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Navigating early fatherhood: the lived experiences of adolescent fathers in Vhembe District, Limpopo Province, South Africa

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Abstract

Adolescent fatherhood presents unique challenges, yet research has predominantly focused on adolescent mothers. This study explores the experiences of young men who became fathers in adolescence in the Vhembe district, Limpopo province, South Africa, using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a qualitative method. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with eight participants recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Ethical protocols ensured credibility and trustworthiness. Findings revealed both external (media influence, peer pressure) and internal (non-use of contraceptives, negative attitudes towards sex education) factors contributing to adolescent fatherhood. Young fathers experienced psychological distress (denial, guilt, depression) and social stigma, which affected their identity, relationships, and self-perception. Educational disruptions and financial strain further shaped their life trajectories, limiting opportunities for personal and professional growth. These findings highlight the need for tailored mental health support, social workers in schools, community-based health education, and inclusive policies for adolescent fathers. Further research is encouraged to enhance support for young fathers. This study underscores the multiple barriers they face and calls for systemic interventions to improve their well-being and future opportunities.

Keywords: Adolescent Fatherhood; Lived Experiences; Psychological Impact; Social Challenges; Educational Outcomes; Vhembe District

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1. Introduction

Like adulthood, parenthood in adolescence is a transformational and often challenging life event, transitioning from a period of self-exploration and dependence to adult responsibilities of raising children. Despite significant research work and social interventions aimed at understanding and supporting adolescent mothers, the experiences of adolescent fathers have received little by way of research (Swartz and Bhana, 2009; Neale, 2015). While research on adolescent fathers in African contexts does exist (Enderstein and Boonzaier, 2015; Madhavan and Roy, 2012), it remains relatively limited compared to adolescent motherhood studies. This study contributes to the growing body of literature by offering insights into the specific experiences of adolescent fathers in South Africa, particularly within rural communities. This gap is particularly problematic given the special struggles that young fathers face, such as stigma, limited finances, and abrupt transition into adulthood. In fact, these challenges frequently hinder adolescent fathers from providing emotional, financial, and social support to their children and partners, thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty and strained familial relationships.

Adolescent fatherhood often results from various interconnected factors. Peer pressure, premarital sex, inadequate sex education, and poverty leading to teenage pregnancies and parenthood have a vast impact around the world (Sipsma et al., 2010). In South Africa, cultural expectations and systemic inequalities further exacerbate the prevalence of adolescent fatherhood (Makhanya and Matthias, 2018). The psychological, social, and economic pressure is often tremendous as young fathers transition into fatherhood, faced with the expectation to be present in their children's lives during their own developmental milestones. Research shows that the active involvement of fathers leads to better social, emotional, and academic outcomes for children (Hendel, 2022; Garner and Yogman, 2021). However, cultural stereotypes of adolescent fathers as absent or disengaged exclude them from parenting discourses and programmes (Neale, 2015).

The socio-economic environment of rural South African topology (Vhembe district) further complicates adolescent fathers' role. Young fathers, however, often face high unemployment rates, limited access to healthcare, and persistent guilt driven by gendered social norms that make it challenging for them to play a meaningful role in their children's lives (Matlakala et al., 2018) Young fathers are often seated in low paying or temporary employment, usually offering short-term relief to financial instability and disrupting their educational process (Makhanya and Matthias, 2018). Another big challenge is healthcare access. Societal biases and the unwelcoming attitudes of healthcare providers, among other factors, together with the high cost of healthcare services, discourage adolescent fathers from involvement in their children's health-related decisions and care (Jeong, 2021).

Many barriers remain to adolescent fathers engaging with their children and undertaking their role as fathers (Swartz and Bhana, 2009). They lack the guidance and support needed, as they often grew up without positive paternal figures. This absence of role models, along with the expectations of society and socio-economic challenges, exacerbates the precarious situation for adolescent fathers who have to balance their caregiving responsibilities as students and youth navigating their own identities (Clayton, 2016).

The intention of this study is to discover the lived experiences of young men who became fathers in adolescence in the Vhembe district of the Limpopo province, South Africa. The study examines this underrepresented group by looking at their psychological, social, educational and financial challenges. By situating these experiences within existing African research on adolescent fathers, this study expands

knowledge on the nuanced realities they face, particularly in rural settings. The findings aim to inform policies and interventions that support young fathers, reduce the prevalence of adolescent fatherhood and address the systemic barriers that perpetuate cycles of disadvantage.

1.1. Study aim

The aim of this study was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of young men who became fathers during adolescence in the Vhembe district.

1.2. Problem statement

Research has largely overlooked the uniqueness of the challenges encountered by adolescent fathers, yet the benefits of fathers being actively involved in their children's lives have been well documented (Mazza, 2020). This omission leaves an important hole in our understanding of how young men negotiate the messiness of adolescence and fatherhood (Rosenberg and Wilcox, 2006). Most studies focus on teenage mothers, but little is said about young fathers who may also require substantial support in their parenting roles. There is a concern about this lack of attention, because it undermines the development of specific strategies to assist adolescent fathers in managing their external responsibilities. The gap in this study is addressed by exploring the lived experiences of adolescent fathers in Vhembe district. The study may inform interventions for preventing early fatherhood and developing support systems for young fathers to improve outcomes for them, their children and families.

1.3. Research objective

To explore the experiences of young men who became fathers during adolescence in the Vhembe district of the Limpopo province, South Africa.

1.4. Research question

What are the experiences of young men who became fathers during adolescence in the Vhembe district of the Limpopo province, South Africa?

1.5. Theoretical framework

The study is based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory focusing on interactions between humans and their environment. Bronfenbrenner's framework consists of five interconnected systems that influence human development at various stages of life:

- *Microsystem:* The areas surrounding the adolescent, like family, peers, school and community, in which interaction occurs directly. The microsystem of young fathers includes relationships with family members, partners and children. Finally, these relationships may or may not help them to perform their roles as fathers (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

- *Mesosystem:* The interactions between different microsystems. For adolescent fathers, this includes the relationships between family and school or between the young father and health-care providers. Positive mesosystem interactions can support young fathers in balancing education and parenting (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).
- *Exosystem:* The systems which influence the individual indirectly in broader social fields. These include community resources, health-care policies and media portrayals of fatherhood for young fathers. They can either ease or hinder the involvement of fathers in their children's lives (Sipsma et al., 2010).
- *Macrosystem:* The surrounding culture and society that influence the values and norms within context. Cultural perceptions of fatherhood in general, and more particularly in rural communities, shape how adolescent fathers see themselves as fathers and, to some extent, how society sees them (Swartz and Bhana, 2009).
- *Chronosystem:* The dimension of time, including life transitions and historical context. The challenges faced by adolescent fathers evolve as they age, and as societal norms change (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

By applying this theory, the study examines how these systems interact to shape the experiences of adolescent fathers, offering insights into the support needed at multiple levels.

2. Methodology

The research design process followed in this research, together with procedures used in enquiring into the lived experiences of young men who become fathers as teenagers in the Vhembe district of the Limpopo province, is described in the methodology section. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used in this study as a qualitative design to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences through early fatherhood challenges (Eatough and Smith, 2017). The eight participants selected using the participant selection process, and the data collection methods and analysis techniques are described. This section also considers ethical considerations such as participant confidentiality, voluntary participation and integrity of the research process (Kang and Hwang, 2021). Finally, the section discusses the possible limitations of the methodology and the measures taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings.

2.1. Research design

A qualitative research design was employed in this study with interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology to explore the lived experiences of young men who became fathers during adolescence. IPA was chosen for its ability to capture participants' personal perspectives and the meaning they attach to their experiences, allowing for an in-depth understanding of adolescent fatherhood (Eatough and Smith, 2017).

2.2. Study setting

The study took place in the Vhembe district, Limpopo province, South Africa. Social expectations regarding parenthood are strongly tied to cultural expectations in this region, which is predominantly rural with a high

unemployment rate. Considering the challenges of the district's socio-economic context may be helpful to understand the plight of adolescent fathers.

2.3. Participants' demographics

Participants in the study were eight in number, ranging in age from 27 to 34 years, all of whom had become fathers between the ages of 16 and 18. The young men were from the Vhavenda ethnic group, with varying levels of education, ranging from Grade 9 to Grade 12 at the time they became fathers. Most participants had children who were between the ages of 8 and 18 at the time of the study. Table 1 shows the biographies of the participants.

Table 1. Participants' biographies

Young men	Age in years when they became fathers	School grades when they became fathers	Ages of young men
Munangiwa	18	12	34
Mulalo	16	9	28
Ntanga	17	11	27
Ndivhuwo	18	12	29
Mpho	17	11	33
Rendani	18	12	30
Anzani	18	9	27
Khathu	16	10	28

2.4. Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews, which allowed for flexibility in exploring the participants' experiences while ensuring consistency across interviews. The interviews were conducted in Tshivenda, the participants' native language, to facilitate open and authentic communication. Each interview was audio-recorded with the consent of the participants, and field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details. The interviews lasted between 30 to 60 minutes and were transcribed verbatim.

2.5. Data analysis

Data were analysed using the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework (Eatough and Smith, 2017). The process involved multiple stages: familiarisation with the transcripts, coding of key themes and the development of overarching themes based on participants' interpretations of their experiences. The researchers then compared and contrasted themes across all interviews to ensure consistency and depth in the analysis.

2.6. Trustworthiness

Ensuring the trustworthiness of qualitative research is critical for establishing the credibility, reliability, and validity of findings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose four key criteria for trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was maintained through prolonged engagement with participants, member checking, and triangulation of data sources to ensure an accurate representation of their lived experiences (Shenton, 2004; Ikhile, 2024). Transferability was addressed by providing rich, thick descriptions of the research context, participant demographics, and study setting, allowing readers to determine the applicability of findings to other contexts (Nowell et al., 2017). Dependability was ensured through a transparent research process, including a clear audit trail documenting data collection, coding, and analysis procedures (Elo et al., 2014). Lastly, confirmability was achieved by maintaining reflexivity throughout the study, where the researcher continuously acknowledged and mitigated potential biases in data interpretation (Berger, 2015). By rigorously applying these criteria, this study enhances the trustworthiness of its findings and contributes to the reliability of qualitative research on adolescent fatherhood.

2.7. Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of South Africa (Unisa) Research Ethics Committee, and permission was granted by the Vhembe District Municipality. Participants were provided with detailed information about the study and gave informed consent prior to participation. Confidentiality was ensured by using pseudonyms, and all data were stored securely. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

2.8. Limitations

The study's limitations include its small sample size, which limits the ability to generalise the findings to all adolescent fathers in South Africa. Additionally, the study relied on retrospective accounts, which may be influenced by memory recall biases. Lastly, while the research focused on a specific district, the findings may not be fully representative of other regions with different cultural or socio-economic contexts.

3. Result

This section presents the study's results exploring the experiences of young men who became fathers during adolescence in the Vhembe district, Limpopo province, South Africa. It focuses on the emergent themes and subthemes derived from a thematic analysis inspired by interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). It is organised into two superordinate themes: antecedents to becoming a father during adolescence and adolescent fatherhood's impacts on young men. The thematic analysis highlights factors contributing to adolescent fatherhood and the psychological, social, educational, and financial consequences of this phenomenon. Table 2 shows the themes identified by thematic analysis, which will be discussed further in the section as findings.

Table 2. Thematic analysis findings

Superordinate themes	Themes	Subthemes
Antecedents to becoming a father during adolescence.	Internal factors	Non-use of contraceptives
		Negative attitude towards sex education
	External factors	Peer pressure
		Media influence
Adolescent fatherhood's impact on young men.	Psychological impact	Denial
		Regret
		Guilt
		Depression
		Confusion
		Jealousy towards the child
	Social impact	Loss of friends
		Stigmatisation
		Isolation and withdrawal
		Involvement of the father in the child's life
		Identity crisis
		Role transition
	Educational impact	Progress
		Success
	Financial impact	Limited financial support
		Forced employment

3.1. Key findings

3.1.1. Antecedents to becoming a father during adolescence

Adolescent fatherhood arises from a combination of internal factors, such as inadequate contraceptive use and negative attitudes toward sexual education, and external influences, such as peer pressure and media exposure. These factors influence the behaviours and choices young men make during a development period when they are vulnerable for early fatherhood. This section evaluates these antecedents through participants' accounts and existing literature. This theme examines the predisposing factors influencing adolescent fatherhood, categorised into internal factors and external factors.

3.1.1.1. Internal factors

Non-use of contraceptives

The findings revealed a lack of contraceptive use as a significant contributor to adolescent fatherhood. Participants admitted either ignorance of or deliberate avoidance of contraceptives.

> Mulalo shared, *"We were not using contraceptives; we were just playing around, and things happened. We were both aware and know very well that should we not use a condom or any other protective measures, a child may be born out of that."*

Mulalo's statement underscores the awareness that both young men and their partners had about the consequences of unprotected sex. However, despite this awareness, the lack of preventative action suggests gaps in translating knowledge into practice, possibly due to youthful recklessness, misconceptions about contraceptive effectiveness, or a lack of access to reliable contraception.

Another participant, Khathu, highlighted mistrust in free condoms:

> *"I knew about free condoms. found everywhere, in public spaces, which I suspect are of low quality, and I did not trust them. I also know of the quality ones sold in shops, but I felt I could not afford them. Therefore, I did not use a condom."*

Khathu's mistrust of free condoms highlights an important barrier to contraceptive use. Perceived issues of quality and affordability deter young men from using protection, reinforcing the need for better contraceptive education and access to high-quality, affordable options. Misinformation and skepticism surrounding contraceptives can lead to higher rates of unintended pregnancies among adolescents.

Negative attitudes towards sex education

The study revealed that many participants dismissed sex education, viewing it as unimportant.

> Mpho stated*, "Mostly at school, we were taught about sex education during life orientation lessons, but that was one of the subjects that most learners hated and felt it was useless; we even made fun of what the teachers would teach us."*

Mpho's response highlights the challenge of having sex education engaging and relevant to young people. The dismissal of such lessons suggests that traditional approaches to sex education may not resonate with adolescents, making it crucial for educators to explore interactive, relatable, and culturally appropriate teaching strategies that emphasize the real-life consequences of unsafe sexual practices. The undervaluing of sex education likely contributed to inadequate contraceptive use and poor understanding of reproductive health.

3.1.1.2. External factors

Peer pressure

Peer influence played a significant role, with participants engaging in risky behaviours to fit in.

> Ntanga recalled, *"I remembered I was still young, trying many things. You know, like when you grow up in the villages, there is peer pressure and hanging around with different friends. I wanted to fit in when I started having sex. Others who already have children boast by saying that at least they know they are real men. Some tease us, saying that a strong man can make a child. Moreover, no adult has told me anything about sex."*

This reflection illustrates how adolescent masculinity is often linked to sexual activity and fatherhood in certain social settings. The pressure to conform to peer expectations can lead to risky sexual behavior, especially in environments where open discussions about sex and contraception are lacking. This emphasizes the need for mentorship programs and community-driven interventions that challenge harmful gender norms.

Media influence

Media exposure was another factor, as participants emulated celebrity lifestyles.

> Munangiwa remarked, *"The media played a big role in influencing me. television and magazines made me feel that sex is for fun and one must enjoy it. So, even though I had sex education at school, that did not help me much, I could watch what I wanted to watch. My parents did not restrict me from anything. I did not think of the consequences; I tried living celebrities' lives as shown in media."*

Munangiwa's statement underscores the impact of media on shaping adolescent perceptions of sex and relationships. The glamorization of casual sex in mainstream media, coupled with a lack of parental guidance, creates an environment where young people engage in risky sexual behavior without considering long-term consequences. Media literacy programs could help adolescents critically evaluate media messages and make informed decisions.

3.1.2. Adolescent fatherhood's impact on young men

Adolescent fatherhood profoundly affects young men's lives across psychological, social, educational, and financial dimensions. These effects include denial, guilt, depression, stigma, learning loss, and financial pressure. This section presents the diverse problems associated with early fatherhood and the impact they have on the participants' identity, relationships, and life course, as considered in the thematic analysis section above. This theme explores the profound impacts of adolescent fatherhood, categorised into psychological, social, educational and financial dimensions.

3.1.2.1. Psychological impact

Participants reported experiencing denial, regret, guilt, depression, confusion and jealousy.

> Khathu shared his initial denial: *"It was like a joke (laughing) I thought she was kidding, I wished it was one of the moments where she would say she is playing."*

Khathu's reaction reflects the initial psychological shock many adolescent fathers experience. The disbelief and minimization of the pregnancy indicate emotional unpreparedness, which can lead to avoidance or delayed acceptance of responsibility.

> Ntanga expressed guilt: *"I didn't know that I destroyed someone's future because she could not further her studies because she had to take care of our daughter."*

Ntanga's statement reveals the heavy emotional burden young fathers carry, particularly when they see their partners' opportunities diminish. Feelings of guilt can contribute to mental health struggles, making it essential to provide counseling support for both adolescent parents.

> Mpho described jealousy: *"It was too much for me, my life had stopped, all the attention was going to my child, and I was jealous, no one cared about me anymore."*

Mpho's response highlights the emotional complexity of adolescent fatherhood. While young fathers are expected to take on responsibility, they may struggle with feelings of neglect and resentment, particularly if they feel excluded from support systems that primarily focus on the mother and child.

3.1.2.2. Social impact

Participants faced stigma, isolation and role transition challenges.

Anzani affirmed this statement based on his experience of loss of friendships:

> *"I was in Grade 11 when my son was born; I was not so comfortable informing my friends about the pregnancy. My friends happened to know that I am a father through gossip. I was not comfortable with the gossip. Some friends did not want to socialise with me after I became a father."*

Anzani's highlights the stigma surrounding adolescent fatherhood. Fear of judgment and gossip can lead to social withdrawal, reinforcing isolation and limiting access to peer support.

Based on stigmatisation experiences, most of the participants did have different experiences. Here is statement from Ndivhuwo:

> *"Some of my friends told me that their parents told them that if they hung out with me, I might influence them to follow my route of being an adolescent father. Hence, they avoided interaction. To be honest. It is not a nice thing to father a child when you are still young because, as I said before, it changed my lifestyle and even how people perceive me; they see a father, but they no longer see a boy, and I was expected to behave accordingly."*

Ndivhuwo's account reflects the profound social consequences of adolescent fatherhood. The imposed expectation to behave like an adult while still navigating adolescence creates a psychological and emotional strain. Social exclusion due to parental fears of negative influence further isolates young fathers, making peer support networks crucial in mitigating these challenges.

On isolation Rendani alluded that:

> *"Sometimes, when it started, I used to withdraw from people, especially people of my age; I wanted to withdraw and isolate because I would be thinking that they were talking behind my back and judging me, so I would want to be alone, and that is how I cope without engaging other people, listening to myself. I found them judgmental, but I had to be a bigger man and go past this stage with an understanding that I have a child that is on the way; fortunately, I did not get into drinking, which we often see when people face challenges."*

Rendani's statement highlights how adolescent fathers may resort to isolation as a coping mechanism in response to perceived judgment from their peers. The conscious decision to avoid negative coping strategies like alcohol use is commendable. However, it underscores the need for structured support systems that provide emotional and social guidance for young fathers.

3.1.2.3. Educational impact

Fatherhood disrupted academic progress, with some participants repeating grades or abandoning studies.

Ntanga shared:

> *"As a result of lack of focus on my schoolwork and early fatherhood, I repeated Grade 12. The pressure of being a father and a scholar became too much, and I failed to focus more on my schoolwork. Moreover, I had to work part-time at a restaurant and shops, leaving me little time to study."*

Ntanga's statement illustrates the overwhelming responsibilities young fathers face, where financial pressure and caregiving demands overshadow educational aspirations. Without targeted support, many adolescent fathers struggle to balance these demands, ultimately affecting their future prospects.

3.1.2.4. Financial impact

Adolescent fathers experienced financial strain and often sought temporary employment to support their children.

Munangiwa stated:

> *"I was compelled to find a job so that I could provide for my child. My parents' allowance was not enough because the money they were giving me was shared between me and the child."*

Munangiwa's highlights the financial precarity of adolescent fathers, who are often forced into premature economic independence. Without stable employment opportunities, young fathers may struggle to meet their children's needs, reinforcing cycles of poverty.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the multifaceted nature of adolescent fatherhood, influenced by internal and external antecedents, and reveal significant psychological, social, educational, and financial impacts on

young men. The discussion explores how these themes, grounded in participants' lived experiences, align with and expand on existing literature through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.

4.1. Antecedents to adolescent fatherhood

Adolescent fatherhood stems from various internal and external factors that increase vulnerability to early parenthood. Internally, the non-use of contraceptives emerged as a key contributor. Despite awareness of the risks of unprotected sex, participants either chose not to use contraceptives or distrusted free condoms due to misconceptions about their quality. Khathu expressed, "I knew about free condoms … but I felt I could not afford quality ones sold in shops." This mistrust echoes findings by Lindh et al. (2016), who observe that misinformation and societal beliefs often limit effective contraceptive use among young people. Limited knowledge of alternative contraceptive methods, compounded by a dismissive attitude toward sex education, exacerbated the issue. As Mpho admitted, "We even made fun of what the teachers would teach us," reflecting an undervaluation of critical life skills education. This aligns with Mavhandu et al. (2022), who identify the systemic marginalisation of life orientation in schools, often deprioritised in favour of subjects considered more critical for academic success.

Externally, peer pressure and media influence played significant roles, situating these influences within Bronfenbrenner's exosystem. Participants were driven by the need to fit in with peers, with some associating fatherhood with masculinity and social validation. As Ntanga recounted, "Some tease us, saying that a strong man can make a child." This finding supports Kukundakwe's (2021) assertion that peer dynamics heavily influence early fatherhood, with societal norms reinforcing risky behaviours to prove manhood. Media influence further perpetuated these risks, normalising sexual activity as a status symbol. Munangiwa shared, "Television and magazines … make us feel that sex is for fun, and one must enjoy it." This observation resonates with Roberts and Henriksen (2004), who highlight the pervasive role of entertainment media in shaping adolescents' perceptions of sexuality, often promoting unattainable or unhealthy ideals. The exosystem framework suggests that external social structures, such as media and peer influence, shape adolescents' behaviors indirectly, reinforcing perceptions of masculinity tied to early fatherhood.

4.2. Psychological and social impacts of adolescent fatherhood

The impacts of adolescent fatherhood were profound and multidimensional, with psychological effects being particularly striking. Participants experienced denial, guilt, depression, and role confusion. For instance, Khathu initially dismissed his girlfriend's pregnancy as a joke, illustrating the unpreparedness and shock often accompanying early fatherhood. This aligns with Kaye (2023), who posits that denial is a common initial response to life-altering news. Over time, denial gave way to regret and guilt, as young men reflected on the consequences of their actions. Ntanga lamented, "I didn't know that I destroyed someone's future," highlighting the emotional toll of realising the impact on their partner's life and education. These findings support Makusha (2024), who identifies emotional distress as a significant barrier to young fathers' involvement in their children's lives.

Socially, adolescent fathers faced stigma, isolation, and strained relationships, which can be mapped onto Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem. Ndivhuwo revealed, "My friends avoided interaction … they said I might influence them." This experience underscores the broader societal judgment that often isolates young fathers, as noted by Rodríguez-Cruz (2023), who describes the tension and fear of stigmatisation among adolescent dads. The mesosystem, which includes interactions between family, school, and peer groups, plays a crucial role in how adolescent fathers experience stigma. For example, family-school interactions may shape educational outcomes by influencing whether young fathers receive support or face exclusion. In cases where school environments fail to provide accommodations for young fathers, as seen in participants' narratives, the mesosystem exacerbates educational barriers.

4.3. Educational and financial challenges

Educationally, early fatherhood disrupted participants' academic progress, with many sacrificing studies to care for their children. The influence of the school system and family expectations aligns with the mesosystem, where the intersection of different environments shapes adolescents' decisions. Ntanga recounted repeating Grade 12 due to the overwhelming pressure of balancing school and fatherhood. This aligns with Mortimer (2010), who notes that adolescent fathers often juggle competing priorities, undermining their educational attainment. Despite these challenges, some participants displayed resilience. Anzani stated, "I passed my matric with distinctions, but I had to choose to go and work to provide for my daughter," demonstrating a commitment to their paternal responsibilities even at great personal cost. The mesosystem perspective suggests that when schools, families, and communities fail to coordinate support for young fathers, educational attainment is severely compromised.

Financial strain further compounded the challenges of adolescent fatherhood. Participants relied heavily on family support or sought temporary employment to meet their children's needs. As Munangiwa explained, "I was compelled to find a job so that I could provide for my child," illustrating the financial precarity of young fathers. These findings align with Matlakala (2020), who emphasises the economic challenges faced by adolescent fathers, often exacerbated by limited opportunities for stable employment due to incomplete education. The macrosystem, which encompasses broader societal norms and economic structures, plays a crucial role in determining the opportunities available to young fathers. Systemic inequalities, such as high unemployment rates and limited economic mobility, restrict adolescent fathers' ability to provide for their children, reinforcing cycles of poverty and exclusion.

In conclusion, the findings reveal that adolescent fatherhood results from a complex interplay of personal choices, societal influences, and systemic inadequacies, which can be effectively interpreted using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. The exosystem shapes adolescent fathers' perceptions of masculinity and sexuality through media and peer influence, while the mesosystem influences their educational opportunities and social experiences through interactions between family, school, and community. The macrosystem, encompassing broader cultural and economic structures, determines the long-term financial and social outcomes of early fatherhood. The profound psychological, social, educational, and financial impacts underscore the need for holistic interventions to support young fathers, addressing their emotional well-being, social integration, and economic empowerment. Such efforts are vital to mitigating the long-term consequences of adolescent fatherhood for both the young men and their families.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the internal and external factors influencing adolescent fatherhood and its profound psychological, social, educational and financial impacts on young men. Internal factors, such as the non-use of contraceptives and dismissive attitudes toward sex education, were compounded by external pressures like peer influence and media portrayals of sexuality. Adolescent fathers faced emotional challenges, including denial, guilt and depression, as they transitioned prematurely into parenthood (Kiselica and Kiselica, 2014).

Socially, stigma and isolation disrupted friendships and community ties, while role confusion further complicated their adjustment to fatherhood. Educationally, early fatherhood derailed academic progress for many, with some abandoning their studies to support their families. Financial strain was a persistent challenge, forcing young fathers to seek temporary employment or rely on limited family support (Matlakala, 2020).

Despite these challenges, many young fathers showed resilience, striving to fulfil their parenting responsibilities. This underscores the need for comprehensive interventions, including education, mental health services and community support, to empower adolescent fathers and improve their outcomes. The study's findings provide a foundation for shaping policies and programmes that address the unique needs of adolescent fathers, fostering their development as individuals and as parents. Young fathers deserve the same support and resources as their children, ensuring both generations thrive. The results also highlight the importance of addressing the broader societal and cultural factors contributing to adolescent fatherhood, paving the way for a more equitable and supportive environment.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are made to address the antecedents and impacts of adolescent fatherhood and to support young fathers in navigating their unique challenges. Programmes should include comprehensive education on teenage pregnancy and its consequences. Life orientation lessons in schools should prioritise family planning, starting at the primary level. Effective sex education must focus on modern contraceptive methods, risks of early pregnancy and delaying sexual activity (Mavhandu et al., 2022). Community awareness campaigns are essential to challenge cultural patterns that expose teenagers to early parenthood, such as societal pressures for early cohabitation and marriage (Matlakala, 2020).

Mental health services tailored to young fathers' needs should be expanded, offering psychological counselling for issues like denial, guilt, depression and confusion. Psychologists and school counsellors can create safe spaces for adolescent fathers to work through their emotions. At the same time, peer support groups can reduce isolation and provide practical advice (Kaye, 2023). Social workers should address stigmatisation, isolation and withdrawal by engaging with schools and families to create inclusive environments. They can guide adolescent fathers on accessing social grants and provide resources to encourage family and community involvement in their parenting roles (Rodríguez-Cruz, 2023).

Educational programmes should emphasise the importance of academic success for adolescent fathers. Health professionals should conduct workshops in schools on contraceptive methods, sexually transmitted diseases and the consequences of adolescent fatherhood. Vocational training and parenting education initiatives should be developed to equip young fathers with skills for economic stability and effective parenting (Mortimer, 2010). Policymakers must develop comprehensive policies addressing adolescent fathers' needs,

encompassing education, health care, employment and parental rights. Collaboration among social workers, educators, health-care providers and psychologists is necessary to meet these multifaceted needs (Matlakala, 2020).

Future research should explore effective interventions for supporting adolescent fathers and identify factors contributing to positive outcomes. Studies across diverse contexts can enhance the generalisability of findings and inform tailored support systems.

Author contributions

The study was conceptualised by AN; IA contributed to the drafting of the article; and AM and NV gave inputs throughout the whole process.

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Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical considerations and participant confidentiality. Access to the data may be provided upon reasonable request to the author, subject to approval from relevant ethical review boards.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest related to this study.

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