




# Negotiating Fatherhood: Young Men’s Narratives of Care, Responsibility, and Struggle in a Low-Income South African Setting

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## Abstract

Financial provision continues to factor significantly in how Black men perceive and enact fatherhood, influencing the extent and manner of their paternal engagement. The enduring representation of men primarily as financial providers constrains the generation and enactment of alternative modalities of fatherhood within families and society. This qualitative study explored how the everyday lived experiences of young Black men in Soweto, South Africa, influence their varied engagements with fatherhood as they navigate structural constraints to pursuing their ideal of fatherhood. An exploratory descriptive qualitative approach was employed. We conducted two sets of semi-structured interviews with 19 young Black men in Soweto and analyzed data using a reflexive thematic approach. Four themes were generated from the data: (1) Provision dominates: being a man is being able to provide. (2) It is not all about money: presence matters. (3) A family shapes a man’s identity. (4) Social fathers have an impact. These themes echo through the narratives that shape how men negotiate fatherhood within their everyday lived experience and contexts. Financial provision continues to be conceived as a primary instrument for allowing men to perform their ideal of fatherhood, and, under precarious conditions, men actively perform multiple modalities of fatherhood in Soweto.

**Keywords:** *fatherhood, alternative modalities, economic precarity, paternal involvement, critical masculinities*

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## Introduction

In 2023, only 35.6% of South African children lived with their biological fathers in the same household (Van den Berg et al., 2024). Results of the longitudinal Birth to Twenty study conducted in Soweto, South Africa, found that caregivers of 26% of 11-year-old children reported the child had experienced no contact with their father, either since birth or from early childhood (Richter & Morrell, 2006). Recent statistics highlight that 46% of all children live with their mothers but not with their fathers (Slemming et al., 2024). Contemporary South African fatherhood continues to be marked by limited paternal involvement in maternal and child health (Drysdale et al., 2021; Engelbrecht et al., 2024; Madhavan et al., 2014).

Paternal involvement entails a complex intersection of multidimensional factors, ranging from financial provision to increased caregiving and nurturing within complex relational dynamics (Draper et al., 2023; Hodes & Morrell, 2025). These factors are shaped by contextual realities of economic precarity, which serve as a significant determinant barrier in how young fathers negotiate fatherhood (Hodes & Morrell, 2025; Makusha, 2024). Quantitative research and narrative studies on South African fatherhood have highlighted the reality and historical dynamics of father absenteeism, particularly concerning Black men (Hatch, 2024; Morrell et al., 2016; Ncayiyane & Nel, 2024; Richter & Morrell, 2006; Richter et al., 2010).

These patterns are rooted in historical and sociocultural constructions of fatherhood. Colonial-cum-apartheid labor regimes entrenched the image of the non-resident Black father and institutionalized the patriarchal provider role as the dominant marker of paternal identity (Morrell et al., 2016; Richter et al., 2010). However, evidence shows that some fathers can engage not only in material provision for their children but also in caring and nurturing practices while not being co-residents with their children (Enderstein & Boonzaier, 2015; Engelbrecht et al., 2024; Hodes & Morrell, 2025; Magqamfana & Bazana, 2020; Malinga & Ratele, 2022; Nesane et al., 2016; Shefer & Ratele, 2023).

Socioeconomic conditions and cultural notions of fatherhood, pregnancy, and paternal involvement have been shown to influence the quality and amount of paternal engagement (Hodes & Morrell, 2025; Kabongo & Malose, 2023; Malinga & Ratele, 2022; Ncayiyane & Nel, 2024; Nesane et al., 2016). Childcare and nurturing are represented as “women’s work,” while the role of the father continues to be represented as that of financial provider, reinforcing gendered social norms (Cumber et al., 2024; Foglabenchi et al., 2024;). Emotions, such as shame, that arise with the inability to fulfill such a role can lead to paternal disengagement and relationship breakdown (Le Roux & Lesch, 2023; Makhanya & Matthias, 2018; Malherbe & Kaminer, 2022).

South Africa’s unemployment rate reached 41.9% in late 2024 (Stats SA, 2024), serving as a structural constraint on young Black men’s ability to enact their ideal of fatherhood. Such an ideal is often framed by their ability to provide materially, with this being conceived as an expression of love and care for the children and family (Grau Grau et al., 2022; Hodes & Morrell, 2025). Furthermore, financial precarity significantly mediates men’s ability to reside with and support their children; it also limits their ability to establish independent family units (Grau Grau et al., 2022; Makusha, 2024).

Structural barriers that mediate father involvement, such as economic precarity, often result in disengagement and absenteeism, which has adverse sociopsychological impacts on children. Father absenteeism has been linked, for example, to early sexual debut and adolescent pregnancy (Anderson, 2015;

Steventon Roberts et al., 2025). Evidence also suggests that children who grew up without their biological father's engagement in their education were more prone to dropping out of school and had poorer mental health and learning outcomes (Sikweyiya et al., 2022). Young men experienced the absence of biological fathers in emotional terms, impacting their sense of identity through exclusion from paternal family networks, with associated educational and financial impacts on them (Mkhwanazi et al., 2024).

Yet fatherhood in South Africa is not static. In a study of young fathers in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, Makusha (2024) demonstrated how structural vulnerabilities rooted in the country's socioeconomic history intersect with dominant masculine norms emphasizing control and authority to shape young men's roles, identities, and responsibilities as fathers. This occurs in the context of shifting masculinities and changing social expectations that have enabled many men, including nonresident and unmarried fathers, to engage in caregiving, emotional support, and nurturing practices alongside or in the absence of financial provision (Bitalo et al., 2024; Draper et al., 2023; Ladur et al., 2021). These emerging modalities challenge reductive assumptions of paternal absenteeism and demonstrate that men often remain involved, even when co-residence or consistent provision is unattainable (Enderstein & Boonzaier, 2015; Hatch, 2024).

In sum, considerable research examines the socioeconomic and cultural representations of fatherhood in South Africa. This foremost includes the role of father as provider and to a lesser extent contributing to the duties of childcare. The decline of economic conditions and loss of work opportunities has resulted in the decline of the provider role and further paternal disengagement from the actions of care and expressions of nurturing. While a few qualitative studies of the meaning of emotional nurturing and caregiving have been conducted (Enderstein & Boonzaier, 2015; Le Roux & Lesch, 2023), more research is needed to understand alternative modalities and practices of fatherhood in the everyday lived experiences of young fathers in low-income South African contexts.

This qualitative study aimed to explore the modalities of fatherhood as they are generated, negotiated, and enacted by young Black fathers in a low-income context in Soweto, South Africa, where economic precarity and evolving sociocultural norms converge to shape paternal practices at the contemporary juncture.

## Theoretical Framework

The paper adopts a social constructionist (Burr, 2015) and life course theory (Roy, 2006) framework to explore young Black men's experiences of negotiating fatherhood under conditions of precarity. Social constructionism offers a lens to observe the influence of social and communal life on meaning construction as this arises out of the interaction of individuals and their environment (Burr, 2015). Within this framework, fatherhood can be conceived as a socially enacted role drawing on social, cultural, and economic factors. Fatherhood is therefore inherently a social act—a doing. In this instance, given the particularities of context, social constructivism is seen as a means by which people produce meaning and make sense of their lived experience. As such, meaning produced through human activity, fatherhood, per se, does not precede society but is produced within certain sociocultural contexts (Burr, 2015). Fatherhood and masculinities, as social and relational constructs, are neither static nor universally experienced. They are produced through religio-cultural, sociohistorical, and institutional forces and are therefore open to contestation and redefinition. This makes social constructivism a powerful lens through which transformation can occur. Black men are not only enforcers of patriarchal norms, but they are also subjected to navigating vulnerability, inequality, trauma, and care (Govender & Cartwright, 2022). Recognizing this complexity allows for a shift from treating fatherhood and masculinities within the context of South Africa as problems to be corrected to understanding them as a space where ethical and emotional transformation is both possible and necessary (Hooks, 2004).

Life course theory is used as an additional framework, and it will assist in engaging the unfolding of fatherhood within constructions of masculinities. Life course theory considers the ways in which the lives of

individuals shape and are shaped by social structures, such as how changing social contexts transform normative roles like fatherhood (Roy, 2006). Life course theory offers two concepts in exploring the narrative of fatherhood: agency and linked lives. In terms of agency, individuals actively pursue, make choices, and organize their lives to achieve particular goals, such as being involved fathers (Roy, 2006). Roy (2006) described linked lives as instances where individual fathers are embedded in a family network of linked lives, through which social expectations, norms, and meanings of fatherhood are integrated and internalized.

## Methods

### Study Design and Setting

This study was part of the Men in Transition project, a longitudinal qualitative research study aimed at broadening the understanding of men's lived experiences in Soweto and how these experiences have influenced their aspirations for family, education, and health. The study explored the views and perceptions of Black young adult men in their 30s regarding family and schooling, reflecting on their family environments and their childhood aspirations. Participants in the Men in Transition study were all male and drawn from the Birth to Thirty (Bt30) cohort, the largest and longest running study of its kind on the African continent, which has followed 3,273 individuals since their birth in 1990 (Richter & Morrell, 2006). The study was conducted in Soweto, a predominantly Black, low-income, and densely populated urban township southwest of Johannesburg.

### Participants

The Men in Transition study recruited and followed 19 Black African men longitudinally, all aged 34 years at the time of data collection. Participants for the Men in Transition study were selected from the Bt30 cohort based on historical data of their family's socioeconomic status during early childhood (aged 0–2 years) and adolescence (aged 16 years). Socioeconomic status was assessed using a household asset ownership questionnaire administered as part of the Bt30 study. Participants were categorized based on changes in socioeconomic status between early childhood and adolescence, resulting in four groups: low-to-low, low-to-high, high-to-low, and high-to-high. Additionally, participants were classified according to whether they completed secondary schooling, creating a total of eight groups.

### Interviews

First, we conducted semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews with 19 men to explore how their home and community environment may have influenced their future aspirations, schooling, attitudes and behavior, and fatherhood. They were invited for a second set of in-depth interviews, which continued from the themes that were generated from the first set of interviews. A 48-hour interval was maintained between interviews. The interviews lasted an average of 40 minutes each. These face-to-face interviews took place at the Developmental Pathways for Health Research Unit (DPHRU) offices at Chris Hani Baragwaneth Academic Hospital in Soweto. They were carried out by a trained male interviewer, a notetaker, and occasionally an observer, all of whom were fluent in both English and local languages. Participants spoke in the language they felt most comfortable. The study was organized to create a conversational atmosphere, encouraging honest responses from participants.

The study conducted five pilot in-depth interviews with male research assistants at the DPHRU who reside in Soweto to assess the cultural relevance of the interview questions and to refine the interview schedule. Participants were invited to engage in the study by phone, and research assistants explained the study telephonically and in person. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim (translated into English), and reviewed for quality against original recordings.

## Data Analysis

We employed a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2023, 2025) to guide the descriptive and explanatory phases of data analysis, foregrounding the researcher's central role in knowledge production. This approach diverges from codebook-driven methods, which predetermine thematic frameworks prior to engagement with data. Reflexive thematic analysis was selected for its organic, open-coding procedures and iterative theme development, guiding and centering the interpretation of the dataset. Within this paradigm, themes are not viewed as "emerging" neutrally from the data but are actively constructed through the researcher's analytical labor and reflexive iteration (Braun & Clarke, 2025).

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework, transcripts were recurrently reviewed with accompanying analytical notes to capture initial insights. Data were inductively coded using participants' own terminology, with codes compared across transcripts and grouped into provisional themes. These themes were refined for coherence and conceptual clarity before final thematic categories were established.

## Ethical Considerations

The Human Ethics Research Committee of the University of Witwatersrand approved this study (M220821). Informed written consent was obtained from all participants.

## Results

Two sets of semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 Black men in Soweto, South Africa. Four themes were generated from the data: (1) Provision dominates: being a man is being able to provide. (2) It is not all about money: presence matters. (3) A family shapes a man's identity. (4) Social fathers have an impact. Through a selection of illustrative quotations, the themes are presented below, and each will be addressed separately.

### Provision Dominates: Being a Man is Being Able to Provide

Several participants who found themselves in precarious economic circumstances reported experiencing a profound sense of discomfort, despite receiving financial and emotional support from their partners during periods of unemployment. Many participants self-identified as wanting to be primary financial providers, as in the following:

Being a man is to provide. Most of the time I am the one that provides at home, even though my partner works, and I also help my mother, as well. I look after my children, as well; they have different mothers, and so I have to give them transport money, money for school fees, and then send money for food. Sometimes I am not able to give them money for everything, and so I will only pay school fees and transport and ask them to cover the rest. (1566162)

A providing father. A supporting father. Yes. (611849400)

Being a man for me meant that I should be bringing bread home. No matter how things are, I should be the one who is providing food for the family. Security starts from us as men at home. (5564126)

Okay, for me, I am going to say it does not sit well with me, but, you know, as a man, you have to provide. As a man, whether dark or blue, you have to provide, yeah, so her providing, okay, yes, we love each other, we do understand each other, we do support each other, but at the end of the day, you as a man alone, that's why I'm saying I'm a man or responsibility, that's why I'm married, so you can

understand, you getting married, and then after you are unable to provide, and you see that as a bit of a challenge or a bit of a confusion. (1189782)

So that is rule number one, you are the decision maker, issues of security, protection, you are also the protector. And in many cases, you are also the provider. And in fact, I would say provider is mainly top of the list. (11207801)

One participant explicitly linked his sense of manhood and personal pride to his capacity for financial provision, while another participant expressed his role toward his partner and child as straightforwardly that of provision—being able to provide.

When you speak of pride of a men [sic], thing is we see this thing, almost everywhere, whereby if a woman starts being the provider for you, you lose your authority, as a man will be easily controlled, you will be easily manipulated. You basically don't have a voice. So the pride of a man is to say, I will do whatever it takes to protect my image and to protect my pride. (11207801)

As a man in that relationship, it was to provide. (611849400)

Additionally, several participants identified financial instability as the primary barrier to establishing a cohabiting family environment with their children and partners. For some participants, economic precarity generated a persistent sense of inadequacy or lack, as they felt unable to fully embody the role of present and actively engaged fathers, despite making significant efforts to remain involved in their children's lives.

My expectation is to take her to live with me. If I can do that, if she can live near to me, if she needs something, I can provide her without being on a call. Or sending money through the apps and whatever. That would be nice, but I cannot provide now. (611849400)

I want to marry my girlfriend and if it was possible, to also take my child to stay with me but it is going to be a huge fight because the mother also loves the child. I so wish it was possible and also to get a job so that we can live together with my child and girlfriend. (1429980)

I guess for me, it was you know, the typical saying that okay to be a man you have to go to school, get a good career, you know, have a family and, you know, settle down and then be a provider. It wasn't beyond that. (1449647)

Several participants emphasized the challenges of navigating manhood and fatherhood amid precarious economic conditions, particularly in relation to the persistent expectation to serve as financial providers. One participant's reflection highlighted the emotional and psychological strain of financial-provider-related pressures and the ways in which economic precarity can complicate the performance of socially prescribed masculine and paternal roles.

It's hard, especially when you have children, and more especially when you don't have a stable income, sometimes you get money, sometimes you don't. My partner looks up to me to provide, even though I am not working. I wish I can go back to be a child—I don't know what is happening. (1566162)

Financial considerations played a central role in shaping how men with children conceptualized fatherhood. One participant articulated a clear position against having children while experiencing financial instability:

For now, I have a partner, but I don't have a kid, at all, like totally, I don't have a kid, I don't want to bring someone in the world to struggle, I have a partner, but I tell her all the time that I want a child, but, for now, I don't have any money, that is something that I don't have, so I don't want to bring a child into the world to struggle. (7571564)

### **It's Not All About Money: Presence Matters**

One participant expressed the complex intersection of fatherhood under precarious economic conditions where he questioned his identity as a man and a father, given his inability, due to economic precarity, to perform his ideal of fatherhood. Despite facing economic challenges that limited his ability at times to provide materially for his child, he navigated financial constraints by being a present father figure; his notion of fatherhood was premised on presence. His narrative is condensed below.

There are times that maybe I'm not financially stable to fix 123. But as I'm saying that when you have a problem I reach out to my mom, or my mom will call and say ... you should go to see them, buy him something, chill with him for an hour, then come back. That is when I also realized that was my biggest problem. And to him money is not a problem; it is my fear. So, you see I've seen the problem and I spoke with him and my mother, said you know what, it is not about money, it is about availability. (1006147)

So when I grew up, I told myself that if I have a child, I would be the best father that I can be. I have seen what my mother went through being a single parent. I never struggled with that single parent raising me. People who say so and so was paying for your school fees, those things do not mean anything. The main thing to me is presence. Our presence is more important than anything because as suffering as you are, you will always find help if you are always present. (1006147)

That is why I always told myself that whether money or no money, her heartbreak pain or what, I will always be there for him. The most important support that I have never got. I was just being there for a person, showing face. (1006147)

Another participant highlighted the significance of adopting modalities of love and support toward one's children in the absence of the ability to provide financial support. Love, presence, and care became markers of fatherhood for men who performed fatherhood through presence, despite their lacking the ability to provide consistent financial support for their children.

I have learned that even if you are not able to be there for your child financially, you can support them by showing them how much you love them. (6689860)

For numerous participants, the experience of fatherhood was characterized by what may be termed a "present absence." Fathers were physically and emotionally involved in their children's lives through regular visits, phone calls, and active engagement. However, they remained absent in a structural sense due to a lack of co-residence with the child and the child's mother. This pattern of non-cohabitation was shaped by socioeconomic constraints, distance, and, in other instances, relational dynamics, such as the dissolution of a relationship while taking on co-parenting responsibilities.

It's very difficult because he is in North West and I am this side. So we can speak on the phone and then ask me for what he needs for school, then I will ask from his grandmother. (611849400)

I have never missed anything even though me and his mother separated when he was one year, but both of us there has never been a time where the mother would say "no not come see your son." The mother understands the relationship that I have with him. (1006147)

One participant described how not cohabiting with his children limited the development of a secure emotional bond, as his interactions were largely confined to monthly visits during which he provided financial support for their material needs. Another participant emphasized that his precarious financial circumstances hindered his ability to cohabit with his children, primarily due to his inability to secure independent housing.

My child is still young and only four years old. I can say that I do have a relationship with them, but it is not a close one, because I do not see them every day, only during month ends when I take the support money to them. (1429980)

There are some things that I am still looking at; I still don't have a place of my own ... I would be happy to stay with my kids, but for now I will not be able to stay with them. I am not stable to do that. (1566162)

### **A Family Shapes a Man's Identity**

Most participants expressed positive attitudes toward family life and a strong desire to establish families of their own. For some participants, the aspiration to create a family was rooted in a conscious effort to interrupt the intergenerational transmission of trauma associated with their own childhood experiences, such as the absence of a stable family structure, the lack of an emotionally or physically present father, or exposure to familial conflict. The notion of family, including the commitment to forming and maintaining one, was constructed by some participants as central to their understanding and representation of fatherhood.

I wanted to be a family man with a wife and children. That is all I wanted to become. (5567091)

It means, I'd rather have my family than the whole world, I always put my family first. Before anything, my family first. (3502192)

I don't know how to feel to have a father in my life. I grew up with a single parent ... So now this beautiful angel from God must be given a chance to both the mother and the father, so it was all about stabilizing that family thing ... So I couldn't just focus on my profession while my family was suffering, so part of my decision was on doing things right by her and try to offer her something different that I don't even know what it is. (9226273)

Two participants made use of the terms love and respect to describe their sense of loyalty to their partner and children, along with the desire to want to take care of their family and, as such, associating care and nurturing of their family with the ultimate expression of love and fatherhood.

Rather than me to pay for the kids, I shouldn't do that, I rather marry, because I will be fixing everything, and this woman, I will be giving her respect, that she doesn't have two kids living at her place or at her home, so now she has got two kids and some brothers of ours or some sisters, they are complaining, having kids like this, and what not, so you understand that thing, so I thought, no, let me do it clearly, take this woman and take my kids, because I love them, they are my kids. (1189782)

I would say love my family. I love my family more than anything. I'd rather put my family first before anything, before anyone that I know. Because of the love that they gave me, it's out of this world. (3502192)

Some participants associated manhood with the notion of family, reinforcing the notion of responsibility a man must assume if he is truly to be seen as a man. The notion of family was used by some participants as forming a foundational tenet of masculine identity. Paradoxically, conceptions of masculinity were associated with love and caring for one's family, highlighting the complex interplay between traditional notions of

masculinity associated with a man as a mechanical unit of material provision and an emergent modern repertoire of fatherhood expressed through caregiving and love for one's family.

Being a man, it meant so many things. When I say so many things, be good to your family, be a family person. Not only the people that you stay with, even related family. Everyone should look up to you, whether young or old. (3502192)

They would often say that as a man you must have your own family and that will make you to be a real man. Also you should take care of your family and have money. That is all. (5564126)

I am going to be a good father, because I have nieces and nephews, because my aunt has a child, and I can say that I raised that child, because creche, I was fetching her, the thing is I was not able to bathe her because she is a girl, so my mother was helping me, she is the one that was helping, so the day that I have a family, I'm going to be a good family man. (7571564)

### **Social Fathers Have an Impact**

Several participants highlighted the significant presence and influence of men who, while not biologically their fathers, assumed paternal roles at various stages in their lives. These social father figures often emerged from within the participants' immediate communities and were regarded as focused and respectful older men or, in other instances, male teachers who offered guidance or mentorship. The guidance and support provided by these nonbiological paternal figures in the lives of some of the participants played a significant role in how they managed to navigate stress and adversity. These figures offered advice and emotional support that shaped participants' coping strategies and personal development as they grew up. These social fathers continue to form part of the lives of some participants.

So I had a lot of families here and there whereby men of other families would bring me in and just teach me a lot of things. There is this one guy, he would say to me, you are not a man if you can't solve problems. A man is supposed to solve problems, so if you have a problem and you can't solve it, then you are not a man. (2496026)

He was very supportive, because he played a father figure, he played an older brother, he played a teacher, and he played a person who would be a friend, and on an honest straight base. (1006147)

He is not judgmental at first, he is humble to me, and I see him as an uncle to me, like a brother even though he is older. He is the oldest person that I spent a lot of time with as compared to other older people. I grew up in front of him so to say. (3872462)

He used to come and join us when we were hanging out, and he would tell us that we have a lot of opportunities, and that we should go to school and told us that school is one very important thing, that we would get what we want if we went to school. That we must not be afraid to face challenges. He would also tell us about peer pressure and not mind about what a person did. That we must focus on what will make us succeed. (5385928)

I just wanted to highlight certain things that I think will help us a lot as men. Every guy needs a father figure. Whether it's your father, whether it's your brother, whether it's a guy from the street corner, but every guy needs a father figure, but a proper father figure because the reason why the jails are so packed, it's because of people with no father figures. I have seen that first hand in the township. They sit at a corner and influencing each other but when you observe, there is no elder person guiding them. But because they are so into it, when you start guiding them, they tell you that you are not their father. But somebody with a proper father structure, if somebody grew up with the uncles, that person will turn out proper. (2496026)

## Discussion

This study explored how 19 young Black fathers in a low-income South African setting negotiated and enacted alternative modalities of fatherhood in contexts of socioeconomic precarity. Within these contexts, material provision continued to dominate the narrative of manhood and, subsequently, that of fatherhood. In addition to these dynamics, nonbiological father figures emerged as an integral guiding force in the upbringing of some of the participants, highlighting the dynamic character of fatherhood as not merely biological but increasingly social. Four themes were generated: (1) Provision dominates: being a man is being able to provide. (2) It is not all about money: presence matters. (3) A family shapes a man's identity. (4) Social fathers have an impact.

This analysis conceptualized fatherhood through a social constructionist lens (Burr, 2015), emphasizing the intersection of individual experiences and broader sociohistorical and economic contexts, thereby capturing the lived realities of young Black men as fathers in Soweto, South Africa. In contexts of socioeconomic precarity, young Black men have generated alternative masculinities and forms of fatherhood, demonstrating that these concepts are open to contestation and redefinition, as shown in the results above and further explored in the discussion below. In line with life course theory (Roy, 2006), expressions of alternative and gender-equal forms of masculinity and parenting reflected ideological shifts in society, influencing how men adopt and incorporate progressive forms of fatherhood in precarious socioeconomic settings. The choices of the men to engage actively in family life while sharing in the responsibilities of childcare were conceived as realizing a vision of engaged fatherhood. This reflected the concept of agency in life course theory, where young men actively pursue choices to attain particular goals, such as being actively engaged fathers (Enderstein & Boonzaier, 2015; Makusha, 2024; Roy, 2006). Here, fathers remake difficult life experiences through positive parenting behaviors and the generation of engaged family life and narratives, which often disrupt adverse experiences of father absence and disruptive family life from their own earlier lives (Malinga & Ratele, 2022; Roy, 2006; Shefer & Ratele, 2023).

The findings of this study highlighted the continued significance of financial provision in the repertoire of fatherhood for this generation of young Black fathers. Being able to provide financially was foregrounded by most participants as central to their role as a father and their general self-representation of fatherhood. This aligns with other studies in South Africa (Foglabenchi et al., 2024; Makhanya & Matthias, n.d.; Ncayiyane & Nel, 2024). Young Black fathers in this study internalized the need to provide financially for their children, which was synonymous with their masculine identity. The influence of gendered social norms continued to influence and shape men's self-concept, with several participants having directly equated their worth as a man and father with their ability to provide financially. This was also evident among men without children who nonetheless expressed a desire to become fathers in the future, as they closely associated fatherhood and family formation with the ability to meet financial responsibilities.

The ability to provide financially remains prominent among young Black at the contemporary juncture. This concern may persist into the near and distant future. For most participants, the ability to fully perform the role of financial provision formed the basis of an expansive and more engaged fatherhood role. Such capability would allow them to establish independent households, which was identified as critical to being able to establish secure family units. This is in line with other studies in South Africa that highlighted the desire of young Black men to establish independent households, but they were constrained by financial precarity (Makusha, 2024).

Identification with financial provision also intersected with the contestation of traditional gendered social norms (Macleod & Lesch, 2024; Meyer, 2017). Internalized gendered social norms continued to shape some participants' self-conception of man and fatherhood, resulting in feelings of disempowerment when they were unable to take on the role of main financial provider for their children and within their relational dynamic. Some participants whose partners assumed the role of financial provider within their relational dynamic

described feelings of unease. This unease stemmed from a dissonance between their structural realities of economic precarity over which they had minimal control and internalized expectations of the male financial provider role. The inability to fulfill the traditional financial provider role, while their partners temporarily assumed this responsibility, conflicted with some participants' sense of pride, authority, and masculine identity. This highlighted a tension between deeply held gender norms and the socioeconomic constraints imposed by unemployment or underemployment within their immediate contexts. This complements other studies in South Africa that highlighted the continued prevalence of hegemonic ideals of dominance and control expressed through the ability to provide financially among this generation of men and fathers while intersecting with structural constraints, such as underemployment or unemployment (Makusha, 2024).

This may be superficially interpreted as evidence of persistent, unexamined gender norms that reinforce a gendered division of labor, positioning men as providers and women as carers (Foglabenchi et al., 2024). However, the findings of this study revealed that these dynamics are more nuanced. The internalized need to provide financially by most of the participants did not preclude the acknowledgement and enactment of alternative modalities of fatherhood, such as emotional presence and care-based fatherhood. These were viewed as vital to the role of the father and intricately tied to the need for financial provision, as identified by most participants.

A key finding was an awareness and enactment among most participants of alternative fatherhood modalities. These included emotional presence, love, care, and establishing secure emotional attachment with one's children as early as possible. These forms of fatherhood were embraced and acknowledged by some participants who confronted financial insecurity but sought to enact a positive form of fatherhood. This form of fatherhood was not solely premised on financial provision, although this remained a critical factor in their self-perception of fatherhood. In instances of financial precarity that confronted some participants, the enactment of alternative fatherhood modalities was encouraged in instances where young fathers had received social support.

Numerous participants were fully aware of the significant financial responsibility that came with fatherhood and sought fully to assume this responsibility. Confronting financial difficulties while not cohabiting with their children created a sense of disempowerment among some participants who were not able to regularly provide materially for their children. However, feelings of disempowerment were often mitigated by supportive social and familial networks. This support frequently came from the man's mother or other elder male figures, who encouraged the father by emphasizing that fatherhood is not solely defined by financial provision but can also be expressed through love, presence, and emotional support.

In other instances, participants sought conscious rupture of the generational trauma they experienced from not having an actively involved father figure in their lives. With the narrative of low paternal involvement among South African fathers persisting (Drysdale et al., 2021, Engelbrecht et al., 2024), this generation of young fathers represented a positive shift within the narrative of South African fatherhood.

Despite being confronted with socioeconomic precarity and the limitations this imposed on the types of fathers they wanted to be, all participants did not turn away from fatherhood. Being present was a marker of agency: choosing to be present where the other option could easily have been abandonment. These results complement other studies in South Africa where young fathers actively seek to take responsibility for paternity, in contrast to the dominant social norm narrative of South African men denying paternity (Enderstein & Boonzaier, 2015; Hodes & Morrell, 2025; Kabongo & Malose, 2023; Ncayiyane & Nel, 2024). Similarly, Enderstein and Boonzaier (2015) emphasized the need for focused research into the factors that motivate fathers to remain involved in their children's lives, even while facing the stresses and uncertainties of socioeconomic hardship.

The structural constraints confronted by young Black fathers, such as high rates of unemployment and poverty and their associated instability limited their ability to formalize relationships through marriage, where this may have been desired. It also constrained their capacity to establish independent households conducive to forming a nuclear family. This has resulted in what Makusha (2024) referred to as “families in waiting”—a result of young Black fathers lacking the financial resources to start their own families and own independent housing.

Despite the effects of structural constraints on their ability to fully enact their ideal of fatherhood, most participants displayed positive attitudes regarding the notion of family. While confronting material limitations of financial instability resulting in the absence of cohabitation by most participants, most aspired to the ideal of the cohabiting nuclear family. The heterosexual family unit was conceived and desired as the best mode in which to be an actively engaged father and family man. Having a family and being actively engaged in family life was associated with the production of masculine identity.

To the extent that fatherhood was intertwined with masculine identity, actively embracing paternal and familial responsibilities emerged as central to most participants’ self-identification as both men and fathers. Family and the ideal of family life is what most participants aspired to. Other studies in the South African context have emphasized the centrality of the family as a primary site for the construction of masculinity, femininity, and gender equality. Here, the family serves not only as a site for the production of gendered identities but also for the reproduction of gender-inequitable relations and problematic constructions of gender (Helman & Ratele, 2016; Shefer & Ratele 2023).

However, our findings highlighted how family was conceived by most participants in terms of practical and necessary conditions for the rearing and nurturing of children and the production of gender-equitable parenting. In this instance, family was conceived in a child-centric manner, that is, in the best interest of the child. The positive attitudes associated with family among most participants can be attributed to a conscious recognition of the responsibilities inherent in fatherhood. This aligned with other studies in South Africa, which highlighted how fatherhood can contribute to the lives of men, giving meaning to their lives and opening alternative channels for emotional engagement (Sikweyiya et al., 2022; Van den Berg et al, 2024). This study further highlighted how family may be conceived as a site for the construction of positive masculinities, defined as peace-loving, democratic, tolerant, and respectful (Enderstein & Boonzaier, 2015). This framing suggested that the family can serve as a space where hierarchical gender relations are contested, with young fathers increasingly integrating the roles of father and partner, in response to evolving gender and family dynamics that have the interests and wellbeing of the child at their core.

The impact of absent fathers can be a significant challenge, particularly for young men (Mkhwanazi et al., 2024). Some participants highlighted the positive impact and influence that non-biological, social father figures had in their lives. Social fathers are men who, in diverse ways, assume an active role in the lives of children who are not their biological offspring (Bitalo et al., 2024; Van den Berg et al, 2024). This underscores the dynamic nature of fatherhood in the South African context, where distinctions between biological and social fatherhood have long been embedded in child-rearing practices (van den Berg et al., 2018; Malinga & Ratele, 2022; Richter & Morrell, 2006; Shefer & Ratele, 2023; Sikweyiya et al., 2022).

These distinctions are shaped by the country’s history of systemic oppression of the Black majority and the resulting disruptions to traditional family structures (Richter & Morrell, 2006; Richter et al., 2010). In the absence of biological father figures, some participants expressed the positive influence social fathers had on them at various points of their lives in the form of emotional and psychological guidance. The role of positive male role models in the absence of biological father figures was conceived as critical to the production of socially responsible young men by some participants, particularly for young men in socioeconomically precarious conditions.

Under such instances, positive male role models, whether biological or social, were deemed as essential by most participants to the production of positive and diverse forms of masculinity within their contexts. This was conceived as a “proper father structure” within the context of this study, when, in the absence of a biological father figure, this role was taken on by an uncle or a respected male figure within the community. In contrast, other studies have highlighted the importance of social fathers as a buffer in the absence of a biological father figure (Van den Berg et al., 2024). Young men who grew up in the absence of biological fathers did not see social fathers as adequate replacements for biological fathers and, as such, idealized the concept of an engaged biological father figure, emphasizing the importance of blood line and cultural heritage in the African context (Mkhwanazi et al., 2024).

What was not highlighted was the extent to which young fathers conceived of biological fatherhood in relation to social fatherhood. However, given the considerable emphasis that most participants placed on the importance of cohabiting within an ideal nuclear family, it may be inferred that biological fatherhood and its enactment is conceptualized as the ideal form of primary fatherhood for most participants, linking this result to other studies in the South African context (Mkhwanazi et al., 2024).

### **Implications for Policy**

These findings have implications for fatherhood support programs and for conceptualizing fatherhood within precarious socioeconomic contexts. As this study highlighted, young fathers engage in multiple and dynamic forms of fatherhood, often within the constraints of structural barriers, such as high unemployment and widespread poverty. These conditions limit their ability to realize their idealized visions of fatherhood, visions that, while inclusive of emotional and care-based involvement, are also closely tied to financial provision and the aspiration to establish independent households as a foundation for family life. Social policy frameworks need to acknowledge that young fathers are already enacting multiple modalities of fatherhood premised on emotional presence, love, and care. However, their ability to provide financially cannot be subverted, as this aspect is critical to their enactment of an expansive fatherhood, in which the ability to provide financially is deemed a gesture of love. Therefore, establishing fatherhood support programs that connect young fathers to networks of employment and training opportunities is essential for enhancing their capacity to secure meaningful employment. Such initiatives not only strengthen their ability to fulfil the provider role they aspire to, but also complement the emotional and care-based dimensions of fatherhood that many participants are already practicing. Educational programs to promote the different modalities of fatherhood among mothers, who may act as gatekeepers when fathers are not contributing financially, may serve to enhance gender-equitable parenting, reinforcing the importance of the father’s presence in the life of the child.

### **Limitations**

This study was not set up to inquire about how young men perceived their ability to provide financially in the context of fatherhood. Although not directly prompted by us, this issue emerged repeatedly in the narratives of many young men, indicating its significance to their self-conceptualization of fatherhood. Future research can explore female voices and how they perceive and understand the enactment of fatherhood as practiced by their male partners under structurally precarious conditions. While most men expressed positive attitudes toward family, participants only spoke of heterosexual families; thus, alternative parenting and families were not explored. There is, of course, great variation to the gendered nuclear family (Richter & Morrell, 2006).

Because qualitative research does not aim for statistical generalizability, concerns about credibility can arise. However, the credibility and confirmability of the study was attained through the selection of thick descriptive quotations, reflecting the reality of the participants in their own words (Shenton, 2004).

## Conclusion

In precarious socioeconomic contexts, young fathers navigate constrained environments by assuming dynamic fatherhood roles. Within these roles, financial provision, love, emotional care, and active involvement in their children's lives operate not in isolation, but through a complex interplay. This study demonstrates the multifaceted enactment of fatherhood among young Black fathers in Soweto, South Africa. Young fathers actively negotiated masculine identities and conceptions of fatherhood through the practice of multiple modalities of fatherhood within context-specific settings. The dominant narrative of fatherhood, however, as primarily defined by financial provision was not subverted or replaced by multiple modalities of fatherhood roles. The capability to provide financially was conceived of as enhancing their ability to enact dynamic modalities of fatherhood, as financial instability did not entail a rejection of paternity by all participants. This study underlines the importance of integrating the dynamic modalities of fatherhood expressed and enacted by participants with the creation of economic opportunities, so they can fully express their ideal of fatherhood. It also recognizes that, despite evolving gender norms and ideals, many young Black fathers continue to self-identify with and place significant value on their ability to provide financially for their children and families, which they closely associate with their ideals of man and fatherhood. This is ultimately deemed a gesture of love, commitment, and acknowledgment of paternal responsibility.

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