Parental Experiences of Men Raised Without Fathers or Father Figures: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

Paternal parenting affects child development; hence, the father's absence has a deleterious effect on the male child. The literature on parenting shows limited focus on how parenting impacts children by gender. This qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study investigated the key question, "How does a father's absence during childhood influence a man's subsequent parenting of his son(s)?" An integrated theoretical framework was used to guide the study: Parenting Style Theory, Social-Cognitive Theory, and Bioecological Systems Theory. Nine Trinidadian males aged 20 to 35 years who were parenting sons were recruited to participate using snowball sampling. Data on men's adverse childhood experiences were gathered using semi-structured interviews. Content and thematic analyses were done using DELVE software. Key findings include the influence of stereotypical cultural constructs, the church's critical role in addressing childhood trauma, the transmission of father absence across generations, and the relationship between neurodevelopment and adverse childhood experiences. Implications of these findings will benefit child and adolescent advocacy, inform policymaking, aid professional intervention in mental health and education, and strengthen familial systems and ecclesiastical contexts. Future research should explore the lived experiences of men who crave emotional connection with their sons yet struggle with the stereotypical cultural perception of manhood.

KEYWORDS: father absence, brain development, childhood trauma, intergenerational, the transmission of behavior.

Outcomes associated with children in absent-father households include a four times greater risk of poverty, behavior problems, increased likelihood of becoming a substance user, and incarceration (Caribbean Institute for Family Development, 2011; Mate, 2010; UNICEF, 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Paternal parenting affects brain development in children. Therefore, a father's absence might affect a child's mental growth. Bowlby's (1951) seminal work showed the predictability of parent-child relationships and their impact throughout the lifespan (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). The brain's plasticity and architecture are heavily influenced by people's lived experiences and the epigenetic environment that frames them (Siegel, 2012). These interpersonal neurobiological processes largely influence the child's cognition, emotional regulation, and behavior (Siegel, 2012). They mutually shape social, intellectual, cultural, emotional, peer group interactions, and familial structures. Father absence

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bi-directionally impacts paternal-child cognitive, affective, emotional regulatory, and behavioral interplay.

The absent male parent affects the developing offspring's neurobiology (Bambico et al., 2015; Mate, 2010). This absence from the infant's interpersonal relationship influences the wiring and rewiring of the brain architecture's circuit-level mechanisms (Feldman et al., 2019) and affects the medial prefrontal cortex and synaptic development (Bambico et al., 2015). This study showed interest in the parenting experiences of men in the absence of childhood paternal involvement, particularly as the pattern of increased problems among young males in Trinidad and Tobago might have been related. Issues included high rates of high school dropouts (Douglas, 2019), lower levels of literacy among adolescent males (McLanahan et al., 2013; Seepersad, 2016), youth delinquency, males outnumbering their female counterparts at the three correctional facilities in Trinidad between 2007 and 2013 (Seepersad, 2016; UNICEF, 2017), and a high rate of substance use (Ochonogor, 2014) among adolescents at the male youth correctional facility, Youth Training Center (Y.T.C.;Turney & Goodsell, 2018).

Single parents constituted 18% of Trinidad and Tobago's population in 2011; three-quarters were females. The absence of the father-son experiences neurobiologically impacts cognition, emotional regulation, and behavior throughout the lifespan (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016) since adverse socioeconomic, behavioral, and social outcomes correlate with an absent father (Caribbean Institute for Family Development 2011; Mate, 2012; UNICEF, 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Further, in the Trinidad context, poor cognitive outcomes such as failing to complete high school education, academic under-performance (Douglas, 2019; Seepersad, 2016), and substance use (Turney & Goodsell, 2018) may be associated with paternal deprivation.

Caribbean phenomenological research on the parenting styles of non-residential and uninvolved fathers is limited. Further, the intergenerational impact on the son's future parenting practice has not been addressed. The current study's findings can enhance the phenomenological literature on the impact of being raised with non-residential, uninvolved fathers and how it affects the understanding of how men parent their sons. Phenomenological methods are particularly effective at bringing to the fore the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own perspectives, and therefore at challenging structural or normative assumptions. Adding an interpretive dimension to phenomenological research, enabling it to be used as the basis for practical theory, allows it to inform, support or challenge policy and action.

Literature Review

The social and physical environment impact brain architecture (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Feldman, 2015; Swain et al., 2014; Teel et al., 2016). Studies show evidence of this neurobiological process (Abraham et al., 2016; K. Braun & Champagne, 2014; Kopala-Sibley et al., 2017) that points to the underlying risks for the developing child and adolescent into adulthood. The neurobiological interplay between the parent and infant has long existed. Still, neuroimaging is a recent phenomenon that has allowed for a clearer view of the developing brain's impact. Brown et al.'s (2018) research showed this phenomenon is possible. This dynamic is a constant in our society globally, the Caribbean regionally, and Trinidad and Tobago locally. Hence, this research attempted to provide evidence to inform stakeholders of a grave familial and socio-cultural problem in homes, schools, and religious institutions. Therefore, there is an urgent need to shift the trajectory of absent, non-residential fathers' uninvolved parenting styles or solely maternal parenting styles, which cannot be ignored.

Nature-Nurture and Considerations from Epigenetics

The study of environmentally induced paternal germline (epigenetic effects) might explain the transgenerational influence of a father's experiences on offspring development (Curley, 2011). Brain anatomy and physiology are critical proximal risk indicators for psychopathology (Hyde, 2015). Other studies support this brain-environment development process (Siegel, 2012) and add that integration results from an intentional positive intersubjective exchange between the parent and child in the environment. In addition, the social and engaging environment helps to shape brain development and behavior (Siegel, 2012). The Center on the Developing Child (2007) claimed that the child's early social environment experiences lay a fragile or sturdy foundation for ongoing development. The interaction between genes and experience directly shapes the developing brain, referred to as *serve and return* between child and parent. Unreliable or absent paternal responses also shape brain architecture, creating malformation affecting learning and fostering behavioral maladaptation (Center on the Developing Child, 2007; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). In light of the above, brain development is affected by toxic stress, which could lead to life-long problems in learning, behavior, and physical and mental health (Center on the Developing Child, 2007). Scientists concur that chronic childhood factors precipitate the toxicity of the developing brain: stress, extreme poverty, repeated abuse, or severe maternal depression are examples. Without parental and paternal involvement to combat negative child development with protective factors, the developing brain's architecture becomes shaped by toxic stressors. A father's self-efficacy plays a pivotal role in the desire, willingness, or capacity to intentionally become catalytic in the positive shaping process of childhood development (Albanese et al., 2019; Bandura, 1989; Giallo et al., 2013; Trahan, 2017) or maintenance of a distant relationship. Self-efficacy is a conscious appraisal and belief or doubt of self-competence and capabilities in accomplishing tasks (Trahan & Shafer, 2019).

Crespi and Ruspini (2015) revealed the multiple sources attempting to influence a father's involvement and transition to parenthood. A father's choice to alienate himself from his son's growth and development is indicative of a low level of self-efficacy to play such a pivotal role (Caribbean Families, 2020; East, Hutchinson, Jackson et al., 2014; East, Hutchinson, Jackson et al. 2020; Meyer, 2018; Ramkissoon, 2005). Although learning is as natural as breathing, experiences can inhibit or facilitate it. The growth of neurons, nourishment, interaction, and emotions are related integrally to interpreting experiences (Bonomo, 2017).

Caribbean parents endorse corporal punishment. Corporal punishment is punishment through physical force intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort; however, light to address behavior modification issues (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006). Despite the ongoing global debate on corporal punishment, it remains part of Caribbean cultural child-rearing practice (Arnold, 1982; Clarke, 2011; Pace et al., 2019; UNICEF, 2017). It is usually sanctioned by the devout and the irreligious alike (Clarke, 2011). Research on the correlations between the Caribbean parenting approaches and child well-being and developmental outcomes (Descartes, 2012; Griffith & Grolnick, 2014) is scarce and acknowledged the need for more research on parenting practices and their effect focusing specifically on the impact of the gender of the child. One study on British Caribbean families showed parenting styles with strict expectations of high academic and social competencies, obedience, and respect (Griffith & Grolnick, 2014). Jamaican parents tended to use harsher measures than some of their American counterparts in achieving behavior modification.

Cross-sectional and retrospective studies showed that boys who lack a positive relationship with their fathers might demonstrate aggressive behaviors (James & Davis, 2014; Smith & Green, 2007). Conversely, boys are encouraged to engage in outdoor activities (Evans & Davies, 1996; Schwartz, 2016). Their punishment is harsher to modify behavior, possibly

perpetuating a modeled approach to maintaining control. A father's physical presence in the household does not necessarily indicate involvement in his children's development since non-resident fathers can still be emotionally attached and involved (Caribbean Families, 2020; James & Evans, 2014; Ramkissoon, 2005).

Historical Paternal Perspectives on Parenting in the Caribbean

Research on Caribbean parenting and childhood is still a newly developing area (Grant, 2016). This segment provided information to address the first research question: How do men raised without fathers or father figures develop their understanding of parenting? Research has shown that the three expectations of men as parents have changed in recent decades, from the more traditional notions of men as breadwinners or disciplinarians to constructs of fathers as caring, emotional, sensitive, and engaged (A. Braun et al., 2011). This approach combines warmth, indulgence, and punitiveness, a pattern that may not fit into Baumrind's frameworks on parenting styles (Yildirim, 2013). Traditional parenting styles can impact present-day paternal parenting (Herland et al., 2014). Herland et al. (2014) purported that fatherhood is less studied than motherhood. In Herland et al.'s (2014) qualitative longitudinal research, the participants suggested that their complicated past and the epigenetic context created uncertainty, fears, and insecurities about their current expected performance as fathers.

Concepts of Manhood, Masculinity, and Fatherhood in the Caribbean

Cognitive and cultural constructs influence parenting practices (K. Braun & Champagne, 2014; Schwartz, 2016). How gendered roles are conceptualized and understood depends on the messages communicated to men and boys about their positions in their local communities, societies, and the world (Consentino, 2017; Freeks, 2017; Kannan, 2018; Meyer, 2018; Wiltshire, 2012). Therefore, learning about their masculinity is enshrined in the historical, political, and social circumstances they grow up and live (James & Davis, 2014). The research question: How do men raised without fathers or father figures develop their understanding of parenting? was addressed.

Qualitative survey interviews were conducted with 1000 young men and women from Caribbean high schools and focus group sessions with teachers and community leaders on the region's perspectives and behavior, violence, and the high incidence of HIV/AIDS (Wiltshire, 2012). The findings showed that the young men depended on their families, schools, peers, and young girls to demonstrate manhood. The authors found that masculine stereotypes negatively impacted emotional intelligence, self-discipline, and the boys' self-control (Wiltshire, 2012). Wiltshire's (2012) study showed that stereotypical perspectives of being physically healthy, athletic, tough, aggressive, and having multiple partners reinforced male self-identity. Participants in James and Davis' (2014) study lamented their father's absence. They noted that "we need man-to-man talk" and "emotional connection" (p. 90) and viewed fathers as "moral architects" (p. 91), yet, they are often present but distant. The role of the father is culturally accepted as economic provider. Nevertheless, participants repeatedly complained about the "psychological absence of physically present "failed fathers" (James & Davis, 2014, p. 91), therefore concluding that although criminal behavior was destructive, it became their means of financial support. Cultural labels such as "don't cry like a girl," or exceptions such as "he is a boy, he will be naughty," "toughen up" when they are hurting as victims of bullying, sexual and gender identity, or fitting into peer relationships shape the male child and adolescent's identity and self-concept. The developmental consequence cemented the cognitive and behavioral paradigm that being tough yet emotionally regulated was acceptable, but perceived *feminine or girly* behaviors were not (Kannan, 2018). Risk factors disrupt this microsystemic role (Flouri et al., 2015; Lakhani & Nadeem, 2017; Langa, 2010), reflected in child trauma,

maternal stress due to father absence (James & Davis, 2014), and paternal incarceration (Lakhani & Nadeem, 2017; Mate, 2010; Seepersad, 2016; Turney & Goodsell, 2018), which reinforces the paternal son disengagement.

Fatherhood in Trinidad and Tobago

The cultural context conceptualizes people's lives. This conceptualization is valid because fathers' worldviews are shaped by their families of origin (Maccoby, 1992; Wiltshire, 2012) and informed by the surrounding cultural context (Grant, 2016), which reemphasizes the avenues through which male children and adolescents learn about who they are and how they should function. Trinidad is a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic, multi-religious Caribbean society, comprising two dominant ethnic groups, Afro-Trinidadians and Indo-Trinidadians, descendants of collectivist cultures: Africa and India (Kumaraguru & Cranor, 2005), although impacted by creolization. Like other collectivist cultures, the authoritarian parenting style seems the most dominant in the Caribbean.

A Global Phenomenon – A Caribbean Reality

The parenting style of non-resident and uninvolved fathers is a present phenomenon in the Caribbean region (Caribbean Families, 2020; Descartes, 2012; James & Davis, 2014; Ramkissoon, 2005; Sharpe, 1996; Smetana, 2017), including Trinidad and Tobago (Caribbean Families, 2020; Descartes, 2012, Evans, & Davies, 1996; Primus, 2018; Roopnarine et al., 1996; Ulu & Erdentug, 2017). Hence, a marked shift from the original pre-slavery, male-headed, intact family tradition (Green, 2018).

Perpetuating Parenting Styles

Parenting theories have concluded that parenting behavior patterns can pass to other generations (Bandura, 1977, 1989; Branje et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2018; Cartwright & Henriksen, 2012; Floyd & Morman, 2000; Jessee & Adamsons, 2018). Kopala-Sibley et al.'s (2017) study is similar to the researcher's study on the impact of parenting experience in childhood and the subsequent effects on the offspring. A study to determine paternal care expression showed the quality and quantity of time spent with their pups (Bales & Saltzman, 2016; K. Braun & Champagne, 2014). For example, males with an absent father showed less paternal care to their offspring than males who were reared biparentally.

Intergenerational Considerations

Intergenerational transmission of parenting styles is possible (Bambico et al., 2015; Brown et al., 2018; Jessee & Adamsons, 2018). Two thousand, nine hundred and seventy U.S. families participated in a study that revealed that fathers' relationships with their paternal grandfathers helped shape their parenting styles. Jessee and Adamsons (2018) cited other studies (Beaton & Doherty, 2007; Bouchard, 2012), which concurred that the quality of father-child involvement was likely to pass to the succeeding generation. They added that men's experience with their parents shaped their beliefs, efficacy, and ideas about parenting their children (Jessee & Adamsons, 2018).

Parenting in Father Absence

The parenting styles of mothers, grandparents, social fathers, adoptive parents, other relatives, adult friends, or an institution influence the child raised with a non-residential and uninvolved father (Cuartas et al., 2020; Descartes, 2012; James & Davis, 2014; Schwartz, 2016). A study on *the effect of father absence and father alternatives on male and female rates of violence* agreed that the intervening parental alternatives play a crucial role in the father absence phenomenon (Schwartz, 2016). For example, the place of the elderly in the community, powerful agents of socialization and social control for young adults, helps buffer the single-parent mother's role (Anderson, 1990). Anderson (1990) claimed that many acted as surrogate fathers to those needing moral support.

Theoretical Frameworks

Integrated theoretical approaches and concepts guided this research: It involved Baumrind's Parenting Style Theory and Bandura's Social-Cognitive Theories addressed the essence of parenting and learning dynamics. This researcher drew on Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems model to address the bi-directional father-son interaction in parenting styles via the proximal and distal ecological systems. The segment identified critical implications for child development, the family unit, and the intergenerational transmission of parenting behaviors. Finally, this researcher considered intervening variables and their role in the social milieu.

Parenting Style Theory

Baumrind's (1966) seminal research on parental typologies is not universally applicable but possibly more consistent with European cultures' parenting practices (Griffith & Grolnick, 2014). Her research findings from studies with pre-school children proposed three primary parenting styles: the authoritative style, characterized by high responsiveness and demandingness, and correlated with assertive, self-reliant child behavior. Second, the authoritarian style is low responsiveness and high demandingness related to withdrawn child behavior. In contrast, the permissive style links with high responsiveness and low demandingness demonstrated in low self-control and low self-reliance, later adding the rejecting-neglecting style (Baumrind, 1966). Maccoby and Martin (1983) proposed the uninvolved parenting style seen as low on responsiveness and demandingness, similar to Baumrind's rejecting-neglecting style from her third study.

Social-Cognitive Theory

The science of early childhood development influences brain development in social contexts. Developmentally, children naturally crave social connections. This process begins early and spreads throughout the lifespan (Jessee & Adamsons, 2018). Learning channels include vicarious observation, where learning and behavior modification occur via consequences to others. For example, a normative paternally absent environment concerning a male child's emotional acceptance influences the strengthening or pruning of neural pathways. This process extends to the parental models' adaptation and the potential platform for perpetuation (Bandura, 1989).

Bandura's more recent social-cognitive theory acknowledged the negative or positive bidirectional influence of the environment's quality on the developing child's brain physiology. The approach proposed that people are agents of their life contexts (Bandura, 2001). They are neither independent nor mechanical channels of environmental influences. Accomplishing

tasks to provide direction and meaning to people's lives requires sensory, motor, and neural systems (Bandura, 2001). Hence, brain activity is directly related to the social environment and interactions (Siegel,2012). Social and environmental interactions influence cognitive growth. Albert Bandura's social-cognitive theory showed the interconnecting influence of learning and behavior modification where a child imitates others in the social and physical environment. Negative or positive modeling in the microsystem creates learning platforms (Bandura, 1989).

Bioecological Systems Theory

The bioecological model is a scientific study of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Therefore, development is the continuity of the phenomenon of individual and group biopsychological characteristics intergenerationally. Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2006) perspective forms part of related theories, including lifespan psychology and cultural psychology. Three principal constructs constitute this model: process, mutual interaction between the individual (a primary mechanism), and the environment, referred to as proximal processes, which influence human development. Furthermore, the person is impacted by those processes contextually and over time. This theory acknowledged that children develop contextually; for example, the interconnection occurs within social, familial, and cultural contexts. In this space with a non-residential and uninvolved father, the son learns and perpetuates parenting practices of whomever they are socially connected with; as discussed previously, boys might be perpetuating mothers' or grandmothers' parenting styles.

The parenting literature highlighted the over-representation of research on maternal-child relationships within the family, with limited but growing research on father absence and parenting styles. Studies showed that Baumrind's prototypical parenting styles are helpful, though not universal. Research relating to fathers' absence in the Caribbean is increasing yet limited. Given the implications for child development and the family unit across the region, the father-son dynamic requires more significant investigation.

Methodology

The qualitative methodology was best suited for this study as this approach examines human experiences in their natural setting (Creswell, 2013; Palinkas, 2014). Phenomenological research is a qualitative method that describes the meaning of the experience as perceived by the participant concerning what and how it happened and the meaning placed on that experience. Hence, a greater understanding of the phenomenon (Teherani et al., 2015) through the participant's voice since phenomenologists aim to understand rather than impose causal interpretations (Gill, 2014). These meanings were disclosed through interviews with the fathers to address the second question: What are the parenting experiences of men raised without fathers or father figures? The researcher attempted to address the research question for a deeper understanding of childhood experiences through adults' recollections and how those experiences impacted their parenting experiences to understand further the depth of the impact that might pass to the future parenting of sons. Lester (1999) states that phenomenology concerns studying experience from the individual's perspective. The phenomenological approaches are based on a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity and emphasize the importance of personal perspective and interpretation (Lester, 1999), which is why it was appropriate for this study.

Phenomenological Hermeneutic (Interpretive) Design

Hermeneutics is "a process and method for revealing hidden human experiences and human relations" (Lopez & Willis, 2004, p. 4). Concerning the study of human experience, hermeneutics goes beyond a mere description of core concepts and essences to look for meanings embedded in common life practices. The ultimate aim was to understand an experience as deeply as possible, which was the focus of the research question, instead of using this understanding to predict or explain behavior. A general principle of phenomenological data analysis is minimum structure and maximum depth (Lester, 1999). Therefore, Neubauer et al. (2019) asserted their understanding of phenomenology as research that describes the phenomenon's essence as experienced and articulated by the participant (Smith, 2013).

Fathers' experiences with absent fathers in their childhood were explored to determine any lingering childhood impact currently influencing how they are parenting their sons (Bales & Saltzman, 2016; Meyer, 2018). Their conscious perception of their childhood experiences with all the surrounding elements provided broad themes to enhance their understanding of the existing literature. The aim is to understand the meaning from the father's subjective view "influenced by the world in which they live" (Lopez & Willis, 2004, p. 5) via interviews to address the second research question: *What are the parenting experiences of men raised without fathers or father figures*? Activities are not studied by bracketing the world, as theorized by Husserl (Lester, 1999), but by interpreting actions through the contextual relationship with the surrounding world and interpersonal relationships, referred to as a fundamental ontology (Heidegger, 1988). The theorist acknowledged that interpretation is critical in studying human beings. Therefore, he considers this view integral (Gill, 2014). This Heideggerian perspective correlated with this research's purpose: to allow the fathers to describe and interpret the narrative of their lived experiences, along with the key role of the interviewer (Neubauer, et al, 2019).

Participant Selection and Recruitment

Qualitative research does not require quantitative data, and phenomenological data can be satisfied via participant interviews to bring their narratives to life (Palinkas, 2014). The university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and approved the research, and permission was granted for data collection. Data were generated through interviews, observation, and analyses. The study was guided by the maximum phenomenon variation and snowballing sampling approaches (Creswell, 2013) to achieve a diverse sample population. Participants were recruited from different agencies, but the research cohort who satisfied the criteria: between the ages of 20 and 35 and parenting a son 15 years and younger, were from the Single Fathers' Association and The Pentecostal Assemblies of the West Indies. Recruitment letters and a flyer with criteria details were sent to the agencies, and interested men were asked to contact the researcher. The selected cohort signed consent forms via email and participated in a preliminary interview to review the consent form, answer any questions, and provide demographical data.

Data Collection

The qualitative phenomenological approach involves in-depth interviews to understand the phenomenon. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom due to the pandemic and delved into the experiences of nine Trinidadian fathers raised without biological fathers or father figures (Bales & Saltzman, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The purposeful maximum variation sampling is used when the sample is less than 30 to create a heterogeneous sample close to the general population (Creswell, 2013). Individual, repeated interviews and

subsequent focus group interviews for men with similar experiences were allowed for further exploration and saturation. The data answered the primary research question: How does a father's absence during childhood influence a man's subsequent parenting of his son(s)? and the following subquestions:

RQ1. How do men raised without fathers or father figures develop their understanding of parenting?
RQ2. What are the parenting experiences of men raised without fathers or father figures?
RQ3. How do men raised without fathers understand their experiences in raising sons?

Repeated participant interviews strengthened their responses. The replication also helped achieve data saturation (Creswell, 2013). Lester (1999) purported that "in multiple-participant research, the strength of inference which can be made increases rapidly once factors start to recur with more than one participant" (para. 4).

Data Analysis

Creswell (2013) argued that qualitative research is emergent, and best practice methods obtain data. Coding was essential to allow the data to unveil the concepts. Interpretations emerged from the themes during the inductive and deductive analyses. The researcher interacted with the raw data by asking questions and making comparisons between participants' responses, for emerging themes and concepts consistent with all or most of the participants. Face-to-face, open-ended, semi-structured interviews explored participants' experiences while the emotions engendered by their narratives were observed and documented (Creswell, 2013). Interviews were repeated if further exploration was required to strengthen the researcher's understanding of the participants' responses. To increase trustworthiness, efforts included participant checking for verification, and repeated individual and group interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher examined the data and key themes emerged out of segments of the response. Broader themes and sub-themes helped to capture repeated texts consistent with more than half of the participants. Phenomenological methods effectively bring to "the fore the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their perspectives, adding an interpretive dimension to the research, enabling it to be used as the basis for practical theory, allowing it to inform, support or challenge policy and action" (Lester (1999, para. 3). Findings might be valuable for child and adolescent advocacy programs and healthcare contexts to assist in framing policy for familial intervention, paternal parenting, and community health.

Results

In-depth individual and focus group interviews were conducted on the Zoom platform in light of unexpected COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, which were recorded and transcribed using a software system called TRINT and further edited for accuracy. The data were then coded and analyzed using DELVE, another software designed for qualitative research analysis. WhatsApp and emails were used for communication and scheduling interview dates. Preliminary and formal interview data were sorted, generating emerging and recurring major themes and sub-themes after the responses reached saturation (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The qualitative phenomenological exploratory study centered on the lived experiences of fathers parenting sons but raised without biological fathers or father figures. The topic was the parental experiences of men raised without fathers or father figures. Nine participants

completed consent forms before the interviews. Five were of mixed ethnic background, while four identified as black. They parented sons between nine months and 15 years of age.

Eight out of nine men stated that parental responses shaped their self-understanding and societal roles. Generally, masculinity is normalized as firm, aggressive, and tough, even when men are hurting. Hence, vulnerability was not acceptable in male behavior. The following themes exemplified the significant outcomes from their childhood experiences and their contemplation of their parenting experiences.

Strong Maternal Influence

This theme was central throughout the responses and permeated the data. Participants repeatedly disclosed the influence of their mothers (in one case there was an impacting grandmother) and the stressors it created in the home. The outcomes were dire as her parenting was stressful, discipline was draconian, and the socioeconomic dynamics forced the participants to early employment to assist with the financial difficulties. Robert concurred with other men in one of the focus groups about maternal influence:

> *A woman has natural instincts to protect, care, and love, but even with her best efforts, she is still ill-equipped to furnish a man with everything he would require to really be solid and stand and absorb the real essence of being a man.*

Sam concurred and tearfully reported:

> *I blame her (mom), and I don't make any apologies. I blame her for not allowing us to get to know him." He continued: "you become vulnerable, but didn't want to hear it from my aunt or mother. It wasn't enough because they are not men. Growing up in a house with women, just quarrelling all the time.*

Emotional Deprivation

The recurring theme throughout the literature review and the participants' concerns were the cultural impact on their masculinity in the absence of a paternal model. They were socialized and conditioned by the wider culture that supported that emotional display was congruent with females. Hence, they were forced to hide their hurt and loneliness. Fathers were emotionally and physically distant in the men's childhood. Hence, their cathartic responses during the interviews reflected what they craved but could not reveal as males in a culture that demanded a strong and aggressive male behaviour.

Charlie struggled with the broader stereotypical characteristics and the inner emotional turmoil of what "being manly" meant while watching the widening emotional distance from his son. He admitted repeating similar male stereotypes to his son, "what happen to you? What is your problem? It happened already." If his son attempted to give what Charlie considered an implausible response, he would retort: "that's what you crying for? Boy, stop you stupidness and move from by me. You are a girl or what?" According to Adam:

> *as a male child, a father could help strengthen the manliness in you, the way you think like a man towards your own life, how to dress as a man. Fathers give boys the tools they need to walk through life, so when a father is absent from a child's life, it's a hell of a thing. I have to keep on thanking God for the spirit he gave me because if I didn't have that*

> *spirit, I don't know what I would have been today: living in jail or St.*
> *Ann's psychiatric hospital. I went on drugs. My father was an excessive*
> *drinker and smoker, and not wanting to be like him, I would drink a*
> *little so often, but when I was younger, I used to drink heavier and be*
> *drunk all over the place.*

Dan felt that "a father would toughen you up, pull you up, so you are not viewed as soft, whereas a mother might give you a break." Sam agreed that "men are supposed to be tough and strong. I don't think men will be as honest with men because men are so tough."

From the focus group, fathers agreed that the few memories recalled were of "constant fighting" and that those adverse childhood experiences: "distort a child's worldview and really impacts the psyche of a child, emotionally and mentally."

Systematic Traumatization

Some of the participants recounted the trauma of their father's absence and the attending factors that conditioned their mindsets about who they should be. This was reinforced when their sons became distant from them because of their desire to comply with the stereotypical image of manhood. The trauma of being raised apart from their fathers was continually reinforced by some of the mothers, their basic deprivations, and their inner conclusion that this was the trajectory of their lives.

Charlie confessed, "because of his (father) absence, I chose to be present." He sobbed as he recounted loss, pain, anger, hatefulness, grief, and regret, not being more open as a father, lacking understanding and sensitivity to his son's desire to share his feelings openly, admitting that: "I could have been wrong and should have been the one to console him (son), but I would say, "boy, forget that. Shake it off. It's frustrating to know that I am trying. I am trying."

Impact of Father's Absence

This theme was generated since the men iterated how commonplace their negative behaviour became as they grew confused about who they became due to the consistent unavailability of men in their development. They formed maladaptive habits that they claimed impacted their relationship with their children and particularly with their sons. This struggle continued at the time of the interview.

> *Jack opened about experiences from the family of origin in the*
> *microsystem where: it's like putting on a switch and breaking it on 'on.'*
> *I have to accept it for what it is and thank God because it could have*
> *been worse. I have to find some way to laugh. I want to laugh and relax,*
> *but it is not in me. I don't know what enjoyment is. I think these things*
> *are bad habits that might lead to disaster in my life. How I shape myself,*
> *bringing relaxation in my life, is frightening.*

Given the high levels of aloneness, five of the nine men not only grew accustomed to lacking interaction and being alone, but this experience shaped their worldview and personality and still affected their personal and parenting levels. Experiences of aloneness have led some to develop emotional safe places to hide and maintain mental well-being, but as parents, they found it difficult to detach themselves, creating parenting and familial confusion. Andrew admitted that: "I am at home some nights, and I just want to be in the room by myself because that is how I grew up. There wasn't any love for me. I was by myself."

Vicarious Learning

Some of the participants readily shared their craving for a different model to what they were forced to accept. Some learned from the media with men playing strong parenting roles while others secretly watched their friends who had good relationships with their father. Vicarious learning is accomplished through observation. At the time of the interview, fathers cited their inner struggle to satisfy their son's emotional demands for proximity when this was absent in their childhood.

While Jack learned about the father-son relationship by secretly watching other boys and their fathers play football or fish, he yearned for that experience, stating, "I think that was love." Therefore, he learned early to talk to himself because there was no one else to talk to. He had grown so accustomed to being alone that he was terrified of the thought of leaving (mentally) as he self-quarantined with suicidal ideations. He questioned: "How do I let go of that situation (emotionless) to step into the next uncomfortable zone? I am very cold, so being emotionless is a safety wall for me."

Influence of the Church

The church theme emerged for about half of the participants whose desperation for a paternal model guided them to the church where they felt that effective models might be present. They admitted that finding these models assured them there was hope for their sons. According to Dan:

> having a spiritual life is what really helped me to just be better. That was the only father (God) I could have turned to because my father was not around. I wasn't perfect and still had my struggles, but I believe I was on the right path. The most I could do was just be there for my kids and stop the womanizing.

Five men craved mentors while others learned from men on the streets. Andrew stated: "I had enough of an absent father and had a great desire to be a good father after going to church and having input from a man, a pastor, and a father." Sam shared his craving: "So growing up it was like grabbing at straws, just trying to grab what you can get. Male interactions with men in the church who would adopt somewhat of a mentoring role."

Maternal Stress

The maternal theme was dominant, given the focus of the study of absent fathers. Since the fathers were uninvolved, their mothers were left with the task of compensating in roles the men expected their fathers to fill. Therefore, their mothers were most times stressed and this showed in her absence due to dual employment, her punitive disciplinary measures and the challenge of playing her nurturing role. Robert disclosed his mother's over-reaction in her disciplinary approaches:

> when I was small, licks would come suddenly. I would be watching television and just feel licks on my back. It was like you were ambushed with licks. Whenever I felt like licks were coming, a chill used to run up my spine. I used to shake. I would hear 'I love you,' but with my mother holding a belt, saying, "if I didn't love you, you wouldn't be getting a cut skin of your life right now.

Rejection

Rejection permeated the research as a behavioral outcome as the men interpreted their father's behavior. They added that the feeling of feeling unwanted and unimportant framed their personalities as attempts were made to normalize the intrinsic pain of abandonment. This childhood adverse response had become a parenting barrier in their relationship with their sons. Sam shared: "I felt unwanted and rejected because he (father) wasn't there. I know I have to try and hold on to my son because I could allow him to feel the same way although I am there, so it's hard."

Coping Mechanisms

The researcher observed that the focus group interviews confirmed some of the individual responses as they candidly expressed shared experiences. Some were amazed and felt comforted that other men had similar experiences of trying to survive in difficult circumstances and the consequences it created for their self-efficacy in their new parenting experiences. According to Robert, during the focus group discussion on coping with trauma as a child, he disclosed:

> *I grew up in a very hostile home. There was a lot of abuse that I was exposed to with not much of a buffer for me, so I agree with Jack with putting up walls in order to protect myself. I became very reclusive. My mother would refer to me as 'dangerous' because I would be quiet and hold things inside, and I think I internalized a lot of pain, anger, and hurt. I struggle with expressing myself even now as an adult.*

Charlie recalled: "just how I deal with it because I guess I have a stone-cold heart. I just don't like people. I don't like people around me too much."

Child Trauma

These fathers disclosed the impact on their impressionable development and agreed that for the first time they were allowed a safe space to express and provide their interpretation of a personal but troubled period in their lives. Most shared that their personalities were shaped in those contexts and the many ways they struggled to survive. They cited that the traumatic experiences left them stressed on many levels which, at the time of the interviews, were very difficult to articulate and accept.

Andrew became a people-pleaser as he attempted to cope with maternal rejection. He was forced at a young age to recondition his mind and emotions quickly because of his nomadic childhood and the potential impact on where he was forced to sleep on any given night. He disclosed: "I'm not an expert, but I think trauma really stays with people. I don't know why I don't know if that is so, but it stays with people."

During the individual and group sessions, the men shared challenges that spanned several themes: child trauma, brain development, and coping mechanisms. Four of the nine men were substance users (drugs and alcohol) to cope with childhood maltreatment, neglect, abandonment, abuse, and sustained poor modeling. The men's coping mechanisms directly related to the parenting styles to which they were exposed. Dan was confused as he imitated the examples around him:

*I started getting into trouble, drugs, and fornication. Nobody rallied
around to give moral values. I remembered my stepfather encouraging
me to do my school work. I'm still struggling. They say when a father
is not in a son's life, most of the time, I wouldn't say all turn out to be
on drugs, dealers, or womanizers. Some turn out good.*

Uninvolved Parenting Style

The rejecting-neglecting or uninvolved parenting style was a concept many heard for
the first time but they experienced it. The participants acknowledged that the research questions
triggered experiences they wanted to forget, but were appreciative that they were allowed to
attempt to make sense of that period in their lives, in light of their current relationship with their
sons. Some shared that for the first time they realized that they were repeating the behaviour of
their fathers and the influence of their mother. Adam reported:

*When a father is absent from a child's life, it's a hell of a thing. I have
to keep on thanking God for the spirit he gave me because if I didn't
have the spirit, I don't know what I would have been today.*

Sam shared tearfully:

*How am I going to father or how am I going to be a father if I was not
able to really benefit from fatherhood or being fathered. I was rejected
early in my life by him because that's how I felt, whether that is what
he meant to do or not. That's how I felt. I felt rejected. I see what
separation does to a child.*

Childhood Issues in Adulthood

This theme emerged as participants continued to struggle with adverse experiences in
their adult life; relationships with partners and more so the relationship with their sons. They
shared their difficulty with how they formed relationships with their female partners, the
challenge of understanding how they should behave as men given the tension between cultural
stereotypes and their sons' expectations. Their responses individually and in the focus group
discussions showed their ongoing struggle with poor self-efficacy and the reality of having to
model for the next generation what was not modeled to them. Henry continued to struggle
interpersonally, resulting from inferior feelings in childhood: "I wouldn't wish my growing-up
experience on anybody. It's so stifling. People are around you, and you don't feel comfortable
talking to them because you don't know what they may say or do or repeat elsewhere."

A Father's Resolve

One of the research questions that focused on their current parenting experiences
allowed the men not only to explain the impact their father's absence had on them but also to
appraise their readiness or preparedness to prepare their sons for their sons. Some fear that they
have started to witness their sons' struggles similar to what they experienced in their childhood.
Jack admitted: "I don't want my son to go through what I went through, so you would do
everything in your power to ensure that he does not go through the same experience." Adam
recalled his father's miserable (Jekyll and Hyde) behavior because he was frustrated. "He and
my mother weren't on good terms, so they always had a fight between them. It was crazy. It
toughened me in a way where my spirit was forged in fire and nothing could out me just so."

Andrew would like his son to be aware: "You are parenting your son, therefore indirectly parenting your grandson because what you are teaching him you want him to take into his marriage and into his parenting."

Minimal protective factors and inattentiveness of the maternal parent in the father's absence created high-risk, toxic social interactions or increased aloneness, significantly reducing emotional integration. Sustained aloneness, emotional deprivation, and multiple influences conflated to produce men who continue to battle childhood fears while their sons demand attention from them. Many of these men have observed the genesis of previously patterned behaviors in their relationship with their sons. The patterned behavior engendered seemingly high predictability for similarities with their fathers' parenting behaviors or elements of maternal parenting behaviors. Their wide-ranging impact of their lived experiences in childhood was still being processed, and the outcome had directly affected their parenting relationship with their sons.

Discussion

The findings concurred with the literature on the role of religion (Clarke, 2011; Descartes, 2012; Landon et al., 2017). In the Caribbean region, religious conservatism created protective measures for wholeness, and the social and physical contexts of the family of origin influence the narratives affected by the surrounding cultural and religious norms. Participants generally espoused Christian worldviews in helping them understand themselves, parenting, marriage, and healing from their childhood adversities.

The challenge was that paternal behaviors are transmittable (Trahan, 2017), as seen in the current study. Whatever is modeled will be learned as seen in one of the underlying Bandura's (1989) theoretical model. Even with maternal presence, though stressed with parenting approaches and communication deficiencies, the participants for paternal parenting patterns. These findings suggested that sustained maternal stress in the father's chronic absence in the primary household influenced underlying emotional stressors evidenced in their responses, which created mental identity issues. This researcher established that contextual learning engages the mind, emotions, and behavior (Bandura, 2001), and this study on father absence showed the deference to maternal authoritarian parenting style and its impact on development. A child's physical development occurs alongside their emotional and mental development in holistic growth. Hence, the more consistent and available parent and parenting style will be imitated. This was evident in their participant's experience.

Findings showed that maternal parenting models were interpreted as the gold standard in childhood because of sustained lack of exposure to alternate positive male models but was implicated as the default template for parenting sons. Hardworking mothers who refused to neglect their children but persisted in ensuring their children were nurtured for healthy development should be acknowledged. The challenge at times was the male child's exposure to the dominant authoritarian parenting styles of the tired and stressed mothers as they attempted to cope with the overwhelming parental responsibilities left in the absence of the father (Jones, 2016). However, more troubling was that the maternal parenting style became the cited template for parenting male children (Zaidi, 2010).

These research findings have wide-reaching, impactful implications that can be useful in multi-disciplinary settings in healthcare, education, and private and public therapeutic institutions. The findings which were consistent with the review of related literature can be used to inform policy formulation along with other parenting research in social, health, and educational settings. The current research can provide resources to community groups and intra-familial settings with marriage and family therapists, neuropsychologists, behavior therapists, developmental psychologists, and policymakers who depend on evidence-based data.

Intervention should incorporate cultural stereotypes as a critical factor in designing approaches (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Trahan & Cheung, 2016). Burke-Harris (2015) alluded to the repeated exposure to toxic stress in an intensive study of the phenomena and the negative implications for adult life. Early detection equals early treatment, and therefore, provision should be given to mandatory pediatric early screening (Burke-Harris, 2015) to avert early adverse childhood experiences and potential poor adult ill-health.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of the father's absence deserves more deliberate attention. In light of the consequences to male children and their toned for healthy development and socialization, there is a need for protective measures that secure generations of parenting to strengthen and reinforce intact family units. Male children raised without their fathers' involvement are at risk for life-long impairments that can reshape their cognitive, physical, emotional, and behavioral outcomes into adulthood. The vulnerability intensifies with sustained epigenetic ecological contexts, with boys' heightened stress response creating susceptibility to poor health in adulthood.

The psychologist and professional counselor can reference knowledge from the study in a therapeutic, non-threatening, and non-judgmental space for emotional healing. Men can gain insight into the impact of poor paternal modeling and be exposed to generous empathic modeling to rebuild trust. Distorted cognitive assumptions, emotional dysregulation, and maladaptive behavioral outcomes can be addressed in that trusting environment. The structural family therapist could address deep, unresolved childhood residual problems affecting familial systems involving his sons, daughters, and spouses or partners. The aim would be to create a safe restorative space targeting (1) intrapersonal emotional wounds from a rejecting-neglecting and uninvolved father and (2) the interpersonal relationships with their sons affected by the transmission of the father's toxic responses in their childhood.

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