of the home environment. The school environment enhances the life of both the child and the father by exposing the father to the life of the child in the school setting. This participation expands the father’s network of acquaintances through meeting caregivers and fellow parents. This fatherly involvement shows both boys and girls that they have expanded options as they grow to adulthood. The children are guided by both adults who are balanced and working together” (p. 132).

Freud’s psychoanalytic theory considers the oedipal complex phase as important in a child’s development, when the father figure plays a vital role. The father becomes the child’s object of love, admiration, and identification. He is seen as the caregiver, a powerful or omnipotent, godlike being, a protector, a great man, and a punishing figure (Hanson & Bozett, 1985, p. 96).

2.5.3 Father and schooled-aged child

This stage is marked by altering roles and responsibilities for both parents. The family may experience what Hanson and Bozett (1985) call "a normative crisis," because “the father becomes instrumental in linking the child with the broader social community. The father shifts from caregiver and organiser to mediator and guider in a broader social and cultural context. The father is at the phase of life were he attains a balance between involvement in child rearing and marital-career situations” (p. 148). The children at this stage are able to make games with unique rules. The children want to please both their parents and they may

feel pressured to make relationships with each of their parents (Stahl, 2000). Salmon and Shackelford (2008) stated that fathers, who are physically involved in play with their children, are associated with children's skill at regulating their emotional states and with their later social competence (p.122).

2.5.4 Father and adolescent

Adolescent phase is a stage of both rapid physical, mental and emotional development. Adolescents go through the development process of acquiring independence and autonomy. They become attracted to parents of the same sex as their role model. Their peers become important to them for comradeship. Thus, it becomes crucial for a boy to have his father around as a companion during identity development. The father's expressive nurturing blossoms and interaction with his son is at its peak, enabling identity development of the adolescent (Hanson & Bozett, 1985). The girl child also needs the warm relationship of her father to be able to menarche later and to delay sexual activity which might result in teenage pregnancy (Salmon & Shackelford, 2008).

The above sections discussed the role of the father in different stages of a child's development, from infant to adolescent. The presence of the father is crucial in all stages. However, there is no research available to establish the benefit of the father's presence for the father. This leads us to the next discussion of effects of father absence on the children and the family.

2.6 The effects of father absence

Frieman and Berkely (2002) describe father absence "as absence from home for any number of reasons, such as divorce, remarriage, military service, incarceration, or work that requires travel". According to them, "some fathers, although physically present, are emotionally absent from their children's lives" (p. 211).

Pirani (1988) elaborates on experience of deserted mothers as "women who lose the support of their husband experiences heightened anxiety and stress. They become increasingly responsible, and losses status in society. Society treats these women differently from those that have support from their husbands. Furthermore, they may be too weak to cope, or become overbearingly powerful to their children, perhaps harming them with their bitterness towards the absent fathers or transferring of positive or negative attention to a favoured or

disliked son or daughter. Furthermore Women who have been betrayed by their husbands or the fathers of their children often find it hard to trust men again” (pp. 27-28).

Lamb (1987, p. 14) indicated that “children more so boys growing up without fathers seemed to have problems in the areas of sex-role and gender-identity development, school performance, psychosocial adjustment, and perhaps in the control of aggression”. It is important to remember that the existence of differences between groups of children growing up with and without fathers does not mean that every child growing up without a father has developmental problems or that all children whose fathers live at home develop appropriately. One cannot reach conclusions about the status of individuals from data concerning groups simply because there is great in-group heterogeneity.

The quality of father-son relationships has proved to be a crucial mediating variable. When the relationship between a masculine father and his son is good, the boy is indeed more masculine. Subsequent research even suggested that the quality of the father-child relationship is more important than the masculinity of the father, (Mussen & Rutherford, Payne & Mussen, Sears, Maccoby & Levin, cited in Lamb, 1997). Boys seem to conform to the sex-role standards of their culture when their relationships with their fathers were warm regardless of how masculine their fathers were, even though warmth and intimacy have traditionally been seen as feminine characteristics (Biller, Lamb & Radin, cited in Lamb, 1997).

Lamb (1987) summed up the effects of father absence on children as follows “father absence may be harmful, not necessarily because a sex-role model is absent, but because many paternal roles economic, social, and emotional remain unfilled or inappropriately filled in these families” (p. 15). Once again, the evidence suggests that recognition of the father’s multiple roles as breadwinner, parent, and emotional partner is essential for understanding how fathers influence their children’s development. The children usually clearly carry the mark of their father’s absence, suffering resentment and a persistent feeling of deprivation. They are socially isolated, since the father usually guides and establishes his children in ‘the world out there.’ In some cases, the children suffer from guilt, and feel diminished, unworthy of his attention and ashamed of him.

A study conducted in Israel by Lifschitz on father absence due to death indicated that “the loss of a father before the child turns seven can have adverse effects on his or her cognitive

development and behaviour, more so than if it happened at a later age” (Krohn & Bogan, 2001, p. 3).

Another study, conducted by Drew and Silverstein, (2007), on grandparents’ psychological well-being after loss of contact with their grandchildren revealed that “these relationships are not immune to the strains, pressures, and dysfunctions faced by contemporary families, nor do they function independently of the wider generation that links them” (p. 372). This research was conducted to identify psychological impacts experienced by grandparents after being separated from their grandchildren. Furthermore Drew and Silverstein, (2007) mentioned that according to “bereavement; “the loss of a valued relationship may adversely affect mental and physical health, and when the loss is unexpected it induces a prolonged grief response” (p. 372).

Richter and Morrell (2006) add that a father’s absence predisposes the family to economic deprivation and social stigma, and often places unexpected burdens on those who seek to provide the child with a substitute family. The literature on fatherhood and father absence in South Africa can be described as limited. Most studies focussed on related topics such as single-parent families, which are directly influenced by absent fathers. In some cases, data about the fathers was gathered second-hand from the mothers and the children.

In South Africa, polygamous marriages have been legally recognised and are practised widely. They pose a difficult situation for the family, because the man is able to marry more than one wife, resulting in multiple children, and women are prohibited from marrying more than one man. One example is a father who married six wives and has fathered 22 children. The question that follows is: How does such a father spend quality time with every child, and how is he emotionally and physically available to his children? Some of his children are experiencing him as an absent father. In this scenario, legal-marital rights and a culture allowing marriage to more than one woman and the fathering of many children supersede the need for fathers to be present in their children’s lives.

2.7 A CALL FOR FATHERS’ INVOLVEMENT IN THEIR CHILDREN’S LIVES

Botha (2008) of Men's forum, who is outspoken about challenges facing today’s men, has stated that men have to first appreciate themselves and achieve liberation from the pressures

surrounding them. Only then will they be able to respect women and tackle gender violence. He also challenged old fashioned men who harbour the belief that men are superior to women. A single parent with six siblings from different fathers raised Botha. He and one sister share a father; however, they do not know their biological father.

In 1997, Dr Bongani Khumalo, founder of the South African Men's Forum (SAMF), challenged all men in South Africa to restore the soul of the nation. The purpose of the forum was to “mobilise and galvanize men and boys to change their mind-set about gender roles, and to work to bring about equality in society”. He called men from all walks of life to march to the Union Buildings to pledge not to abuse women but to protect them. The SAMF together with Human Sciences Research Council “encourages men in nurturing roles in relationship to children”. SAMF has further formed the Religious Men’s Guilds Project and the Shebeen project which “seeks to challenge religious stereotypes of men and women’s roles by engaging with religious leaders”. The Shebeen Project “hosts monthly men’s conversations in shebeens and taverns focusing on variety of topics, including sexual assaults, alcohol, violence and fatherhood” (Richer & Morrell, 2006, p. 290).

A television programme aired on SABC 1 every Wednesday, Khumbulekhaya, journeys and reconnects families to their estranged family members. The majority of these reconnections are between absent fathers and their children. This television channel assists families that separated or have never met their loved ones. One can conclude from watching this programme over a period that there are many children who are separated from their fathers and there are a number of fathers who are absent in their children’s lives. There is an outcry from both children and absent fathers to reconnect.

2.8 AN ECOSYSTEMIC APPROACH

The ecosystemic approach describes the world as characterised by ecology of ideas. These ideas occur as part of an interlinked network of ideas in a system. Thus, the system consists of parts that make it a whole (Bateson, 1976). The ecosystemic approach is an integration of three different fields of study, namely the systems theory, ecology, and cybernetics, which fit together because they possess overlapping assumptions, and their epistemologies are compatible. This approach is relevant to the present research, as it was developed in the context of family therapy and, furthermore, it represents a set of principles whereby any facet of human functioning can be observed and described (Becvar & Becvar, 2009).

A system is a process that is used to describe regularities or redundant patterns we observe between people and other phenomena. Thus, studying absent fathers is viewed in relation to other family members. The system perspective views an individual as part of a system. Therefore, in the present study, the absent father is studied in relation to his family and as being absent from the family system. The absence of the father in the relationship with his children becomes the focus.

The term ecosystem implies that the approach presupposes a manner of viewing human functioning, where the focus falls on systems, and ecological and cybernetic principles provide the point of departure (Meyer, Moore & Viljoen 1997). The application of this assumption to the present study is relevant because the research is set in the context of absent fathers, which absence impacts on systems and sub-systems. The communication occurs in both verbal and non-verbal forms, creating meaning and understanding of the phenomenon under study, absent fathers (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988).

It is important to note that the ecosystemic approach assumes that any attempt to put forward a view of humankind will be regarded as just one possible construction of reality (Meyer et. al., 1997). Therefore, what follows in this study is, in part, the writer's own view, incorporating relevant literature and dialogues with absent fathers. For this reason, it cannot be reflected as a fixed reality. There is a further assumption that the reader will also enter into a dialogue with the ideas that are presented in the study, and that new ideas will be co-constructed in this process (Gergen & Gergen, 2003).

Roberts' (1994) general system theory has played a particularly important role in psychology in the movement away from reductionism towards a holistic view. According to the general system theory, systems consist of smaller elements or sub-systems, but are also part of larger suprasystems. These notions are clearly evident in the ecosystemic approach, and imply that the individual constitutes a sub-system of a larger family system, and that the family is part of the suprasystem of the community, extended family, and friends. Fourie (1998) identifies systems in the form of a hierarchy of related systems, and human functioning is studied in terms of the interactional patterns within and between systems.

The idea that a person assigns meaning to everything he or she comes into contact with, and that this meaning represents reality for that person, holds an important place in the ecosystemic approach and in the present study. This reality is valid for the person concerned,

although someone else might construe that reality differently. However, it is possible that people can construct a reality together when they reach consensus. Thus, the meaning a person attaches to an experience is determined by the person and not by the experience. Hence, in the present study, the researcher will explore what meaning the absent fathers attach to their experience of being absent from their children's lives (Gergen & Gergen, 2003).

Maturana (1980), Efran and Lukens (1985) place particular emphasis on the self-determination of systems; which means that independent external agents do not directly influence systems. The organisation and structure of the system will determine the functioning of the system. Maturana (1980) further distinguishes between the organisation and the structure of a system. Organisation is what defines the system as a unified entity. In a family, the organisation would be the parents and their children. A system is described as a closed organisation because a system cannot continue to exist if its organisation is relinquished. Structural change take place all the time; it is important to note that, at any given moment, the structure of a system determines the actions of the system and its reaction to perturbations from the outside.

The ecosystemic approach has shown us the importance of viewing an individual not only as a single person, but also as a member of a family system. However, since the noted systems also include sub-systems and larger supra-systems, the absent father is viewed as a newly formed system, and his original family as another, now separate, system, where they once were one system.

2.9 CONCLUSION

This chapter discussed the literature and theoretical framework of the study. The next chapter will discuss the research methodology employed in the study.

CHAPTER 3

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

There are two approaches to research, namely qualitative and quantitative. Ary, Jacobs and Razavieh (1990) distinguished between the two methods. On the one hand, they regard the quantitative inquiry as following a hypothetical-deductive model of explanation, which begins with a theory of the phenomenon to be investigated; followed by any number of hypotheses that are deduced and subjected to a test, using a predetermined procedure such as an experimental, casual-comparative, or correlational design. The ultimate goal of using the hypothetical-deductive model, in their view, is to revise and support theories or law-like statements of social and behavioural phenomena, based on the results of hypothesis testing. On the other hand, they regard a qualitative inquiry as seeking to understand human and social behaviour from the participant's perspective as it is lived in a particular social setting. They furthermore see this approach as embracing the diversity of its kind, i.e. the subjective perceptions and biases of both the participants and the researcher in the research frame.

Table 3.1 The comparison between qualitative and quantitative approaches (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004, p. 75)

Qualitative approach	Quantitative approach
Epistemological roots in phenomenology.	Epistemological roots in positivism.
Purpose is constructing detailed descriptions of social reality.	Purpose is testing predictive and cause-effect hypotheses about social reality.
Methods utilise inductive logic.	Methods utilise deductive logic.
Suitable for a study of a relatively unknown terrain; seeks to understand phenomena.	Suitable for a study of phenomena that are conceptually and theoretically well developed; seeks to control phenomena.
Participants' natural language is used, in order to come to a genuine understanding of	Concepts are converted into operational definitions; results appear in numeric form, and are eventually reported in statistical

their world.	language.
Qualitative approach	Quantitative approach
The research design is flexible and unique, and evolves throughout the research process. There are no fixed steps that should be followed, and the design cannot be exactly replicated.	The research design is standardised according to a fixed procedure and can be replicated.
Data sources are determined by information richness of settings; types of observation are modified to enrich understanding.	Data are obtained systematically and in a standardised manner.
The unit of analysis is holistic, concentrating on the relationships between elements, contexts, etc. The whole is always more than the sum of its parts.	The unit of analysis is variables that are atomistic (elements that form part of the whole).

Comparing the qualitative and quantitative research approaches, the researcher in the present study chose the qualitative approach because it is applied in natural settings where participants describe their experiences in their own language, and data are analysed using words or phrases gathered from interviews. The qualitative approach was implemented on the phenomenon under study and the sample size was small; thus, the results cannot be generalised to the entire population. In this present study, the absent fathers gave an encounter of their unique experiences.

Burns and Groves (1993) define qualitative research as follows: “there is no single reality; reality is based on perceptions, and is different for each person, and changes over time. What we know only has meaning within a given context” (p. 61). The researcher made use of qualitative research because it acknowledges multiple views of reality.

Phenomenological approach is the most suitable research design for describing and understanding fathers who are absent from their children’s lives. Spinelli (2005) explained phenomenology as “an attempt to understand more adequately the human condition as it

manifests in lived, concrete experiences”. He emphasised its main purpose as “to illuminate and disclose the meaning of structures of lived experiences” (p. 131). Therefore, this methodology was appropriate for the absent fathers sharing their personal experiences. Phenomenology provided openness of possibilities in the exploration of any facet of human experience that may be highly desirable, not just for its own sake, but also, possibly, for its impact upon such issues as decision-making analysis, social change, and policy-making (Spinelli, 2005). This was further echoed by Husserl, cited Spinelli, (2005) that phenomenology “takes the view that experience is not an internal, intrapsychic process but is an expression of inter-relation” (p. 131).

Banister, Bunn, Burman, Daniels, Duckett, Goodley, Lawthom, Parker, Runswick-Cole, Sixsmith, Smailes, Tindall and Whelan (2011) described phenomenology as a research method that “explores the diversity and variability of human experience in all its complexity from first-person accounts, with the intention to gain new understanding of how the world is experienced from those actually experiencing the phenomena of interest” (p. 7). Rogers, cited in Banister, et al., (2011) emphasised the need to understand how people experience themselves, others, and the contexts within which they are embedded, from their own viewpoint.

Another description of the phenomenological study is that of De Vos, Strydom, Fouche, and Delpont (2005) “phenomenology is the meaning of experiences of a phenomenon, topic, or concept for various individuals. Data are systematically collected, and meanings, themes, and general descriptions of the experience are analysed within a specific context” (p. 270). Thus, in the present study, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with absent fathers, so that they may share their experience of being absent from their children’s lives.

3.2 THE STUDY SAMPLE

3.2.1 SAMPLING METHOD

The population of the present research study was the entire community of fathers who are emotionally and physically absent from their children’s lives, and who reside in South Africa. The study’s sample was refined to absent fathers who were attending a specific clinic in the Gauteng province, and who were willing to take part in the study. Non-probability sampling was selected for the study. In particular, purposive sampling was used to select participants

for the study from a population of mental health service users at the designated clinic. Purposive sampling refers to “a method of selecting participants because they have particular features or characteristics that will enable detailed exploration of the phenomena being studied” (Frost, 2011, p. 49). The sample was not heterogeneous, and it was too small a sample to be representative of population of absent fathers.

3.2.2 SAMPLING PROFILE

Four participants were interviewed in this study, all of whom were residing in the same province. Participant 1 was a 32-year-old, single, white male who had fathered a child out of wedlock. He had achieved two university degrees, and was unemployed at the time of data collection. Participant 2 was a 55-year-old, divorced, black male who had fathered five children with different women; four of the children were fathered out of wedlock. He had achieved Standard 10, and was medically boarded. Participant 3 was a 47-year-old, white male. He was married, and he had fathered two children and divorced. He had achieved Standard 10, and was employed as a car guard. Participant 4 was a 60-year-old, white male. He had married and divorced four times, fathered four children during his first marriage, and had four grandchildren from his first two children. He had achieved Standard 10, and was a pensioner.

3.3 DATA COLLECTION

Data were obtained by means of semi-structured, in-depth, individual interviews with the absent fathers. The researcher engaged in a focused enquiry with each participant regarding their experiences as absent fathers. Semi-structured interviews access people’s perceptions, meanings, and definitions of situations, as well as their construction of reality. The researcher probes interesting areas that emerge, and follows the respondents’ interests or concerns. Grbich (1999) stated that the researcher needs to understand participants’ life experiences. In the present study, the data were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim, and then analysed. Open-ended questions were asked, which were structured as follows: Determine absent fathers’ conceptualisation of their role of fatherhood. Questions: What are your perceptions about fatherhood? What does fatherhood mean to you? What do you understand about being a father? What is your opinion of fatherhood?

1. Describe the role you play in your children's lives. How have you fulfilled that role? Do you see fatherhood as a task, a role, or a process of life?
2. Explore family structures and interactions that contribute to fathers being absent. Questions: Describe your family of origin, your relationship with your father, and how these have influenced you. Are there any influences from your father that could have contributed towards your being an absent father? How did your father role model fatherhood? Was your father an absent or present father? Elaborate on your relationship with the children's mother. Did the end of the relationship with the mother result in you becoming an absent father?
3. Explore absent fathers' experiences of their relationships with their children. Questions: Describe the relationship with your children and how you see your role in their upbringing. This elicited the fathers' involvement with regard to the following: contribution towards children's physical development, emotional bonding and development, academic development, social development, role modelling, moral values, discipline, financial obligations, and responsibilities.
4. Explore the impact of being an absent father on the father's psychological well-being. Questions: How does being an absent father impact on your psychological well-being? How do you cope with being an absent father?

3.4 DATA ANALYSIS

3.4.1 Familiarisation and immersion

After the interviews with participants, the researcher transcribed the data verbatim, within 12 hours of collection, in order to maximise recall of the information. The researcher then read the transcribed interviews several times to gain a 'feel' for the content. The researcher made notes to be used in follow-up interviews with the participants, to obtain clarity regarding information, at which time the participants could acknowledge the information collected as representative of their opinions. Familiarity with the data was also achieved by returning to the individual protocol and extracting those phrases or sentences that directly pertained to the investigated phenomenon, so that, by the end of this exercise, the researcher had collected a list of significant statements from each protocol. The aim of this exercise was to critique the data collected so that the researcher could identify gaps in the information and start utilising various concepts and frames to see if they shed light on the research topic (Grbich, 1999).

3.4.2 Inducing themes

The data was read and re-read in order to answer the following question: *What is the absent father's conceptualisation of fatherhood?* The father also had to give a description of his family of origin, his relationship with his children, how his absence from his children's lives has impacted on him, and how he copes. This was followed by formulating main themes for each absent father namely: *The father who denied paternity*, *The father with children from five women*, *The lonely father*, and *The sad father*. Thereafter, categories, codes, and concepts were formed (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

3.4.3 Coding

Coding entailed checking the data against the codes to see if they fit. If the match was poor, the codes were adjusted. The coding process should account for all data in such a way that data are not forced into predetermined frames; rather, these frames should emerge from the data. A more abstract interpretation was embraced, which included the researcher's beliefs, values, and prejudices (Finlay, 2011). Coding overlaps with theme formulation, as they mean the same, e.g., the researcher formulated the theme of impact of being an absent father on the fathers themselves, which was further coded into emotional, occupational, and behavioural challenges. The emotional challenges were sub-themed into loneliness, loss, and guilt.

3.4.4 Elaboration

Elaboration entails revising and structuring the data. It also entails refining and defining the data more conclusively, searching for connections across emergent themes, and integrating the themes (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). After the coding of data, integration of themes was done with all the participants' themes.

3.4.5 Interpretation and checking

Interpretation and checking meant double-checking of the themes to see if there were any repetitions or underutilised themes. The researcher took cognisance that her own preconceived ideas about absent fathers should not cloud her interpretation of the data (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). The researcher, the product of an absent father and experiencing raising children without their fathers, bracketed her feelings of disappointment and missing

the fathers by not including these in the results, thereby withholding her biases and focussing on the fathers' experiences.

3.5 TRUSTWORTHINESS

Stiles (1993) defined “trustworthiness in terms of two concepts namely ‘reliability and validity’. Reliability refers to the trustworthiness of observations or data whereas validity refers to the trustworthiness of interpretations or conclusions” (p. 601). In the present study, trustworthiness was ensured through the accuracy of the description of the lived experience of the participants. Credibility was established by participants reviewing the transcribed interview information. This confirmed that the described experiences were the perceptions of the participants, and that the transcribed words represented their individual experiences. Confirmability was established by rewording the activities of the researcher so that any reader may follow and understand the course of the research process. This facilitated a presentation of the evidence and thought processes that were developed to achieve the conclusions. Transferability or generalisation of the results is irrelevant, as the experiences are unique to the participants and apply only to them. Dependability is the ability of other researchers and readers to follow the method used. Authenticity refers to a unique study, conducted by a researcher with particular participants, and the research results being presented in an honest manner (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) outlined four elements important in executing a research study, namely health researcher, research participants, health research, and a research ethics committee. The HPCSA further defined these elements as follows: a health researcher is the researcher or individual performing the investigation, research participants refers to subjects that are being interviewed, health research as is defined by the National Health Act of 2003 as “any research that contributes to the knowledge of the following:

- The biological, clinical psychological or social processes in human beings;
- Improved methods for the provision of health services;
- Human pathology;
- The causes of diseases;

- The effects of the environment on the human body;
- The development or new application of pharmaceuticals, medicines and related substances; and
- The development of new applications of health technology”.

Research ethics committee refers to “a multidisciplinary committee charged with the primary objective of protecting research participants through the ethical review, approval and monitoring of research” (p.1). This committee is at the University and had approved the research study. McBride (2010) described ethical considerations as “the list of responsibilities of the researcher and the rights of the participants before, during, and after the study” (p.93). McBride (2010) identified five major responsibilities of the researcher, namely respect for persons, informed consent, beneficence, confidentiality, and justice implemented during the research process.

3.6.1 Respect for persons

Respect for persons means that you accept people for who they are and interacts with them in a way that they feel embraced and important. The participants in the present study were treated with respect and in a cordial manner. The purpose of the study, benefits of the study, what the participants had to do, and information about the right to withdraw from the study if they so wish were explained to the participants (McBride, 2010).

3.6.2 Informed consent

Informed consent is a written permission from participants to allow the researcher to conduct interviews with them. Written consent was obtained from the Department of Health and all participants in the present study. Participants could withdraw at time. All participants were emotionally and mentally stable, well rehabilitated, meaning that they were functioning relatively well in their communities and did not need to be institutionalised, and could make informed decisions (McBride, 2010).

3.6.3 Beneficence

Beneficence means that the process of research protects the participants, and that they would benefit from the exercise by expressing their own experiences. Each participant experiences an interview in a unique manner. In the present study, the researcher was on the look-out for any psychological distress manifesting in the participants. One participant felt some emotional distress, and he was referred for psychotherapy.

This distress was also related to the fact that he had appeared in the maintenance court on the morning of the interview and was dissatisfied about the outcome of the court proceedings, which was not in his favour. Follow-up meetings were conducted with him, and he was coping well and was less emotionally distressed (McBride, 2010).

3.6.4 Confidentiality

Confidentiality means keeping the information acquired from participants private. In the present study, confidentiality was maintained by using pseudonyms instead of real names. In instances where the participant used his real name, the researcher replaced the name with a pseudonym. Information acquired from the interviews was only shared with the researcher's supervisors and the participants themselves. The tape-recorded interviews were destroyed once transcribed verbatim (Creswell, 1994, cited in Mabusela, 1996).

3.6.5 Justice

Justice means that the researcher exercises neutrality and withholds any biases. In the present study, the participants were from diverse population groups, and were treated in the same manner; the researcher was also sensitive to their needs. There was consistency during the interviewing process. All the participants were interviewed in the same room and interviews were allocated the same amount of time. The researcher used the same language and followed the same interviewing process for all the interviews. Similar questions were posed to all participants. The research results are presented with honesty and integrity, and were not misused or misinterpreted (McBride, 2010).

3.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter outlined the research design and methodology implemented in this study. The next chapter presents the results of the research study.

CHAPTER 4

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the results of the research are presented. The results will be discussed per individual participant. The research results highlight the aims and objectives of the study, which were to explore: (1) participants' relationships with their fathers, (2) their perceptions of fatherhood, (3) how they became fathers, (4) how they reacted towards being fathers, and (5) how being absent fathers impacted on them.

The participants were selected randomly at the mental health clinic they had been visiting once a month or every two months for treatment for mental health problems and rehabilitation into the community. Admission to the clinic is voluntary. Four participants were interviewed, and their responses are discussed below. The participants were given pseudonyms according to the overall themes that were extracted, and to ensure confidentiality. Furthermore, this is a vulnerable group of mental health care users and the quality of the interviews could have been compromised.

4.2 RESULTS OF THE STUDY

4.2.1 THE FATHER WHO DENIED PATERNITY

The participant was named: *The father who denied paternity*, based on his overall feelings about being an absent father. He described himself as not showing any interest in his child's life, and does not identify himself as a father. He was overwhelmed by emotions, and dealt with them by suppressing his feelings and disengaging from fatherhood.

4.2.1.1 BACKGROUND

Genogram: The participants' parents are married and have three adult children. The participant is the eldest of the three. He has a younger sister and brother; none are married. He has a good relationship with his mother and siblings. He has a strained relationship with his father.

Academic history: He attended school up to Standard 10 (Grade 12). He performed well, in both primary and high school, and was involved in extra-mural activities. He furthered his studies at a tertiary institution and obtained a degree in marketing and economics.

Work history: After completing his university studies, he worked both in the country and abroad. He worked for himself for a period of two years, and gave the impression that he still owns the business in another country. He is currently unemployed.

4.2.1.2 FAMILY DYNAMICS AND RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS FATHER

The participant described his parents as different from each other. The mother was described as being soft, compassionate and caring. She apparently stimulated her children cognitively and engaged them in play. She is regarded as emotionally connected to the children, and the participant found it easier to relate to her. She was a housewife and dedicated most of her time to her children. The father on the other hand was described as emotionally withdrawn and unable to express his feelings towards his loved ones. He tends to bottle up his feelings and does not share them with those around him. He does not show his weaknesses or vulnerability, and is perceived as cold and hard. An extract from the participant's response reflects this:

"I always felt pressure from him and never ever felt what I did was good enough. My dad in contrast is withdrawn person. He does not express his feelings towards his children and wife. And he finds it difficult to voice his feelings, sadness towards a person. He tends to keep everything inside himself".

The father was successful in his business, and he provided financially for the family. Although the father attended the participants' extra-mural activities at school, the participant experienced him as emotionally detached. He did not feel acknowledged by his father, and he felt pressured to perform, especially at school. The participant attributed his father's behaviour to the fact that he had lost his own father during his teenage years, when he still needed a father figure. Participant missed a loving father. This negatively affected him in becoming a man and a father. He perpetuated the same behaviour of not loving others.

4.2.1.3 PERCEPTIONS OF FATHERHOOD

4.2.1.3.1 Shaping children's behaviour

The participant provided a clear description of the roles of the father within the family. He described it as having a purpose in the development of the children, reinforcing principles

and fundamental values of behaviour, and providing strength in children's lives. An excerpt of his response reflects this:

“A father plays a role or purpose in the development of the children. I think values and principles and fundamental values of behaving are fulfilled by the father”.

However in his interaction with his daughter he failed to live up to those values and principles. He relegated from shaping his own daughter's behaviour.

4.2.1.3.2 The provider of finance, security, and safety for the children

The participant perceived a father as the main financial provider for the family in terms of providing a home and meeting the financial needs of the children. This is what the participant had to say about this:

“Well, I think, to some extent, he is responsible for the security of his family, which can be either financial or in terms of providing a home. I still think a man has a duty to provide a safe environment, and if he wants a family he should be able to provide a safe environment for the family”.

He contradicts himself because he did not provide financially for his daughter, even in circumstances when he was still employed. He did not ensure that his daughter was all the time feeling secure and safe.

4.2.1.4 HOW HE BECAME A FATHER

The participant met the mother of his child whilst they were both studying at university. He described their relationship as similar to a one-night stand because they had a night of passion when his previous relationship ended. After leaving university, he later heard that the mother of his child was pregnant, and did not take any initiative to be part of their lives. He elaborated that he was not ready to be a father at that stage. Becoming a father was a surprise for him and thus he did not fulfil the role. This was also coupled with the belief in his family that fathering a child out of wedlock was a taboo in his family; hence he kept it as a secret. He was residing and working in another country when the child was born. His mother was the one who kept contact with the child and supported the mother and the child emotionally. His reaction to the birth of his child is discussed below. He seems to be indulging the defence mechanism of denying the reality that he is a father.

4.2.1.5 REACTIONS TOWARDS FATHERHOOD

4.2.1.5.1 Distancing himself from the event

The relationship with the mother of his child was not established and it was not his plan to father a child. He views his relationship with his daughter as a “roller coaster”, one moment he is there and the next he was not. He attributes this to not having intentions of creating a family and that he was relieving his emotions of the previous lost relationship and enjoying sexual interaction. He seemed to be in denial about having had an intimate relationship that resulted in him fathering a child.

“It wasn’t even a relationship. I was looking for someone to be with and (name of the mother of the child), I think, had more feelings for me. And we never had a relationship. We weren’t boyfriend and girlfriend. I just came out of a serious relationship. It was at the end of university and I was coming to Johannesburg.”

4.2.1.5.2 Rejected his role of fatherhood

The participant was absent when his daughter was born, and did not take any initiative when he was informed about the birth of his child. He was unprepared to be a father. He continued with his life, and did not bother to make any contact with the mother of his child or with the child. This is what he said:

“So, she is very persistent, and, obviously, I did not want to have a child at that time. And also, because of my upbringing, everything was about perception and how did people viewed you, and about your social standing. This was two years after (the child) was born. From conception to until my parents knew about it, it was basically three years. And it made a big rift. He (the participant’s father) is very worried about the effect it would have on my family.”

This father has tendency not to take responsibility for his actions, despite being informed about his roles and effects of his actions. Also the birth of his child resulted in a conflict between himself and his father. This relationship between the father and son was distant and it got worse with the birth of the participant’s daughter.

4.2.1.5.3 Abdicating responsibilities

It appears as if the participant's unpreparedness for fatherhood led to his mother playing the role of a parent towards his child while he was not around and did not show any interest in the child. His response reveals this:

"My mom was very good about it. Obviously, it was difficult for her, but she did the best to see (the child), write to her, and be a good grandma, and I would travel around the world and would not see (the child) for a very long time."

The participant's lack of formal intimate relationship with the mother of his child contributed to lack of forming a relationship with his daughter. The participant's mother took up the role of supportive parent towards the participant's daughter. She provided the motherly love and warmth whilst her son remained absent.

4.2.1.5.4 Avoiding his new identity

He avoided being a father for a long time. He suppressed the feelings of fatherhood and wished the child would disappear. He did not want to identify himself as a father and did not honour any obligations relating to being a father. This was confirmed by the following statement:

"But when it comes to my daughter, probably it is too much of an issue. I haven't actually faced it."

He confirmed that he has focused on himself and does not consider his child to be in his life. He has not included his child in his future plans.

"I can do lots of analysis on myself, but I haven't really somehow managed to do that with (the child's)."

4.2.1.5.5 Creating a false impression

To be an absent father was a challenge for the participant, as it did not create the impression that he wanted to portray to the outside world. He mentioned the following in this regard:

"And you would say what people want to hear, and, obviously, with someone in my social standing, having a child out of wedlock was a no-no."

4.2.1.6 THE IMPACT OF BEING AN ABSENT FATHER

Being an absent father seems to have affected the participant in various ways. This can be classified into the following themes: emotional, behavioural, and occupational challenges.

4.2.1.6.1 Emotional challenges

The participant experienced various emotions, namely feelings of regret, guilt, resentment, sadness, loss, anxiety, and remorse, and he also relived his own childhood. The participant felt that his relationship with his own father had paved the way for a negative relationship between him and his own daughter. He said that, because he had a strained relationship with his own father, he finds it difficult to love his own child and be a father to the child. This is supported by the following statement:

“First of all, I need to understand what these emotions are. I can understand guilty. I can understand resentment towards (the mother), and (the mother) for bringing up a child without opting for abortion, which was what I wanted in the first place. But obviously; how my relationship with my own father is having a big impact on relationship with my child? I felt my father was failing me in many ways, and I still relive my worst nightmare by failing my daughter, and it is almost easier if I don’t love her and I don’t connect with her, and I stay out of her life. Then I can’t really fail.”

The participant is also caught up in his emotional distress, which results in him not being able to display positive emotions towards loved ones.

“This is something that I have really explored and psychoanalysis from doctors but it is really connected to my bipolar disorder. What I am excited about therapist is that we are going to do and some hypnotherapy, so to understand what is the chemical imbalance and what are some of the emotions — me being stressed, anxious, unhappy, or ill.”

“I wish, in many ways, that I could have supported her more financially, but I wished for being there and mould her emotionally. Ja, and it makes me very sad, because I wasn’t there.”

He also expressed feelings of uncertainty about himself and how to approach the child and the mother of the child. This is what he said:

“I think it takes a lot of patience being bipolar because I would always fix things quickly and efficiently and to wind your emotions takes time and I have learnt that”.

The participant acknowledges his mental challenges, and these have contributed towards having difficulty relating to his daughter.

4.2.1.6.2 BEHAVIOURAL CHALLENGES

4.2.1.6.2.1 Destructive behaviour

The participant confirmed that he has a tendency to abuse alcohol and engage in binge drinking since he heard that he has a child. He uses alcohol to forget his misery. He also tends to not take his prescribed medication or follow up with his doctor. In some instances, he would take alcohol and medication simultaneously.

“At times, I did not follow up with my doctor, and I took the easy route of drinking alcohol to help me to forget and cope.”

The participant’s emotional pain is profound and at times he wishes his pains could disappear by indulging in excessive drinking of alcohol. He tries to escape from the role of fatherhood.

4.2.1.6.2.2 Disconnection

There is a theme of disconnection from his daughter, due to a lack of love for the daughter. He appears to be lonely. This is supported by the following statement:

“It is almost easier if I don’t love her and I don’t connect with her and I stay out of her life. And I think people just assume that if someone is of your blood that you will love, and your closeness to them, but I think closeness, love is brought by interaction and, at the moment, passion does not translate into me loving my child.”

He sounds resentful and is rejecting his own daughter and does not care about her.

4.2.1.6.2.3 Occupational challenges

Following his university studies, the participant had a fulfilling job. He worked mostly overseas. At some stage, he was in partnership in a business. He lost the work. He has been unemployed for the past three years. Even though during the interview he gave an impression that he still owns his business, he confirmed that he lost his business. This is

delusions of grandeur which forms part of his mental challenges. He has been applying for jobs, but nothing is forthcoming. He is now financially dependent on his parents, and is not able to support his child financially.

“Before 2002, I was doing well at work. I had just finished my second degree. No real reason, apart from needing to be in a high position, which I got it when I went to business. I lost everything in 2003 when I started feeling anxious and having panic attacks.”

The manner in which his absence from his child’s life impacted on him indicates that his absence may not necessarily be deliberate. Indeed, he indicated that he was denied access to his child, despite efforts on his part to connect with the child. His emotional outbursts and need for social interaction indicate that he is trying his best to connect with his child and his social network.

4.2.1.7 CONCLUSION

The father who denied paternity was raised by his biological parents. Although his parents were physically present, he experienced his father as emotionally absent, even though he was financially supportive. The mother was emotionally available, and he bonded with her. He seemed to have always longed for an emotional attachment to his father. The participant blamed his loved one for failure of his relationship. He missed the emotional connection with his own father, thus he did not develop any emotional connection with his own child. His image of a father is characterized by his perceptions of a father that provides for his family and children both financially and emotionally. In his narratives of absent father, he seemed to contradict himself because he portrayed himself as still owning his business and yet he was unemployed at the time of the interview. This contradiction could be linked to his mental diagnosis, the bipolar mood disorder’s signs and symptoms.

4.2.2 FATHER WITH CHILDREN FROM FIVE DIFFERENT WOMEN

The participant was named as such because he had fathered five children with different women and he was unwilling to be present in the lives of his children. His own father had had multiple relationships and fathered a number (he is unsure of the number of children his father fathered) of children with different women and was not available as a father to him. He is bitter about his own father’s absence in his life. This father’s relationships with multiple women emulate the polygamy marriage. Although in his context he was not married to them and it was successive relationships that resulted in fathering child with each one of them. He

had a challenge to spent time with all his children and some of them he did not know, he met them in their adult years.

4.2.2.1 BACKGROUND

Genogram: The participant's parents were not married. His father was married to another woman and had three children with her, and he fathered two more children with other women. The father had an extra-marital affair with the participant's mother, resulting in his birth. His mother raised him single-handedly. He only met his father once in his adult years, and subsequent to their meeting, his father passed away.

Work history: He worked for a government department as a prison warder for more than 20 years. He was transferred from one province to another, until, five years ago, he was medically boarded due to work-related stress.

Social history: The participant has five children with different women; four of the children were born out of wedlock. He married one child's mother, and is still in a relationship with another child's mother. Three of his children are adults, and two have their own children. He does not have any contact with four of his children. He has two friends from former places of work.

4.2.2.2 FAMILY DYNAMICS AND RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS FATHER

The participant was born out of wedlock, and his mother was the only parent he knew. He stayed with his mother throughout his childhood and met father figures for the first time in the form of male teachers when he went to high school. He described his relationship with his mother as loving and nurturing. The participant did not know his father, and did not ask his mother about his father's whereabouts. This is supported by what he said:

“My own father did not support me. The person who was looking after me was my own mother. I grew up under my mother, under my mother's care. My father had another woman, and had about three of his own children. He did not support me. As I said to you, my mother was looking after me all the years, until I finished at school.”

It was when he was an adult that he was contacted by a distant relative, who informed him that his father would like to meet him. He went to his father's place, only to find out that the

father was very ill; he passed away a week later. As a boy, he grew up without any guidance on how to become a man or a father, due to the lack of a male figure in his life. He feels resentful towards his father for not taking care of him or helping his mother to raise him. He also feels rejected by his own father because he did not become part of his life and because his father only needed him when he was sick and dying. He also displayed a sense of relief for having met with his biological father before he died.

4.2.2.3 PERCEPTIONS OF FATHERHOOD

The participant perceived the role of a father as that of a provider, both financially and emotionally towards the family. He sees a father as expected to provide a home for the family and show love to his children. A father should also ensure that everyone in the home is healthy and well taken care of medically. He mentioned the following:

“The father is responsible for the children. He must see to it that a child is maintained accordingly, and must give support. He must see to it that the child is in good condition, give it food and medication if the child is sick, and to see to it that the child is protected and happy all the times.” As I have said, it's to support the child financially also.”

4.2.2.4 HOW HE BECAME A FATHER

This participant became a father for the first time during his teenage years, and two years later he fathered another child. He was in a relationship with the mothers of his children and he walked away from the relationships after hearing that his girlfriends were pregnant. The families of his girlfriends did not come to his family to report that their daughters were pregnant with his children. He did not marry the mothers of the two children. Eleven years later, he met another woman, and they got married and had a third child. Whilst married, he had an extra-marital affair, and had a fourth child. He walked away from the relationship with the mistress. He also divorced his wife. Five years ago, he dated another woman, and fathered his fifth child. He is still in a relationship with the mother of his fifth child, and intends to marry her. He is physically and emotionally absent from the lives of the first two children. The ex-wife has custody of his third child, and he is partially involved in her third child's life. He battles to see the child regularly, because the mother denies him access to the child. He is absent from the fourth child's life. The fifth child stays with him and the mother of the child. He deserted three of the women with whom he had relationships when he

discovered they were pregnant with his children. His children are aged 34, 32, 21, 9, and 5. The next discussion will indicate how he reacted to fatherhood.

4.2.2.5 REACTIONS TO FATHERHOOD

As stated in the introduction to this participant's story, he has been absent from most of his children's lives. He seems to have been present in only two of his children's lives: the one whose mother he had married, and the one whose mother is currently in a relationship with him. Being absent from his children's lives has evoked a variety of feelings in him. These include feelings of remorse, guilt, regret, sadness, and hostility. He stated that he never showed love towards his children and did not bond with them. He acknowledged that being absent from his children's lives is difficult for him to cope with, especially when the children were more vulnerable and dependent on their parents. This hurts him a lot. He said:

“But, to me, I feel, sometimes, uncomfortable if I think about them because I didn't do anything for them and they don't see me regularly. I don't know how they are. The three...I didn't actually support them; their mothers are looking after them up to now. But it hurts sometimes when I think they did not get my love”.

The themes are discussed below.

4.2.2.5.1 Distancing himself from the event

The participant walked away from three relationships after hearing that the mothers were pregnant with his children (the first two children and the fourth child). At the time of fathering his first two children, he was having multiple relationships. When the fourth child was born, he was having an extra-marital relationship with the mother of the child. Despite having chosen to walk away from his children, he feels ashamed and sad about it. He said:

“But to me, I feel, sometimes, uncomfortable if I think about them because I didn't do anything for them and they don't see me regularly. I don't know how they are.”

4.2.2.5.2 Abdicating responsibilities

He was physically and emotionally absent from his children's lives, and did not offer any financial assistance for three of his elder children. The first two children and the fourth child were taken care of and raised by their mothers and the mothers' families. The three mothers did not ask for or claim maintenance for the children. He described his lack of participation as follows:

“Their mothers were looking after them, and they are still looking after them, and, one, his mother is late, who was looking after him, but, fortunately, he is working now. And he is looking after himself, but, the other two their mothers are still looking after them”.

The participant was not ready for fatherhood when he fathered his first two children. He was in a relationship with two women, and they both fell pregnant, two years apart. He relinquished his fatherly role by not supporting the children. He was still a student and teenager himself, and was not yet employed. He elaborated as follows:

“I have five children with different mothers and one is from my ex-wife. She is twenty-one years old, and one whom I am staying with now is five years old. The three, I didn’t actually support them, their mothers are looking after them up to now.”

4.2.2.5.3 Avoiding his new identity

He avoided taking responsibility when he first became a father. He did not acknowledge that he is the father and did not take any initiative in helping the mothers of his first two children. He reacted in a similar manner with the fourth child, and did not enquire about the upbringing of the child. He terminated the relationship with three of his children. He has a strained relationship with the fourth child, and has maintained a relationship with the youngest child. This is supported by the following statement:

“Let say that the last one, who is five years old, that’s the one; I have a relationship with him only. The others... we not close. There is no close relationship.”

4.2.2.6 THE IMPACT OF BEING ABSENT FATHER

4.2.2.6.1 Emotional challenges

The participant seemed to have made attempts to create a relationship with his children by contacting them; however, it appears as if they are not interested in connecting with him. In addition, one of his children’s mothers asked him to stay away from her child. As a result, he feels rejected by and alienated from his own children. He said:

“But I am definitely sure because one of them told me I mustn’t interrupt the child. I mustn’t phone her and stay away and mustn’t pay her a visit. There is no close relationship and, me too, I get fed up. I talk to them, but the problem is, sometimes, to pay a visit, they don’t come.”

He is also feels frustrated and sad about being denied access to his own children. He said:

“She is rejecting me, yes; and, always, she doesn’t want to even see me in that house; it was mine, and it hurts.”

4.2.2.6.2 Behavioural challenges

He sometimes struggles to control his anger, and has a tendency to be physically aggressive towards others. He has been taking medication that helps him to stay in control. He said:

“The person who prescribed me this treatment is (doctor Z) and he is now in prison, and without the tablets ... I don’t feel good. I become aggressive”.

The participant’s anger stems from the frustrations of not being part of his children’s lives and fulfilling his paternal role.

4.2.2.6.3 Occupational challenges

The participant has not yet reached retirement age. He was medically boarded five years ago, due to work-related stress, and he now earns a fraction of his salary. He has to survive on that income and still maintain a partner and the five-year-old child. The two eldest children are self-supporting. He no longer supports the 21-year old, and has never supported the nine-year old child.

4.2.2.7 CONCLUSION

The participant grew up as a lonely and sad child who did not know his biological father. It was difficult for him as a boy to grow up without a father figure, and his mother did not introduce him to his father until he was an adult. He experienced male interaction for the first time when he was in high school. Growing up without a father shaped how he relates to both women and men. He expressed feelings of anger. He is non-committal in his relationships with women, and does not take responsibility for the children he fathered. He would date several women simultaneously, and when they become pregnant, he would disappear from their lives. This resulted in his feeling guilty and trying to reconcile with the mothers and the children. They, in turn, rejected him. He also learned that his father had children with three different women. He tried to cope and change the situation; however, he has low stress tolerance levels. This also impacted negatively on his work performance, and he ended up being medically boarded from work. He seems to be emotionally dependent on his current girlfriend, the mother of his youngest child.

4.2.3 THE LONELY FATHER

The lonely father abandoned all his children when they were under the age of 10 after he divorced his wife. He has stayed away from them throughout their lives, and has only recently tried to contact them. After he divorced his first wife, the mother of his children he re-married three more times. The marriages did not last more than a year each. It seems as if he finds it difficult to form lasting relationships with women. He tries to fill the void in his life with little success.

4.2.3.1 BACKGROUND

Genogram: The participant was raised by both his parents, who were married to each other, but are now both deceased. He has five siblings, two brothers and three sisters. He is the fifth-born child in his family. He has a distant relationship with all his siblings. His mother was sick when he was a year old, and he was placed in foster care for a year, after which he was returned to his mother. At the age of two, he drank paraffin and received medical treatment. He attended school up to Standard 10. He was anxious throughout his school years, due to unknown factors.

Family history: He married his first wife, and they had four children. He and his wife abused alcohol, and he was admitted to a rehabilitation centre 25 years ago. He divorced his first wife and remarried three times. He divorced all three wives.

Work history: After completing school, he went to the army and completed two years of national service. He worked at several places as an administration clerk, and worked for six years at his last place of employment, prior to retirement. The company became insolvent. He is now a pensioner.

Social history: He has been living in an old age home since 2008. He has had a girlfriend for the past six months; however, he reported feeling unhappy about the relationship. His hobby is walking long distances, which he does on a daily basis.

4.2.3.2 FAMILY DYNAMICS AND RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS FATHER

4.2.3.2.1 Emotional detachment

The participant described his parents as very strict, especially his father. The father was not emotionally available to them as children, and he kept to himself. The participant started feeling anxious as a child, and did not feel free to communicate with his father.

“I did not have liberty to communicate with him, and, from his side, he did not try to reach out to me and to us in general, to our family in general, you know.”

He was separated from his mother when he was a toddler, and was taken care of by a foster mother. The mother was ill, thus she could not nurse him. His siblings were older than him, and they remained at home when he was in foster care. He was taken back home when he was in pre-school and his mother had healed from her illness. He became estranged from his siblings in his adult years when he got married, and they are leading separate lives. They have a distant relationship, and they do not contact one another.

4.2.3.3 PERCEPTIONS OF FATHERHOOD

He perceives a father as an important person in his children’s lives, one who has to be a role model and a guide. A father is also a religious leader who is supposed to promote the spiritual life of the children. The participant did not experience these values in his life and thus he also continued this pattern of absence in his children’s lives.

4.2.3.3.1 Provider

According to this participant, a father’s primary role is to provide for his children and to fulfil the children’s basic needs, such as food, clothing, etc. He mentioned the following:

“I mean, the physical approach is quite obvious, maintenance of the children. You buy clothing, you buy food.”

The participant did not fulfil the basic needs of most of his children. The mothers of the children fended for themselves. He felt shameful and guilt about his actions. He was not available when his children were young and he appeared when his children are adults.

4.2.3.3.2 Spiritual teaching

The father enforces the spiritual orientation and teaching of the children. He instils moral values in his children, to enable them to differentiate right from wrong.

“The spiritual relationship with father and children is of outmost importance. A father need to teach his children about God”.

The participant’s perception of his real life and ideal life as a father indicate a wide discrepancy. Amidst his awareness of instilling spiritual teaching to his children, he did not implement his knowledge to spiritually educate his children.

4.2.3.4 HOW HE BECAME A FATHER

The participant married his first wife and had four children with her. They both wanted to have children although they were not specific about the number of children they wanted. He experienced excitement when first two children were born, but when the last two were born he felt pressure and overwhelmed with responsibilities. He and his wife both abused alcohol and had lots of conflicts, and eventually decided to part. They divorced when the children were young (all four children were under the age of 10). He did not help raise the children. The wife had custody of the children, and he did not contest it. All his children are now adults. They are married, and two have children of their own. It is only now that he has contact with them and is trying to establish a relationship with them and his grandchildren.

4.2.3.5 REACTIONS TOWARDS FATHERHOOD

4.2.3.5.1 Distancing himself from the event

The participant was initially present in his children’s lives because he was married to his first wife. Upon the birth of four children he could not cope with the demands of being a father. The couple had marital conflicts and abused alcohol. Thus leading towards their marriage dissolving and he left his wife and the children. He did not make any contacts with his children and continued to marry three times, and all those marriages ended in divorce.

“Me and my first wife had many differences and we could not cope with the children. We resorted to alcohol abuse and I ended up at the rehabilitation centre. Upon discharge from rehab I filed for divorce and started a new life. I married three more women but it did not work out, I divorced them all”.

4.2.3.5.2 Accepting responsibility

He had to work extra time to augment his salary in order to support the bigger family.

He accepted his responsibilities as a father. The wife was a housewife, and few months after the birth of their third child, she fell pregnant with the fourth child. He started experiencing financial difficulty, and started using alcohol to cope with the demands of the family and escape from challenges. He was then admitted to a rehabilitation centre and upon discharge, divorced his wife. He learned the hard way to accept and acknowledge his responsibilities for his children. This is illustrated by his statement that follows:

“The first years of a child are the most forming years for the child, and, if the father is missing or absent, it is crucial and It is quite detrimental to the spiritual development, you see, and, afterwards, I thought about it three times, and I am still thinking about it because, eventually, I’ve got to be responsible for them, you see.”

He was struggling to maintain his identity as a father and succumbed to pressure of looking after a big family, which led him to abuse alcohol. He divorced the wife, and walked away from his children.

4.2.3.6 THE IMPACT OF BEING AN ABSENT FATHER

The wife had custody of the children and kept the house. He was instructed to pay maintenance for the children’s upbringing, however, he defaulted. He did not visit his children. He experienced the following after losing his family and his home:

4.2.3.6.1 Emotional challenges

He became disconnected, felt that he did not belong, and experienced loneliness, loss, sadness, regret, guilt, helplessness, worthlessness, anxiety, emptiness, and the negative impact of divorce.

a. Disconnection

He tried to move on with his life without his children, and he was not part of their lives until his children were adults. Disconnection and feeling like he did not belong are described by the following statement:

“My ex-wives and children were not there and I was all by myself. I was not part of their lives anymore”.

b. Loneliness

He fears being alone and has been trying to partner with somebody, even though all his relationships ended in divorce. His feelings for loneliness are confirmed by the following statement:

“I must admit that many a times I had to find it myself, you know (understood as exploring and self-discovery). That’s why I have been married four times and that longing for somebody, sometimes, it is indescribable.”

c. Guilt and regret

He regrets and feels guilty about not being part of his children’s lives. He has tried to reconnect with them and the grandchildren. He said:

“The kids are distant. I felt I abandoned them when they were very young, at a critical stage. The first years of a child are the forming years of a child, and if the father is missing or absent, it is crucial years most important years of a child. I always try to make it better, by talking to them, confirming them, or more spiritually, in a spiritual way because that was my big problem feeling guilty.”

d. Loss

The participant felt the loss of a family union. The wife and the children moved out of the house and left him behind. This is supported by him saying:

“Just the physical way I got divorced and the wife took the children away. That is how it ended, you see. You suddenly realise the real loss that you have sustained.”

4.2.3.7 STRENGTHENED RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

While the participant had difficulty in maintaining relationship with others, he strengthened his relationship with God. He is in the process of re-negotiating a relationship with his grandchildren. He gave this encounter:

“I think at the moment the only thing that can do is to pressure a real relationship with God you know to fill that vacuum. Of course you want to be a better person for yourself and for God, for your family, for therapist”.

4.2.3.8 CONCLUSION

The lonely father had both his parents in his life; however the separation from the mother as a toddler until pre-school age had had an impact on him. He was anxious throughout his childhood and remains so in adulthood. This sounds like he suffered from separation anxiety although he did not receive any medical intervention. The anxiety levels were increased by the incident of drinking paraffin at a young age. One wonders what impact it had on the entire family and whether he was the only one affected by this. It seems that the relationship with both parents was strained, especially with the father, which resulted in the participant being fearful of him. As an adult, he abused alcohol, which may have been his way of dealing with his emotional pain. He struggled to maintain relationships with women; he married and divorced four times. He also struggled to have sustained relationships with his children. It was a challenge for him to define himself as a father within the family context. He has found some consolation in a spiritual life.

4.2.4 THE SAD FATHER

The sad father is experiencing sadness in his life due to multiple losses of loved ones. The participant had lost his biological father, with whom he had had a good relationship. He has a strained relationship with his mother, and he rejected his stepfather and also lost him. He is divorced from his wife, and has lost custody of his two children. He is struggling to see the two children because he cannot travel to where they are staying, due to a lack of financial resources. He wishes to be with his children all the time. He lives alone in his apartment and has sheltered employment. He has emotional baggage that is difficult to come to terms with or release.

4.2.4.1 BACKGROUND

Genogram: The participant's parents were married, and he had two brothers and one sister. He is the youngest child. He was born outside of South Africa, and was raised by both parents. The family immigrated to South Africa when he was 20 years old, after he had passed Standard 10. The family left their country of origin due to war. He had a close relationship with his father. He has a good relationship with his siblings, except for the elder brother; they have experienced a conflicted relationship since the death of their father.

Academic history: He attended school up to Standard 10. He was bullied and teased by fellow learners, because of his medical condition.

Work history: He worked part-time at the post office as an administration clerk while he was married. He is currently working as a car guard.

Social history: He was married once, for eleven years, and has two children with his ex-wife. The children are aged 19 and 17 years respectively. He divorced his wife due to a misunderstanding. His ex-wife has custody of the children, and he has access to his children every second weekend, second holiday, and second Christmas.

4.2.4.2 FAMILY DYNAMICS AND RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS FATHER

The participant's parents were married and had three children. He is the last born child. The family lived in two countries. They came to South Africa after he had passed matric. He experienced changing interactions with family members. His relationship with his father, his mother, and his siblings varied from childhood to adulthood. His relationship with his father was very close, and he enjoyed the company of his father. His relationship with his mother it was close in the beginning, but after the death of his father, it became strained and distant. He felt sad about loss of his father and felt disappointed about his mother marrying another man post his father's death. He grew up with all his siblings and they had a happy childhood. He lost contact with one of his sibling for almost five years.

4.2.4.2.1 Demanding and insensitive mother

He interacted well with his mother until the death of his father. His mother was very demanding, and expected him to pay some of her bills, despite the fact that he was not earning much. He confronted his mother, and she became upset and cut all ties with him. They are currently not on speaking terms. He lost his stepfather, with whom he had minimal interaction. When the mother married the stepfather, he was not interested in a relationship with the participant. The participant did not approve of the relationship between his mother and stepfather.

"But one thing that hurts me a lot about my mother, when my father died, it wasn't maybe six months and she was going with another man. She was very, very cross and she just said to me: If you don't want to help me..."

4.2.4.3 PERCEPTIONS OF FATHERHOOD

4.2.4.3.1 Being a role model

He described a father as the leader of the family. He leads the children into righteousness and teaches them how to behave. He mentioned:

“I am the leader of the house, the leader of my wife, the leader of my kids. I think there is also, to give them good upbringing. I understand that authority from myself and by giving them a good learning from school and so forth. I can’t just let them do their own thing”.

4.2.4.3.2 Instil moral values

He sees himself as instilling moral values in his children. He teaches his children to differentiate between right and wrong. He encourages his children to lead a Christian life.

“I am a follower of God; you can say a Christian ... I want for my kids to grow up and understand Christianity. I live in that because the world out there today, I am sorry for the word, it is crap, and I don’t want my kids to end up like people outside that they do all wrongs. I want them to stay on a right path and also that they can have good friends through Christianity, not that they go anywhere and do a lot of rubbish things, you know.”

4.2.4.4 HOW HE BECAME A FATHER

This participant was married for eight years and fathered two children, a daughter now aged 19 and a son aged 17. He was a happy man to be a father and he was involved in his children’s lives. He played with his children and assisted them with homework whilst his wife was busy with her work projects. He felt the relationship with his wife was growing apart and they both decided to divorce. His ex-wife has custody of the children, and he has access, as stipulated by the legal system and can visit the children every second weekend, second holiday, and second Christmas. He has been trying to visit his children; however, these visits are limited due to financial constraints and a poor relationship with his ex-wife.

4.2.4.5 REACTIONS TOWARDS FATHERHOOD

4.2.4.5.1 Readiness to be a father

He was present in the maternity ward during their births. He emotionally bonded with them and embraced his role as a father.

“When my children were born, it was great and one of the best things that happened to my life. I saw these young lives coming to be and this affirmed me as a father”.

4.2.4.5.2 Accepting responsibility

He exercised the role of caregiver and disciplinarian of his children and taught them moral values. He elaborated on this statement by explaining that his ex-wife did not spend quality time with the children, as she was always preoccupied with work. He described taking responsibility as follows:

“I also taught them rights from wrongs and so forth, and, there, if they didn’t want to listen, I did what ... I had to do — just to give them a few kick on the bum. So, I think, that is any responsibility to put over to those two children, and also say: 'This is the way.' ”

4.2.4.5.3 Embracing a new identity

This participant was present in his children’s lives from the time they were born until separating from his wife. He would interact with the children more than their mother would. This unsettled him, and it later led to their divorce. He continued to regard himself as a father, and tried his best to participate in his children’s lives. He is faced with challenges of job insecurity and a lack of finances, which hinder more involvement with his children. He elaborated as follows:

“...to have them each and every single day to read Bible and prayers and so forth. And if they do not learn from me, I don’t know where they will learn”.

“Well, if you take it now, I have been divorced now for eleven years. When I was a father, it was very, very nice.”

“Yes and I have been absent a lot, because ... the divorce letter says I can see them every second weekend, every second holiday, every second Christmas, and so forth, and I cannot get to them. I haven’t got a car.”

4.2.4.5.4 Frustrated by the wife’s lack of involvement in parenting

This participant's wife refused to interact or be involved with him and the children. He was the parent that would interact with the children after work and school. They would share dinner without the wife. The wife brought office work home. She would give the excuse that

her work was more important than interacting with the family. He thus concluded that he was the sole parent, and his wife was the absent parent. He elaborated as follows:

“So, when we were sitting there, she was sitting in front of a TV doing her work, but she didn’t share anything with the kids or with me, and then it will be time to maybe go have dinner, the kids and I would go to the table and have our dinner, but she is not there and then they would ask me: “Hoekom kom Ma nie?” (Why is Mom not coming?). It hurts just to think of the up-bringing of my kids without a mother. ... It really hurt me.

4.2.4.6 THE IMPACT OF BEING AN ABSENT FATHER

4.2.4.6.1 Emotional challenges

a. Loneliness

He has isolated himself, resulting in feelings of loneliness. He has minimal contact with his family of origin and the current, divorced family.

“When I get dropped off at home, I go into my room, I lock the door. It is not even nice for me anymore to, to go outside and to go walk around or anything. It feels as though I am on my own and that’s that, and it’s not, like, nice anymore.”

b. Loss

He has been longing to be with his children since the divorce. He lost his role as father to his children, especially the daughter, which has resulted in feelings of sadness. He mentioned the following:

“I did not see them much. I think I would have had a much better life myself if I did have my children by me.”

“I cannot, like I said, you know, if I, if I phone her she begins fighting. If I phone her and ask, ‘Can I speak to my daughter?’... it doesn’t happen, and so forth, and it is not very nice at all, and from my daughter’s view, I don’t feel like a father anymore. Not anymore.”

He has experienced a different interaction with his son, and has not totally lost him like he has the daughter. They can relate like father and son. He said:

“But, the last few months, like I said, my son has come out of his own... It is out of his own that he says ... ‘Listen, I am going to my father and that’s that.’ So, to me ... I do see my son now. There I still feel as a father, he still respects me as a father.”

4.2.4.6.2 Behavioural challenges

a. Social networks

He has mobilised a support system consisting of close friend and the mental health clinic. The participant has been coping by having a friend that supports him and by attending the clinic, taking medication, and having sessions with a clinical psychologist. However, at times, he feels trapped in his problems and he cannot see a way out.

“My family turned their back on me. I did get some help from her because I realised then that I was actually, how do you say? Put a rope around me. I wasn’t myself anymore. I just wanted to do what other people wanted me to do. Then the doctor explained to me that you don’t have to do, you have to be your own. There I did get very good help and since I have been to her, it has been a lot better for myself.”

4.2.4.7 CONCLUSION

The life of *the sad father* was characterised by people hurting him. He lost his father, and his relationship with his mother was strained. He further lost his stepfather, whom he was hoping would fulfil his father’s role. He got married and felt happy however his happiness was short-lived and they ended up divorcing. He also lost custody of his children, whom he dearly cared for. He feels that life is unfair to him, and he has to acquire support from strangers.

4.2.5 INTERGRATION OF THE FOUR PARTICIPANTS’ STORIES

4.2.5.1 Participants’ backgrounds

The participants’ backgrounds varied greatly, from coming from families who seemed to offer emotional security, as evidenced by the presence of both parents, to families where the parents were emotionally detached and physically absent from their children’s lives. The emotional deprivation was because of the physical absence of their fathers. Two participants’ parents are deceased, while one's mother is still alive, and the fourth participant’s parents are both still alive.

Three of the participants grew up with their siblings. One participant was an only child and had half-siblings, which he met when he was an adult. Another participant was separated from his siblings during his elementary years; they were reunited at a later stage. Most of the participants had good relationships with their siblings; however, some have lost contact with their siblings.

Thus the participants' backgrounds had a bearing on how they became fathers themselves. The emotional attachments with their fathers did not strengthen their relationships with their children.

4.2.5.2 Participants' perception of fatherhood

All the participants shared a common view of fathers as providers. However, they differed in terms of the kind of provider that fathers does between financial provider and providing emotional support. This is confirmed by studies conducted by Clowes, Ratele and Shefer (2013) that "a good father has ability to provide financially and to undertake the labour involved in protecting family members for economic hardships" (p. 5). Others see a father as someone who instils values and reinforces discipline in his children, and thus takes the role of a leader and role model. They also felt that a father should provide security and safety for his children, and promotes their spiritual development.

Participants seem to have contradicted themselves re-role of being a father and not living up to that role. Hence all of them expressed feelings of guilt and regrets for not being able to be part of their children's lives.

4.2.5.3 Participants' reactions to fatherhood

Those participants who had children while they were married seemed to embrace the responsibilities of being fathers. However, they relinquished their roles as fathers after the divorce. Those who were not married abdicated their responsibilities from the time their children were conceived, and they were absent throughout their children's development.

Popenoe (1996) describes pre-fatherhood men as being independent, aggressive, and self-concerned, and fathers as more caring and empathic, integrating their own feelings with those of the family members. Participants embraced pre-fatherhood phase, or fatherhood phase or both. The participants differed in terms of the level of absence from their children's lives. Some of the fathers provided emotional and financial support when they were still married to

the mothers of their children, but relinquished their roles when they divorced the mothers of their children. Thus they experienced negative emotions re-fatherhood post their separation.

4.2.5.4 The impact of being absent fathers on the participants

The narratives presented have revealed that the absent fathers have generated relationships that are lacking in closeness and intimacy, despite the knowledge about the role of fatherhood and desire of the participants wanting to establish a close father-daughter bond with their children. Absent fathers felt hurt and pain for not being able to exercise their roles as fathers thus losing their identity as fathers.

Most of the participants experienced emotional challenges or distress due to being absent from their children's lives. They were sad, lonely, felt guilty, missed the children, and tried to reconnect with their children. One participant, in addition to experiencing some behavioural challenges, abused alcohol. This same participant was financially dependent on his mother. Another participant abused alcohol while he was still married. He acquired help in the form of substance rehabilitation, and has been sober since.

Some of the participants were raised by fathers who did not bond with and teach them, resulting in the participants experiencing fear and mistrust, and hiding their own feelings. They continued this pattern of interaction with their children.

Bradshaw (1999, p. 108) describes absent fathers as harbouring negative feelings towards their ex-partners and children, and being angry, hateful, bitter, and resentful. These feelings resonate in adults that are the product of an absent father.

4.2.6 CONCLUSION

From these results, it appears as if a father's absence from a child's life negatively affects not only the children, but also the father. The fathers go through emotional distress, and face social and financial challenges.

The results also highlight the importance of having a caring relationship with every individual in the family. And that it is through these relationships that we infer meaning in life. This current study suggests that the presence of a father is also important for fathers.

The next final chapter will take us through the discussions of the results, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 5

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The researcher presented the research results in the previous chapter. The following themes emerged from the study: *The father who denied paternity*, *The father with children from five different women*, *The lonely father*, and *The sad father*. The participants were named as such. Bateson (1972) stated that naming describes the ecology of ideas, which in the present study were fathers' unique experiences of their absenteeism. These themes were described, and the researcher explored the experiences of absent fathers to elaborate on the following: the participants' relationship with their own fathers, understanding participants' concept of fatherhood, how they became fathers, how they reacted towards fatherhood, and the psychological impact of being an absent father. Sub-themes were formulated and presented. All the themes were integrated at the end of Chapter 4. The aims of the study were explored and findings of the study presented, guided by the ecosystemic approach and incorporating the literature review.

In this chapter, the researcher looks into the conclusions, the implications, strengths, and limitations of the research study, the researcher's role, recommendations for future research studies, and conclusions.

5.2 THE CURRENT STUDY'S CONCLUSIONS

Firstly, in line with the aims of the study, the researcher can conclude that the fathers' experiences of being absent from their children's lives has negatively impacted on several aspects of their own lives, mainly at the emotional and behavioural levels. Some of them lived in shame of their actions, and kept it a secret for a long time. It seemed absent fathers denied the existence of their children and the fact that they are fathers. Furstenberg (1988), (cited in Marsiglio, 1995) mentioned that "some men may express their feelings about paternity by denying that they have children who live elsewhere." He further elaborated that absent fathers "may feel no emotional ties to children whom they see infrequently, if not at all" (p. 169). Popenoe (1996) summed up that "men who do not father and are not married can be a danger to themselves and to society". He concluded that "absent fathers are at risk towards contributing to social misconduct, delinquency and moral decay" (p. 74). It became

difficult for fathers in the present study to cope on their own; hence some of them resorted to destructive coping mechanisms, such as alcohol abuse. This view was echoed by Morrell (2005) in his article about men's masculinity. He mentioned that "the impact of economic decline has resulted in men abusing alcohol and neglecting their responsibilities towards their families, spouses and children" (p. 85).

In addition, the relationship of the absent fathers with their own fathers set the tone for these fathers to be absent from their own children's lives. One participant's relationship with his own father differed in the sense that he was emotionally connected to his father, but his relationship with his mother became strained and was eventually ruined when his father passed away. The other participant had a distant relationship with his father, as he had met him only once in his lifetime. They therefore continued a similar pattern of interaction with their children by being physically and emotionally absent in their children's lives. Literature supports the above in Hanson and Bozett (1985) identified the traditional father as an aloof and distant authority figure who only indirectly contributes in his children's lives by succeeding in work outside of the home, and by providing for the financial needs of his family, emotionally depriving his children of his love. Furthermore Hanson and Bozett (1985) stated that, even when fathers are physically present in their children's lives, they can still be perceived as being emotionally absent, which can result in negative repercussions for the children. This is also echoed in literature by Shulman and Seiffge-Krenler (1997) that "men that are raised by unavailable fathers find it difficult to be emotionally giving and nurturing and they become self-focused and self-centred" (p. 14).

The second conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that, although absent fathers are able to clearly define the role of fathering, they are unable to fulfil this role themselves. All the fathers interviewed in the present study perceived the role of the father as being a provider for his family, especially the children. Most participants as providing the children with financial and emotional support saw being a father who provides. When revisiting these fathers' relationships with their own fathers, one mostly finds a pattern of inconsistent financial and emotional provision. They experienced their own fathers as emotionally absent or providing insufficient emotional support. Thus the role expectations for absent fathers are generally ambiguous, and absent fathers feel that they are less competent as parents and are less satisfied with their role than present fathers (Manning, 2003). Ouzgane and Morrell (cited in Morell, 2005) described "the models of masculinity in African context as embracing

responsibility, protection, provision, wisdom, communal loyalty and generating harmony” (p. 85). Fathers practice these models of masculinity. The absent fathers compromised the achievement of those models of masculinity. This is further emphasised by Hetherington, Cox, Cox (1978) and Lund (1987 cited in Marsiglio, 1995) that “Fathers who find the tasks of parenting especially onerous or painful may respond by disengaging from their non-resident children and limiting their participation in child rearing after divorce or separation with the mother of the child” (p. 172). Thus absent fathers find it hard to practice what they say and know. They remain to be absent and not providing emotional and financial support towards their children.

The third conclusion that can be drawn from the present study is that absent fathers tend to act ambivalently towards being a father. The two fathers who were married felt happy and excited when they fathered their children, but after their divorces, they were physically and emotionally absent. Nielson (1999) commented that divorced fathers are essentially rendered childless as soon as their marriage ends. Two other fathers who had children out of wedlock were emotionally detached from their children, since the birth of their children. Later in their lives all fathers had tried to establish connections with their children; some experienced difficulties and in other instances their children rejected them. The narratives presented here revealed that the fathers’ absence in their children’s lives have generated relationships that are lacking in closeness and love, despite the desire of fathers wanting to establish a loving relationship with their children. Thus, the absent fathers felt hurt and pain for not being able to exercise their roles as fathers thus losing their identity as fathers. Furthermore Langa (2007) has echoed the issue of the family progresses to become an issue of the community as it in his work with juvenile offenders. He discovered that “boys that felt unloved, uncared for and experienced their fathers as hostile and rejecting them, became aggressive as adults, had tendency to develop antisocial personality disorders and are mostly involved in criminal activities” (p. 65).

The objectives of the study were met by exploring fathers’ experiences of being absent from their children’s lives. The findings of the study illuminate an aspect of family life that is not fully explored despite a number of fathers that are absent in their children’s lives in South Africa. Therefore absent father is a phenomenon that is viewed by the ecosystemic approach as dysfunctional sub-system, which further impacts on the dysfunctional family system and is affected by the same system. The use of the ecosystemic approach was appropriate and

aligned with the belief that reality is constructed, where meaning is revealed through language (Keeney, 1979). Participants and researcher co-constructed the meaning of being an absent father within the family context.

The work of Bateson (1972), Maturana and Varela (1980), and other cybernetic epistemologists have led to a further understanding of human beings in terms of the organisation of their behaviours in social contexts. The epistemology encourages us to search for patterns that connect living processes. It prescribes viewing events as organised by recursive feedback processes.

5.3 IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

In Chapter 2, statistics indicated that more and more families are experiencing absent fathers, and that there is a gradual increase in children being raised by a single parent, usually the mother. Thus the absent father challenge is not only in South Africa, it occurs across the Globe as highlighted in chapter 2. The experiences of the father absence are detrimental to the fathers' emotional wellbeing and behaviour. This is echoed by Nielson (1999) that "divorced fathers are depressed, develop stress related illnesses and often commit suicide, because men tend to conceal their feelings and seldom asks for help" (p.143) Thus implies that absent fathers are not coping and they need support from mental healthcare professionals. Lamb (1986) summed up the challenges that absent fathers experience as follows: "pragmatic problems related to domestic tasks, finances and employment. Absent fathers further experienced emotional or psychological problems; problems in relations with the ex-spouse, in social relations, and in parent-child relations" (p. 109). Furthermore literature indicates that father absence affects all family members including children and mothers. Other studies conducted by Ratele, Shefer and Clowes (2012) have discovered that the impacts of father presence include the following benefits for children: lower psychological distress for sons; reduced likelihood of engagement in risk practices in adolescence. Positive outcomes for daughters who are close to their fathers; better performance at school; better psychological adjustment and well-being children; less antisocial behaviour and more successful intimate relationships; positive intellectual development, higher levels of social competence; internal locus of control and the ability to empathize (p.554). Khunou (2006) also outlined the plight of powerlessness if fathers are not involved in their children's lives. He suggested that fathers must become responsible and assist mothers to raise and educate their children. He adds that the law need to force fathers to support their children, not only support their children

financially, fathers should be physically present, and spend time with their children and provide emotional support. However the huge benefits of father presence in the family, the same benefits for the fathers seems to be minimal.

One of the conclusions of this study was that absent fathers are failing to fulfil the role of being fathers, which implies that absent fathers are denying their identity as fathers. Literature had less to say on this conclusion, although research studies conducted by Swartz and Bhana (2009) with teenage fathers indicated that teenage fathers identified themselves as fathers and they were actively involved in their children's upbringing. However in the current study the absent fathers were not involved in their children's development except for those fathers who were involved during the time they were married to the mothers of their children. Bateson's (1972) systems theory alludes to connections to one another in all relationships. However, this connection is lacking between the absent fathers and their children. Thus absent fathers are unable to function separately as individuals, while maintaining a sense of cohesion and connectedness to their children.

Lastly, the conclusion that absent fathers tends to act ambivalently towards being a father implies that absent fathers have difficulty relating to their children. Becvar and Becvar (2009) contend that complementary relationship is essential to enabling families to function effectively. All participants experienced negative relationships with their children, some from birth of their children and some post-divorce with mothers of their children. There was lack of reciprocity between giving and taking care and between providing and receiving support and nurture.

Furthermore, it has to be considered whether absent fathers have an impact on society as a whole by perpetuating violence against women and children, due to being disgruntled, or have lost a meaning of being a present father. Popenoe (1996) added that "fatherlessness appears to generate more violence toward women just as it increases violence toward children" (p. 73).

South African Institute for Race Relations in their recent article of Fast Facts (2007) outlined the following dysfunctional families as a benchmark for high unemployment rates and poverty; that is decline in marriages, increasing single parent household, absent father families, orphaned children and teenage pregnancy. Furthermore suggested that inequality,

unemployment and poverty should be addressed through fathers' involvement in their children's lives.

The results of the study imply that there could be a 'father crisis' amongst the four participants. This means that absent father has an impact on the absent father himself, family (children and mothers), society, at political and economic levels; and all these factors impact on the absent fathers. This is partially supported by [Vetten and Bhana, \(2001\)](#), an independent researcher on gender issues, commented on the article that "an absent father has serious consequences for both the mother and the children". She alluded to "high levels of post-partum depression amongst mothers as attributable to abandonment by fathers". She added that "studies worldwide have confirmed that single mother households lead to societal problems. The economic burden on the mother is so high that she has to augment her income by working extra hours or holding more than one job. This results in mothers spending less quality time with their children". She concluded that "these situations result in the 'crisis of men' which further perpetuates patterns of abuse, domestic violence, and other social problems, such as crime" (pp.125-151).

According to the ecosystemic approach, the system (in this case, the family) is viewed as functioning optimally when all of its parts are present and functioning as a whole, with a change in one part of the system affecting the entire system (Becvar, & Becvar, 2009). In this instance, the system consists of a father, a mother, and children, with any of the parts affecting the other parts of the system. An absent father, which is a change in the system, affects the functioning of the entire system, and the family cannot function effectively within society. In the present study, each participant needed to determine their experiences as absent fathers; and whether this study has facilitated the development of more functional patterns of interaction and relationship with their children.

The researcher acknowledges the role that men played and continue to play in political and economic arenas. Other research studies have focused on important role that men play in social life, as head of families and driving the cultural aspects of the society and how women have become autonomous and independent. Men are traditionally the custodian of power in families, but have less emotional connection with their children. Thus the "crisis" does not relate to men, but to fathers. Thus this is research study has pointed out a concern from people of all works of life that absent father is a challenge that need to be addressed by families, healthcare sectors, economists media and politicians. This will be discussed further

in recommendations of the study to curb absenteeism amongst fathers, and to promote father presence in families.

5.4 THE STRENGTHS OF THE STUDY

The current study has contributed to the dearth of literature on absent fathers in South Africa. In this research study, fathers had an opportunity to share their experiences without any reservations, due to the qualitative method employed. The qualitative approach discussed in chapter 3 was appropriate to the current study as it allowed for an in-depth enquiry into the experiences of absent fathers.

Secondly, the sample used provided us with rich experiences of four absent fathers from two racial groups, whose ages varied (adult, middle age, and old age). Their children also belonged to different age groups, that is, toddlers, young children, teenagers, and adults. The participants' experiences were unique to them and, in some instances; it appeared as if the participants spoke for the first time about their absence, which they found therapeutic.

The application of an ecosystemic approach in this study did not emphasise the linear causality of fathers being absent; rather it allows development of an appropriate context to understand the meaning of absent fathers and the circular causality, absent fathers have impact on systems as much as the systems impact on the absent fathers.

5.5 THE LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The limitations of the study are related to the following: the sample size; the methodology used; the type of sample used; the area where the sample was selected and the nature of the research.

Initially, the researcher selected the Department of Justice, specifically the Maintenance Court, to select fathers who were attending maintenance for their children. After acquiring permission from court officials to contact absent fathers, there was a lack of interest from the prospective participants, and the researcher then reverted to a clinic in the Gauteng Province. The researcher was employed at the clinic at the time of data collection, and had observed a number of mental health care users who were absent fathers. Convenient sampling was implemented to select the participants. The sample was selected from a group of participants with mental health challenges which could have compromised the quality of the responses.

In-depth interviews were conducted with four absent fathers, to explore their experiences. Quantitative research would have required a larger sample, which will be generalised to entire population of absent fathers. In this study, the Qualitative research was employed and the research results are unique to the four absent fathers. Thus, the participants of this study represent only a fraction of absent fathers in Gauteng Province. Therefore, the results of the study cannot be generalised to the entire population of absent fathers in Gauteng Province.

The nature of qualitative research is such that the themes and meanings elucidated by the researcher are not the only possible distinctions. The meanings that readers attribute to the study may well differ from the researcher's meanings or findings.

The type of sample used represented a multi-racial group and different ages; however, it was not a conclusive heterogeneous sample. The sample did not include other racial groups, Indians, Coloureds and gay fathers. Therefore the findings of the research study are only applicable to the four participants and cannot be generalised to entire community of absent fathers.

5.6 THE ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER

The researcher participated in the process of constructing versions of reality in the encounters with the participants. The researcher was seen as a co-participant in the interaction through which meanings about participants' experiences were constructed (McCarthy & Edwards, 2011). The researcher created a context within which absent fathers could share their experiences as perceived by them. The researcher, at the same time, co-constructed the fathers' reality. The ecosystemic approach views the system as researcher reflecting on the observed and the observer. The multiverse of reality was expressed by different fathers' views within their context of relationships.

The reflections are also part of the researcher's context, as seen through the researcher's eyes. The researcher had to bracket her own experiences of living without a biological father and raising her children without their own fathers in order to create a context for absent fathers to share their own experiences. The researcher had her own views about what constitutes a

family, and has experienced relationships that could have influenced her analysis of the data. As the therapist the researcher is aware of her own blind spots, researcher had to refrain from identifying the absent fathers with her own absent father. In chapter 3 a phenomenological approach was employed in order that absent fathers could share their own experiences. Therefore ecosystemic theory supports the notion that absent fathers told their own reality within the umbrella of many truths (Becvar & Becvar, 2009). Furthermore dealing with emotionally perturbing data for the researcher; needed self-reflexivity throughout the research process. This research study has heightened my awareness of the extent to which my childhood experience of growing up with an absent father is always present in my work as therapist. It has perturbed me to re-evaluate my therapeutic skills and to examine more closely, where I place myself in all aspects of my engagement with clients.

5.7 RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations from the study will be made with specific reference to clinical practice, education, and further research.

Based on the conclusions and implications of this study, it is apparent that the absent fathers need continuous, lifelong support and facilitation of integration with their children. Furthermore, the following future studies are required:

- More research on the same topic, because there is limited research on experiences of absent fathers in South Africa;
- A quantitative or longitudinal study assessing the impact of the absence of the father on both girls and boys from different age groups;
- Research on how to re-integrate and support families that are separated;
- A comparison study of absent fathers and absent mothers, and how their absence affects them.
- This research finding yielded the negative experiences of being an absent father thus more research is needed to explore the positive experiences of being an absent father.

5.8 CONCLUSIONS

In Chapter 1, the researcher shared her personal experience of an absent father. The researcher raised her own children without the presence of their fathers, and sought the assistance of the Court by applying for maintenance. This process focused only on the financial needs of the children through a court order to pay the maintenance regularly. In the

researcher's case the fathers defaulted on maintenance payment, and she decided not to pursue the matter. Despite having paid maintenance for a limited period, the fathers were not physically, emotionally, and socially part of their children's lives. As a mother, you become the lone parent, and you mobilise support from your extended family. You live in hope that the fathers will spend quality time with their children, especially at special events such as birthdays and Christmas, and support and laude the children's academic achievements. Some of these events not only need the father's presence, but also his involvement. At a wedding, for example, the mother has to take over the roles of walking the daughter down the aisle and negotiating *lobola* (brides' wealth). In this regard, as a mother you miss the presence of the father in your children's lives. Even when children are adults they need continuous emotional support from their parents.

The researcher concludes the study with a sense of relief to have journeyed with the four participants. They shared their experiences without any reservations. It was an honour for me to share their experiences, and to contribute to the body of knowledge. One of the participants ended his interview with the following: "It is easier to heal others than to heal yourself," and he further asked whether "Is insight wisdom or is wisdom insight?"

This was an overwhelming journey, but it helped me to do self-reflection. I learned a lot from the absent fathers; I grew personally and professionally, and I wish absent fathers luck in connecting and re-defining their relationships with their children.

I hope that fathers mothers, children, prospective parents, and the community at large will take lessons from the study, and hold hands to create or contribute to a better life for all by being present in significant others' lives.

The USA president Barack Obama (in press) has appealed to all fathers in the World to be present in their children's lives. His father was absent and he feels that he was disadvantaged as a man as he lacked a role model. He is making a great effort to be present in his daughters' lives while leading the most powerful country in the World. (eNCA. Fathers'day. 2013, June, 16).

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ANNEXURE A

INTERVIEW WITH AN ABSENT FATHER

Interview: Good morning

Interviewee: Morning

Interview: How are you?

Interviewee: Alright

Interviewer: As I explained to you about this research, I want to explore your experiences as an absent father. So.....Can I just start with the first question? What are your perceptions about fatherhood or what does fatherhood mean to you?

Interviewee: Well..I think.. er...Father being is an intricate role of a family unit. To have any kind of cohesive, you need to have a father and a mother and the little I know and do understand about family units that father plays. And the father plays a role or purpose in the development of the children. I am not saying he is more than the mother. The mother is more the nurturer and I think values and principles and fundamental values of behaving are fulfilled by the father. And I think er.. father provide security, a lot of strength and lot of direction in children's lives and er...can probably create a lot of confidence in children if handed correctly.

Interviewer: And do you belief there are some of the roles as you have mentioned? Are the any other roles that father plays as a parent?

Interviewee: Any other roles that the father plays?

Interviewer: Yeh.

Interviewee: Well, I think to some extend he is responsible for the security and safety of his family. Er.. which can be either be financial or in terms of providing a home. I know it can be an old outlook but I still think a man has a duty to provide safe environment and if he wants to have a family he should be able to provide an environment for the family.

Interviewer: Can we move to the next question, which is; can you please describe the family of your origin, your parents, your father, specifically your father. What influence he had on you?

Interviewee: Er.. my parents are mutually the polar opposites. My mother is actually very soft, er..very compassionate, very caring and she has done her best to stimulate us as children., engages in games and creative thoughts. And she tried to make us develop as successful as we can. She was very close to all her kids. And it was very easy to relate to her. And she is a very intelligent person. She seems to have done a good job respect. My dad is a in construct a withdrawn person. He does not express his feelings towards his children and wife. And he finds it difficult to voice his feelings, sadness towards a person. He tends to keep everything inside himself. He takes too much so, even think it is a show of weakness. He had a quiet upbringing, losing his dad early in his life and had to be a man of the house. I think at about 16 years old. And so he had to be seen as a strong one, looking after his mom and this ended up making him quiet hard and quiet cold. He is a very successful business man, retired now. And probably going through difficult things for himself now. He is in his own way. He was supportive; he would drive down to my school to watch a rugby game. He would be there and drive us where we would want. He would be there once but I think that the pressure put on kids except for my younger brother and sister. I always felt pressure from him and never ever felt what I did was good enough and I was very successful at school, university and work. But to this day I still haven't received recognition from him.

Interviewer: Sorry to interrupt, you feel your father has not acknowledged you?

Interviewee: Correct.

Interviewer: Mmmm Let's come back to you as a father. I understand you are a father?

Interviewee: Correct.

Interviewer: Please tell me how did you meet the mother of your child and how did it come about you landed up being a father?

Interviewee: Okay, I met 'Ash' the mother whilst I was at university and we had on and off very short flings over the years between people I met in my life. And we never had a relationship. We weren't boyfriend and girlfriend. I just came out of a serious relationship- it was at the end of university and I was coming to Johannesburg and was quiet disappointed

about leaving this relationship and I had fallen into 'Ash's arms. We had one night of passion.

Interviewer: So.. it was a re-bounce relationship?

Interviewee: It wasn't even a relationship. I was looking for someone to be with and 'Ash' I think had always had more feelings for me. Then I headed for her. I mean she phoned me when I was overseas, wherever I was in the World she would phone me. So she is very persistence and obviously I did not want to have a child at that time. And also because of my upbringing.er.. everything was about perception and how did people viewed you, and about social standing. Long time to get out of that in these schools.....everything and you behave how you ought to behave and not how you want to behave. And you would say what people want to hear and obviously with someone in my social standing; having a child out of wedlock was....

Interviewer: A no-no.

Interviewee: A complete no-no. And I basically ..like the first two years...I tried to er.. I kept this to myself....that it hadn't happened and I did not tell anyone.

Interviewer: Mmmm.

Interviewee: And eventually 'Ash' phoned my Mom and said 'Nancy' is my child.

Interviewer: And at that time was the child born already?

Interviewee: Yes. This was two years after Neon was born...er..from conception to until my parents knew about it . It was basically three years. And ...that made a big rift. There was always a rift between me and my father. But now there was enormous relief. What his friends think and what he thinks, what his friends say. He is very worried about people's attitude towards him. Now mine is very similar. I am very worried about the effect it would have on my family. And my mom was very good about it....obviously it was difficult for her but she did the best to see 'Nancy', write to her and be a good grand-ma and I would travel around the World, and would not see Neon for a very long time. And eventually I started accepting that she was my daughter.

Interviewer: How old was she by that time?

Interviewee: I think she was about three or four.

Interviewer: Okay.

Interviewee: And I was working in Cape Province, tried to see her, pay maintenance and be a decent dad...do odd things and things like that er.. and I did make quiet conservative effort and things went quiet well but somewhere along the line between working Overseas again and my bipolar er...I kind of let her down many a times and let her mom down lots of times and so obviously they have lots of distrust.

Interviewer: Mmm.

Interviewee: Because I haven't been productive

(Knock at the door)

Silence

Interviewer: Okay continue.

Interviewee: And then I came back to South Africa last year and one of my priorities is my daughter. And I was in Cape Province and made efforts to see her. But because of my mental issues and my alcohol abuse in the past 'Ash' was very unwilling to let me see her. And eventually I got to see her. But I probably pushed very hard and I pushed 'Ash' away from me you know.

Interviewer: Okay, lets come to during the times that you could not see your daughter, how you as a father or what was going on in you?

Interviewee: Generally...I am normally a perceptive person. I can do lots of er...(loud noise outside the room). That an analysis of myself...but I haven't really somehow managed to do that with Neon. But if you ask me about bipolar I understand how and why I do things and manage to do. Er I know I am getting to a point where I am able to manage it well. But when it comes to my daughter probably it is too much of an issue. I haven't actually face it.

Interviewer: Mmm

Interviewee: And yes I feel guilty er.. but if I am really really honest I don't feel love for my own daughter and it sounds very cruel thing to say but...I haven't seen her grow up. I may

have seen her ten times in her life. And I think people just assume that if someone is of your blood that you will love and your closeness to them but I think closeness, love are brought by interaction and at the moment passion does not translate into me loving my child.

Interviewer: And then how old is she now?

Interviewee: She just turned ten.

Interviewer: And how..is there any way that us as health professionals can help you deal with those emotions?

Interviewee: First of all I need to understand what these emotions are? I can understand guilty, I can understand resentment towards 'Ash' and 'Ash' for bringing a child without opting for abortion which was what I wanted in the first place. Er.. but obviously how my relationship with my own father.. is having a big relationship on..on my relationship to to to to my child and if I could guess is something to do.. I felt my father was failing me in many ways and I still re- live my worst nightmare by failing my daughter and..it is almost easier if I don't love her and I don't connect with her..and I stay out of her life. Then I can't really fail. Can I?

Interviewer: You have to figure that one out. Would you say that this absence has any psychological impact on you?

Interviewee: I am very certain that it does, as I have said this is not something that I have really explored and with psychoanalysis from the doctors but is really connected to my bipolar disorder, that what I am excited about 'Betty' is that we are going to do some regression, hypnosis and some hypnotherapy so to understand what is the chemical imbalance and what are some of the emotions, me being stressed, anxious, unhappy or ill. Ja.

Interviewer: And all along how have you coped in being absent in your child's life?

Interviewee: Er.. I am a coper..I set things aside and manage to cope with lots of stress, lots of pressure and lots of emotional turmoil and I manage by myself but unfortunately it tends to bubble over every now and again but I started having anxiety problems in 2002 to 2003 panic attacks. In the meantime I was doing well financially; I had lots of friends, a relationship with my girlfriend and people around me. I was doing well at work. I just finished my second degree. No real reason apart from needing to be in a high position which I got it when I went

to business. But there was something underneath. I really never thought of it because of 'Nancy' and all those stresses inside me and I think one of the major factors. Somehow to unlock that and...

Interviewer: And when did you last see her?

Interviewee: I saw her in December.

Interviewer: December four months ago?

Interviewee: Ja

Interviewer: And how was your interaction that time?

Interviewee: She was very happy to see me and that made me very glad and..

Interviewer: Does she identify you as a father?

Interviewee: She knows that I am her father but she calls me 'William'. Er..when I was seeing her for quite a while in Cape Town she started calling me dad but I think now she understands that I am her father but the person she sees as her dad is probably her mom's fiancé. And they have a good family set-up. I believe he has his own three kids and he is quite older than myself or 'Ash'. And he can be quiet stable in almost a type of grandfather to 'Nancy', which I am sure I resent it (laughing).

Interviewer: Do you care or when you say you resent it. Can you clarify?

Interviewer: Well I don't like anyone filling the role that I should be filling (father role).

Interviewer: So you wished you could have been there?

Interviewee: Correct. I wish in many ways that I could have supported her more financially but I wished for being there and mould her emotionally. Ja and it makes me very sad because I wasn't there.

Interviewer: If you had been there do you think your life circumstances or the way you are feeling would have been different?

Interviewee: Definitely I am very sure that had I been responsible and taking account for my actions er I would have had significantly less problems in my life. I think my predispositions

towards bipolar is always been there. But I am of the opinion that life, life changing factors can exacerbate the situation and lot of people have ups and downs. And I have considered to be manic or depressed, considering many people go through life being depressed and very common. It could have been taking me being a highly strong person toward an anxious person and with bipolar tendencies, being full blown bipolar and I am not saying it is the only cause. Obviously there is a chemical imbalance and so the imbalance. I really belief it shaped a role the way I emotionally and and er mentally now.

Interviewer: Is there anything during this interview that I did not ask or maybe you want to elaborate more?

(Silence)

Interviewee: What I think is important for someone with my kind of my make-up is kind of, I want answers and I want to understand but I also want a solution and I think it takes a lot of patience being bipolar because I would always fix things quickly and efficient and to wind your emotions takes time and I have learnt that. But I want to know possible ways to bridge the device. I have created and how to approach my daughter and her mom and how to give them some sort of understanding why I have been the way I have, to make myself give myself some understanding why I am what I am, and the way we can possibly re-connect and that's something I hope to get. This is an understanding and speaking to professionals like yourself and to 'Betty' as the road to healing. Ja

Interviewer: Ja I think this is enough for now.

ANNEXURE B

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

UNISA

Dear Sir

REQUEST FOR CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

I am a M.A. Clinical Psychology student at the University of South Africa, currently engaged in a research project titled "Absent fathers: An ecosystemic exploration of context," under the supervision of Professor M. C. Matoane of the Department of Psychology at Unisa.

The objective of the study is to explore the experiences of the fathers who are physically and emotionally absent from their children's lives. The fathers may or may not be financially contributing towards maintenance of their children. Most studies have focused on research on mothers and children to the exclusion of the fathers. The research is aimed at connecting with fathers, to explore their feelings.

To complete this study, I need to conduct interviews of approximately an hour to two hours. The interviews will be audio-taped. In this matter, I undertake to safeguard the participants' anonymity by omitting names and places. Confidentiality will be assured by erasure of taped material on completion of transcribing the tapes. The transcribed tape material will only be shared by the researcher and the supervisor. The participants will give their informed consent for these proceedings and reserve the right to cancel same at any stage of the proceedings. It is understood that the participants are under no obligation to take part in the study.

The direct benefit to participants in the study is that they will have the opportunity to verbalise their experiences as absent fathers in their children's lives. Long-term benefits are that the research findings will be used to formulate guidelines for supportive action that would promote the psychological well-being of absent fathers and to re-integrate them into the family unit.

A summary of the research findings will be made available to the participants.

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

DATE

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCHER

DATE

Moipone Hilda Martha Mabusela

M.A Clinical Psychology Student

ANNEXURE C

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

UNISA

Dear Madam/Sir

REQUEST FOR CONSENT TO CONDUCT RESEARCH STUDY AT THE INSTITUTION

I am a M.A. Clinical Psychology student at University of South Africa, currently engaged in a research project entitled “Absent fathers: an ecosystemic exploration of context”, under the supervision of Prof M.C. Matoane of the Department of Psychology at Unisa.

The objective of the study is to explore the experiences of the fathers that are physically and emotionally absent in their children’s lives. The fathers may or may not be financially contributing towards maintenance of their children. Most of the studies had focused on research on mothers and children to the exclusion of the fathers. The researcher aims at connecting with fathers to explore their experiences.

To complete this study, I need to conduct interviews of approximately one to two hours. The interviews will be audio taped. In this matter, I undertake to safeguard the participants’ anonymity by omitting the use of names and places. Confidentiality will be assured by erasure of taped material on completion of transcribing the tapes. The transcribed tape material will only be shared by the researcher and the supervisor. The participants will give their informed consent of these proceedings and reserve the right to cancel same at any stage of the proceedings. It is understood that the participants are under no obligation to take part in the study.

The direct benefit to participants in the study is that they will have the opportunity to verbalise their experiences as being absent fathers in their children’s lives. Long term benefits are that the research findings will be used to formulate guidelines for supportive action that would promote psychological wellbeing of absent fathers and to re-integrate them into the family unit.

A summary of the research findings will be made available to the participants.

SIGNATURE OF FACILITY MANAGER

DATE

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCHER

DATE

Moipone Hilda Martha Mabusela

M.A. Clinical Psychology Student

