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‘Absent Breadwinners’: Father–Child Connections and Paternal Support in Rural South Africa

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Abstract

The sites for earning a living and for maintaining a family, of production and reproduction, remain geographically separated for many South Africans. Yet the common assumption that only fathers who live with their children provide support for them, substantially underestimates fathers’ financial contributions to their children. In this article we examine the association between children’s connections to their fathers and paternal support. Using data on 272 children collected as part of a study of Children’s Well-Being and Social Connections in the Agincourt sub-district of Mpumalanga, South Africa, we identify three types of connection between children and their fathers and four levels of paternal support. We present empirical evidence on histories of children’s residence and support to advance three propositions: first, that children’s co-residence with their fathers is neither an accurate nor a sufficient indicator that they are receiving paternal financial support; second, children are as likely to receive financial support from fathers who are not even members of the same household as from fathers with whom they are co-resident and, finally that children who receive support from their fathers for any part of their lives are likely to receive support consistently throughout their lives. These findings underscore the importance of using a more nuanced conceptualisation and more inclusive measurement of father connection and support in order to determine the contributions that men make to their children. Children born since 1991 are significantly less likely to receive support from their fathers than are those born before. This difference is not a reflection of different levels of support for children of different ages but is due to real changes in paternal action.

Introduction

Much of the discussion of fathers in South Africa is hampered by a lack of information about what men actually do for children. Popular assertions and policy proposals tend to make the linked assumptions that men who do not live with their children do not support them, and that men who do live with their children do support them. These assumptions are among the motivations for *The Fatherhood Project*, an ambitious and multi-pronged initiative launched by the Human Sciences Research Council in 2003. One of the three issues that inspired *The Fatherhood Project* was ‘The absence of men from households and low levels of father support for children’s care’, a formulation that equates father absence with lack of support.¹ *Baba: Men and Fatherhood in South Africa* is a recent volume of

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diverse articles about fatherhood and fathering. The authors of this volume did not all agree that a father's absence from the home necessarily means his absence from his children's lives or his failure to support them, but all of whom write in the context of these assumptions. In their introduction to *Baba*, the editors remark that 'Many children grow up without a father's presence in their homes or in their lives' and acknowledge, without endorsing the position, that 'In some quarters, this is identified as a contributory cause of childhood vulnerability.'² In general, we contend, social science research treats father absence from the household as an absence of support and, concomitantly, treats a father's co-residence with his children as evidence of his financial support.

The relationship between a father's location and support for his children is, however, not a simple one, and physical location and financial support are two separate dimensions of a father's connection to his children. In this article, we question the use of co-residence as a meaningful measure of father presence. We then problematise the concept of 'household' and identify four distinct types of social connection between children and their fathers. Finally, we present data on the association between the type of connection children have with their father and the level of support they receive from them. The data we have used in this paper originate from intensive fieldwork carried out in 2002 in the Agincourt sub-district in the north of South Africa's Mpumalanga Province near the border with Mozambique.

The standard indicator of father absence is the non-co-residence of fathers and children. The use of co-residence to measure father presence and support finds influential and material expression in the very large number of censuses and surveys that restrict the scope of their inquiry to the members of residential households and in which the residential household is used as the unit of analysis. Most census and survey data are collected at the household level and do not take account of social interactions or material transfers between households.³ The idea that paternal co-residence can serve as a proxy for fathers' support of and involvement in their children's lives is challenged by research on the roles and contributions of non-co-resident fathers in other contexts.⁴ Researchers have also pointed out that the ways in which 'father involvement' and 'father absence' have been conceptualised and measured affect both the research findings and our understanding of what it is that fathers contribute.⁵ The authors of a recent review note that recording a father as 'missing' is often an artifact of the research design and comment that 'although such "missing fathers" are common in Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia, this phenomenon has received little attention from academic researchers'.⁶ Using co-residence as a proxy for father involvement and support of children examines neither the level of involvement and support provided by resident fathers nor the positive contributions made by non-resident fathers.

We suggest that the dominant image of South African fathers as not interested in their children is in part the result of inadequate conceptualisation and measurement. Our goal is to show that a more nuanced conceptualisation and more inclusive measurement of father connection and support enables us to better appreciate the financial contributions that men make to their children. In order to assess assumptions about fathers' presence and support we use data on children's social connections to investigate the association between the type of connection children have with their fathers and the level of support they receive from them.

Households in the Context of South Africa's Economic and Social Conditions

In South Africa, cultural norms about the timing of household formation and people's need to migrate for employment are major factors contributing to the high percentage of fathers

who do not reside with their children. Historically, economic insecurity and employment instability in Southern Africa have resulted in fluid living arrangements.⁷ The South African 'bantustan' and migrant labour systems separated reproduction and production and made explicit and visible the distinction between the two domestic functions of maintaining and renewing the labour force, which is usually concealed.⁸ Since 1994 the last vestiges of legal segregation in South Africa have been removed, but the spatial separation of employment and family has remained a fact of life for many South Africans. Domestic fluidity, 'stretched' households and 'dispersed' kin groups remain relevant characterisations of South African domestic organisation as men and women move to look for work, to take employment, and for a range of other reasons.⁹ In southern Africa and much of the southern hemisphere individuals and groups move frequently and family members are often in different places. Investigations of social connections between children and their fathers must, therefore, attend to both household membership status and non-co-residence.¹⁰

Economic factors do not operate in isolation but are refracted through existing social structures and cultural norms to shape family forms and parental relationships. Several features of the culture and practice of the population under consideration here are characteristic of much of southern Africa and are immediately relevant to the connections between children and their fathers. The following summary is drawn from our own observations, Junod's description of the culture and social structure of the Tsonga at the beginning of the twentieth century,¹¹ and Niehaus's account of twentieth-century changes in land tenure, social organisation, and beliefs.¹² Relevant norms and practices of the Tsonga of the Agincourt area include patrilineal descent, extended descent groups, legitimisation of children to the father's lineage through bridewealth transactions, marriage as a process that may last decades rather than a single event marking a transition, new household formation by mature adults rather than by young couples, and residential compounds rather than single dwelling structures. The stands occupied by kin are often physically very close to one another, people and food flow constantly between them, while labour, including the labour of child-care and supervision, is commonly shared or exchanged.

Land is held by local authorities, with rights to use fields and building plots allocated to household heads. A young man must accumulate some bridewealth so that the elders may negotiate the marriage but the union may be approved, and children who carry the man's family name may be born, well before it is paid in full. While he is accumulating bridewealth, the man is a member of his father's household with obligations to his parents and siblings as well as to his wife and children. His wife may move to her father-in-law's household but few women have done so recently. Most stands or residential plots contain several separate buildings, and additional sleeping houses or huts can be built relatively easily for an adult daughter and her children, so a woman is unlikely to move from her parents' stand until she can establish a household of her own. Until this happens, the man and woman may or may not refer to themselves as 'married' (they may describe themselves as 'promised to each other' or 'engaged') and neither husband and wife nor father and child are co-resident. Once the man can afford to set up his own household he will move to it with his wife and children, frequently accompanied by one or more of his or his wife's younger siblings. If the union is dissolved the children will usually stay with their mother although they may be claimed by their father and his family. In these circumstances children may spend long periods when their acknowledged fathers do not share household membership with them or their mothers, but do play important social, emotional, and material roles in their lives.

Fathers and Children in Webs of Relationships

The complexities of family relationships in general, and of father-child relationships in particular, among poor, rural, South Africans was immediately apparent to us as we got to know people in the two villages where we lived. The members of a single extended family illustrate the diversity of relationships between fathers and their children. Joshua, 13 born in 1951, was the eldest of five children, two boys and three girls, born between 1951 and 1965 to Amos (died 2001) and Patience. Joshua paid *lobola* when he married Lily, who bore five children between 1974 and 1990. Joshua had set up his own stand with Lily years before our detailed records begin in 1987 and, except for one daughter who left for six years when she was married, his children had all been members of his household since then. Joshua's two youngest children (born 1987 and 1990) were still attending school in 2004. They had spent their entire lives in a 'nuclear family household' and their father had always been their only source of support and school expenses. For at least twenty years, however, their father had not lived in that household but had only visited from his permanent residence at his work near Johannesburg airport, where, we were told, he had established a home with another woman.

The children of Joshua's sister Mary were in a similar relationship to their own father. Mary (born 1952) had married Benjamin (born 1951) who had paid *lobola*, and she had moved to Benjamin's village to live with him in his mother's stand. Between 1975 and 1998 she gave birth to nine children, two of whom died in childhood. Like Joshua, Benjamin spent most of his children's lives away at work, in his case near Pretoria; he had been working for several years before our record began in 1985 and continued to do so until 1988, when he returned to his village for seven years. In 1995 he again went away to work. From 1985, through the end of our fieldwork in 2004, Benjamin provided all the financial support for his children. In 2003 to 2004 he did not have steady employment but stayed in the city looking for work and Mary and the children were very hard up. (Their oldest daughter had health problems, their second had a baby when she was 18, and their oldest son was only 13 in 2003.)

While Joshua's and Mary's children were supported by their fathers who either never or only occasionally lived with them, their sister Selina's children had always lived with their father but did not receive support from him. Selina married Alfred without *lobola* being paid and bore five children between 1989 and 1999. Alfred was a rural man and a farmer, his stand contained vegetable plots and enclosures for pigs and rabbits as well as for the much more common goats, he cultivated a field outside the village, and he cut firewood for the household. Alfred's subsistence activities certainly contributed to his family's upkeep but they did not contribute any essential cash, and Alfred's earnings from occasional piece-work were his discretionary income which was spent at the local bar. In these circumstances Selina was the source of support for her children. In 1999, when her youngest child was born, one of Mary's sons, then aged five, came to live with Selina and for four years she also supported him. In 2002, unable to make enough money while living at home, partly because the cost of transport was prohibitive, Selina left her five children, then aged three, five, eight, 12, and 13 at home and found work in a nearby town. Even though the town was only 25 kilometres away the journey took two hours and the round-trip consumed a day's wages. Although their father was living in the household with them, and several of the nearby stands were occupied by their kin, the children were essentially caring for themselves. Selina would return at weekends and she reported that she worried about what her children would have to eat, as she herself was having a good evening meal as part of the board and lodging provided as part of many domestic and menial jobs in South Africa.

Selina's children, like Joshua's and Mary's, at least had stable living situations. This was not true for the children of their brother Mandla, of whom Constance, the first child of his first

marriage and born in 1981, serves as an example both of the flexibility of kin in caring for children and of the instability of those arrangements. For the first four years of her life Constance lived with her mother and father in her father's mother's stand. In 1984 Constance's mother gave birth to a son, John. In the same year, the woman who was to become Mandla's second wife also bore him a son, Constance's parents separated, and Constance went to live with her father's older sister and her husband, Mary and Benjamin. She lived there for ten years, during which time Benjamin was away at work for at least half the time, and was supported by her paternal kin in the person of Mary, her father's older sister. At age 14 Constance returned to her father's village to be the only person living with her father's 60-year-old mother. By sending her to live with her grandmother, the family managed to maintain the old woman in her own house and to keep an eye on her eccentricities. The grandmother joined her younger son, Alfred, in drinking. However, she did send food to his wife, Selina and her children. Constance continued to be supported by her paternal kin because her paternal grandfather started to receive the new pension for the elderly instituted by the ANC government.

In 1998, when she was 17 years old, Constance became pregnant, failed grade ten, dropped out of school, and moved to her maternal grandfather's stand. For the first time, Constance was living in the same household as her 13-year-old brother John. This household was also home to the children's mother, Selina, who had moved there in 1994 and who had been away at work since 1997. At this point any support from her father's family stopped and Selina, who had been paying for Constance's school expenses all along, took over all Constance's support with help from Selina's mother (Constance's maternal grandmother).

There is a great deal of variation in children's schooling, even among siblings, so we hesitate to make a direct causal connection. But we will point out that Constance's progress in school had been slow and uncertain. She had to repeat grade 5 in elementary school, and after one year at the local secondary school she started attending a school in a neighbouring village that had the reputation of being easier. There she repeated grade nine, failed grade ten, took two years off to have her baby, and then returned to school where she failed grade eleven. Constance seemed quite content with her life in the village, but at 23, with a five-year-old baby and no qualifications, she was dependent on her mother's income and her grandmother's pension and had little prospect of being able to support herself or her child.

This family's story, typical of the families we observed, clearly illustrates the complexity of social relationships. Specifically it illustrates that the connections between fathers and children, and particularly indicates that the links between co-residence and financial support certainly cannot be taken for granted.

Measuring Children's Experiences of Paternal Connection and Support

Research Design

Our experience and observation in the Agincourt area led us to three generalisations that challenge the widespread assumption that children who live with their fathers are being supported by them and that children who are not living with their fathers are not receiving paternal support. In this article, we analyse systematically collected quantitative data on the experience of a sample of children. Our goal is to determine the extent to which the following generalisations are empirically supported.

1. Children's co-residence with their fathers is neither an accurate nor a sufficient indicator that they are receiving paternal financial support.
2. Children may receive financial support from their fathers even though they share neither residential nor household connection with their fathers.

3. Children who receive support from their fathers for any part of their lives are likely to receive support consistently throughout their lives.

We began the Children's Well-Being and Social Connections (CWSC) study in 2002 in the Agincourt sub-district, located 500 km north-east of Johannesburg in South Africa's Mpumalanga province. The Agincourt sub-region is typical of much of southern Africa in three important respects: the land is insufficient to support the population through subsistence agriculture or other local activities; there are very few local employment opportunities; and the population has high levels of migration and mobility.¹⁴ This rural area was part of the apartheid 'homeland' system that aimed to concentrate the black population in areas with little infrastructure and poor land. The population of about 70,000, in approximately 11,400 residential units, lives in 21 villages established through forced resettlement between 1920 and 1970. All 21 villages in the site have water provided through neighborhood taps, and at least one primary school; most have electricity and a secondary school. They differ in access to transportation, provision of public services such as clinics, and the number and variety of shops and businesses. The main ethnic group is Tsonga but Pedi and Sotho are also common in the area.

The initial sample for the CWSC study was drawn from the Agincourt Health and Demographic Surveillance System (AHDSS) which has, since 1992, been conducting annual censuses to collect demographic data that can facilitate community-based health development.¹⁵ Our study was designed to investigate in detail the wide range of social connections that link members of different residential households; the flows of resources, services, and assistance across those connections; and their impact on children's well-being. We therefore limited the initial sample to two villages: one above and one below the median level of access and services for the area, selected independently of any knowledge of family structure or dynamics. In each village we used data on assets and wealth from the AHDSS to divide all households into three economic strata and randomly selected two households that had at least one child aged 10 or 11 from each stratum. We took samples from different economic levels; the initial starting points for the 12 contact groups were selected at random; and we were comprehensive in recording the experience of all the children in each cluster.¹⁶

We did not think of the 12 selected households as the centres of networks, but rather as points of entry into groups of interconnected households or 'contact groups'. Madhavan and Townsend lived in the villages for four months in 2002; Garey joined them for one month; and Madhavan and Townsend returned for a month of follow-up research in 2004. Working with eight trained fieldworkers from the area, we mapped out the totality of connections of members of the contact households. We expanded our scope from each initial household by looking first at its links to other households and secondly at current and past connections to other households for every child in all of these linked households. We determined the composition of each contact group by including the other households with which the initial household had the most important connections. We arrived at these judgements through repeated discussions among the fieldworkers, taking into account the frequency of visiting, movements of people, informant reports, and fieldworker judgement and aiming for groups which, while not closed, had a noticeable drop-off of contact beyond their boundaries. The 12 contact groups included 89 residential households and about 650 individuals, of whom 297 were under the age of 21 in 2001.

In the course of fieldwork, we collected a variety of forms of data on social connection including genealogical diagrams, lifetime residential and education histories, in-depth interviews on education, health, child care, familial responsibilities, and role models, copious field notes on participant observations of aspects of village life, and systematic observation of young children. In this analysis, we draw on the lifetime residential histories

we collected for all the children (people aged 0–20) to construct our measures of connection and support.¹⁷ For every year of every child's life, we recorded the connection to and support from mother and father. We identified children's fathers based on the information provided by respondents, about which there was usually consensus among family members. We also recorded the name, relationship to the child and the nature of the connection to, and support received from, every other person who was a member of the household during each year.

We are confident of the quality of our retrospective data for even the oldest children. Throughout our research we used multiple sources and continually compared them. For the children's support and residence histories we first interviewed the children's caregivers (usually in the presence of other family members who contributed their own memories) and then checked all reports through follow-up discussions and semi-structured interviews with other members of the household and contact group. We then attempted to reconcile the histories of children who were siblings or had ever lived with other children and returned to the households to check on discrepancies and investigate complications.¹⁸ In addition, the researchers and local fieldworkers developed great familiarity with the members of the contact groups they observed and were able to detect and correct many inconsistencies, prompting memories and tactfully noting occasions on which family histories were sanitised or normalised.

Data on Paternal Connection

Using the lifetime residential histories, we categorised each year of each child's life into one of four types of connection to their fathers: 1) residential connection (child and father reside in the same physical household); 2) household connection (child and father are members of the same household but do not reside in the same place); 3) social connection (child and father are neither co-resident nor members of the same household but do have an acknowledged relationship); and 4) no connection (child has no contact with father).

We assert that these categories are analytically useful and culturally meaningful. The people we talked to understood and applied these categories and going through our data we found them to be easily identifiable and distinct. We stress that our categories do not, and are not intended to, evaluate the quality of children's relationships with their fathers: children who have a social connection do not necessarily get less nurturing or material support than those who have household or residential connection.

When child and father reside on the same stand we define them as having a *residential connection*. Neither residential nor any other connection necessarily implies material support from father to child. When a child and father are members of the same household, but not co-resident, we describe them as having a *household connection*. Migrant fathers and their children usually fall into this category.

We refer to fathers as *socially connected* when they are neither co-resident with the child nor members of the child's household. In social connection the identity of the child's father is acknowledged and the child has legitimate claims on the father for social recognition, ritual performance, and material support. Social connection, however, does not necessarily imply, although it may be associated with, marriage, intention to marry, cohabitation, or a current sexual relationship between the child's father and mother.

In cases in which the child has *no connection* with the father, the father's identity and whereabouts may be unknown or it may be that nobody involved asserts a paternal relationship. When children have no paternal connection they must look to others for their support, name, inheritance rights, and social position.

Data on Paternal Support

We recognise that paternal contributions to children include commitments of time, emotional support, companionship and training, but we restrict our analysis to material support because of the dominant cultural expectations that this is a father's primary obligation. To determine the sources of support for children we made sure that we could answer three questions for every year of the child's life: (a) 'Who supported this child that year?' (b) 'Was there anyone else who contributed to the child's support that year?' and (c) if the child had been in school, 'Who paid the child's school expenses that year?'¹⁹ For any given year, if the father was the only person mentioned in response to the first two questions, then the child was coded as *received all general support from father*; if he was mentioned in response to the first question and one or more other people were mentioned in response to either or both of the first two questions, the child was coded as *received primary support from father*; if one or more other people were mentioned in response to the first question and the father was mentioned in response to the second, then the child was coded as *received secondary general support from father*; if the father was not mentioned in response to either of the first two questions, but was mentioned in response to the third, then the child was coded as *received only school support from father*; if the father was not mentioned in response to any of the support questions, then the child was coded as *received no support from father*.

Although there is no tuition for public primary and secondary schooling in South Africa, there are expenses associated with school attendance, such as buying school uniforms and paying for various school services. The costs are relatively small but for some children they are a real barrier to attendance. We see paternal support for schooling as both an important form of instrumental support and an indication that the father is present as a resource for the child. We have, therefore, included 'father provides only schooling support' as a separate category.

Analysis

Our analysis proceeds in four steps. In the first step, we examine the association between connection and support by cross-tabulating the level of paternal support children received with the type of connection they had with their fathers in 2001. Second, we examine patterns of connection to and support from their fathers over children's lives. Third, we cross-tabulate the level of paternal support with children's age in order to test for the possible confounding effects of an association between children's age and their receipt of support from their fathers. Fourth, we examine patterns of paternal support over age within birth cohorts to test further for age effects on receipt of support, and we compare patterns between cohorts to determine the extent of change over time in paternal support provision. Finally, we examine the extent to which children aged between 10 and 20 years experience consistent connections to and support from their fathers.

We note two features of our research design and analysis that have implications for the interpretation of our results. First, our concentration on groups of linked households means that our observations are deliberately not independent of one another, violating a crucial assumption of statistical testing. Our reports of statistical significance must, therefore, be interpreted as indications that the observed differences would be significant if the observations were independent. We concentrate our discussion on those differences that are both theoretically suggestive and large enough to be important. Second, our bivariate, rather than multivariate, analyses are motivated by our goal of demonstrating how a new conceptualisation and measurement of fathers' connections to their children produces a more nuanced picture of men's contribution to their children's lives. Analyses to examine the impact of paternal connection and support on children's well-being, which we intend to

carry out, will include appropriate control measures that are unnecessary for our present description.

Children's Experiences of Paternal Co-residence and Support

Table 1 cross tabulates children's connection to their fathers with the support that they received from their fathers in 2001.

Table 1 reveals both the complexity of the connections between children and their fathers and the disjuncture between paternal support and co-residence. Although 41 per cent of children were members of the same household as their fathers in 2001, only 12 per cent of all children were co-resident with their fathers. Almost twice as many (22 per cent) had social connections with their fathers even though they were neither co-resident nor members of the same household. Overall, nearly half of the children received some form of financial support from their fathers, with 39 per cent getting either all or primary support from them. One quarter of the children had no contact with their fathers and therefore received no support from them. Of those children who were in contact with their fathers, 65 per cent received some support from them.

The type of connection children had with their fathers was associated with the support they received but children living with their fathers were not the most likely to be supported by them. Eighty-three per cent of children with a household connection received paternal support in 2001, compared to 60 per cent of those with a residential connection, and 32 per cent of those with a social connection. What is more, children with household connections to their fathers were much more likely to receive all or primary support from them than were children with any other type of connection. To summarise, in 2001 paternal support cut across the pattern of connection: almost as many children received support from fathers who were not even members of the same household (19 children, 32 per cent of 59) as received support from co-resident fathers (20 children, 60 per cent of 33). Eighty-five per cent of children who received any paternal support got it from fathers who did not live with them.

In order to move beyond the cross-sectional view in Table 1 we examined children's life-course experience of connection and support. In Table 2A we show the percentage of children's life times during which they had various types of connection with their fathers; in Table 2B, we show the percentage of children's life times during which they both had those connections and received support from their fathers; in Table 2C, we show the percentage of children's life times during which they did not receive support while connected and not connected to their fathers.

Overall, 76 per cent of children had received paternal support at some point in their life, 62 per cent had received support for more than half their life, and 41 per cent for their whole life. Conversely, 24 per cent of children had never received any support from their fathers and of those, 56 per cent (13 per cent of all children) had never had any connection with their fathers. Only 7 per cent of the children who had always had some connection to their fathers had never received any paternal support from them.

The life-course perspective presented in Table 2 generally reinforces the cross-sectional results from Table 1. Co-residence of children with their fathers has been rare; less than 3 per cent of the 143 children between the ages of ten and 20 in 2001 had lived with their father all their life, and only 25 per cent had ever been co-resident with their fathers. Only one of these children had been both co-resident with, and supported by, his father all his life; only 22 per cent had ever spent even one year co-resident with and supported by their fathers, and a mere 8 per cent had spent more than half their life in that state. In contrast, 63 per cent of children had spent at least one year receiving paternal support while in a

household connection to their fathers, and nearly 29 per cent had spent their whole life in this situation.

In 2001, 22 per cent of all children had a social connection to fathers who were neither co-resident nor members of their household (Table 1). Of these children, 32 per cent received some support from their fathers. The lifetime experience of children between the ages of ten and 20 presents a similar picture: 34 per cent of children had been in a social connection with their fathers for at least one year and three-quarters of those (25 per cent of all children) had received paternal support while in a social connection with their fathers. Three-quarters of children in this population have had life-long connections to their fathers. Three-quarters of them have received support from their fathers for at least one year and 40 cent of them have received support from their fathers all their life.

Taken together, the data in Tables 1 and 2 provide empirical support for two of our initial generalisations; a) that co-residence of children with their fathers is both uncommon and a very poor indicator of paternal support and b) that children receive support from fathers who are not even members of the same household. Neither table, however, provides information on the age pattern of support. The 49 per cent of children who received support in 2001 or the 40 per cent who have always received support might be either the older or the younger children or they could be distributed across all ages. To clarify this question, Figures 1, 2 and 3 compare the percentage of children receiving various levels of paternal support between different groups. Figure 1 compares children in different age groups in 2001, Figure 2 compares the experiences of children born from 1981 to 1986 at different ages, and Figure 3 compares the experiences of four birth cohorts of children in the first five years of their lives.

The distribution of paternal support for the 0 to 4 age group is significantly lower than in the other age groups when all groups are compared, and when the youngest age group is compared with each of the others taken in turn. The difference remains significant even when we omit the children who received school support only, a level of support not applicable to the youngest age group. Whether the lower level of support for the youngest children reflects a decrease over time in paternal support or a population-specific age pattern of support cannot be determined from Figure 1 alone. In our research, however, we have found no evidence that the parental support of young children is different to the support of older children, or that expectations of paternal support are less for young children. Figure 1 does demonstrate that paternal support was not lower for older children and that the distribution of paternal support in Table 1 is not an effect of the children's age distribution.

The findings in Tables 1 and 2 and Figure 1 cannot, however distinguish two basic processes: change over time and change as children age. In other words, they cannot tell us whether the current levels of support for older children have declined or increased since their youth. Cross-sectional differences between age groups could reflect changes in father-child connections as children age or as a period changes in family relations (or a combination of the two). In order to distinguish these two effects, we compare the experiences of the oldest children at different ages in Table 2; the levels of support for these children have been remarkably stable over 20 years. We also examined, but do not illustrate, the life-course experience of those children aged five to 14 in 2001. We found no significant change in the pattern of paternal support as children age in any of the cohorts. The absence of change over age within cohorts means that the differences in support between age groups in Figure 1 are not the effect of changing likelihood of support for children as they age.

Finally, in Figure 3 we compare the experience of children from different birth cohorts, when they were less than five years old.

When we compare the distribution of paternal support for children from different cohorts when they were in the same age range, we do find significant differences. Children born between 1992 and 2001 received support from their fathers at a significantly lower level than did those children born between 1981 and 1991, when they were the same age. Thus we can conclude that period changes are much more prominent than changes over the life course.

One final explanation must be investigated. The variations we have uncovered to this point could indicate either that most children receive sporadic paternal support or that some children receive consistent support and others receive little or none. The different implications for children's well-being of these alternatives motivate our investigation of children's life-course experience.

To determine the extent to which individual children experience consistency in paternal support and connection to fathers, we return to a discussion of Table 2. Of the 143 children aged between ten and 20 in 2001, 65 per cent had received support either for their whole life (41 per cent) or for none of it (24 per cent). Only 36 per cent of children had received paternal support intermittently and 53 per cent of them had been in the same support status for at least three-quarters of their life, leaving 17 per cent who had both received and not received paternal support for at least one-quarter of their life. Similarly, 89 per cent of children had had connection with their fathers all their life or not at all, and only 11 per cent had had sporadic contact. The high percentage of children who had spent all their life in the same support or contact status is a clear indication of the relative consistency of paternal support in the population and supports our third generalisation, that children who do receive support from their fathers are likely to receive it consistently.

Patterns of Paternal Connection and Support Within and Beyond Households

Five features of the complex pattern of connections between children and their fathers that we have described are of particular salience for discussions of the current 'crisis of fatherhood' in South Africa.

Levels of paternal support in rural South Africa

In rural South Africa, as in many poor societies, there are very few opportunities for anyone to earn a living in the areas where they can afford to live. As a result, it is impossible for most fathers to both support and live with their children. In 2001, half the children in our sample received no support from their fathers and one-quarter of those between the ages of ten and 20 had never received any paternal support. Nonetheless, fathers are a major source of support for children. In 2001, half the children did receive support from their fathers, 41 per cent of those aged between ten and 20 had received paternal support every year of their lives, and three quarters of them had received at least one year of paternal support. Whether these figures depict a shocking failure of male responsibility or great devotion in the face of extreme difficulties is to some extent a matter of attitude and expectation, but our research makes several substantial contributions to our understanding of the nature and implications of the relationships between children and their fathers.

Paternal support and shared household membership

One contribution is our finding that measuring men's contributions to their children involves going well beyond recording co-residence; it requires recognition of the relevant domestic groupings and use of an elastic definition of household membership that includes people living in more than one location. Such a definition of household raises measurement

problems of its own because individuals might be counted as members of more than one household. This, however, is the reality of many people's lives, just as it is a fact that many men support children in more than one household or family. Survey and data management techniques that allow for multiple or partial household memberships have been developed by researchers working in South Africa.²⁰ We urge similar methodological innovations on all researchers studying fatherhood in particular and children's well-being and family relationships in general.

Historic change in relationships between men and children

The arrangement of marriage and the determination of parental rights and obligations among the Tsonga have changed in multiple and unanticipated ways over the last two hundred years. We have presented evidence that children born in the 1990s are less likely to receive paternal support than were those born in the 1980s. This decline may be plausibly linked to the worsening employment situation for men in South Africa which has increased the use of other support mechanisms for children. Bank's study in the Eastern Cape, for instance, shows how the employment crisis for migrant men led to an increasing dependence on elderly pensions.²¹ The decline in paternal support may also be related to increased opportunities for men to lead their lives entirely in the townships, without experiencing the need for a rural home as refuge and secure home base. We have, however, observed no decline in children's likelihood of receiving support as they grow older. This suggests that economic and social changes have had a greater impact on younger men than on older ones. We do not want to extrapolate beyond our data, but we anticipate that relationships between children and fathers will continue to change.

Consistency of paternal support over children's lives

Individual men do not seem to alternate during their lives between supporting and not supporting their children. On the strength of our findings we can safely replace the division of children into those with a father present and those with an absent father, with a further division into those who receive support from their fathers and those who do not. We suggest that rural South African children may be becoming divided into two groups with relatively higher and lower levels of well-being associated with the structure of their families and their receipt of paternal support. This division may well transform the rural population from one that has been unimodal if not homogenous on a number of measures into one that is bimodal on measures of well-being.

Fathers beyond the household

Our data demonstrate the empirical importance of the stretched or dispersed household in post-apartheid South Africa. They also show that the shared *household membership* of children and fathers, although it is a much better indicator of the likelihood of paternal support than is co-residence, excludes many fathers who make important contributions to their children's support. We suggest that the relative physical location of children and fathers is not the crucial factor in determining paternal support. Rather, it is the socially recognised relationship of paternity, with its socially legitimised claims and socially enforced responsibilities, which is the pre-condition for effective paternal presence and support.

Our argument for a more nuanced and comprehensive conception and categorisation of the connections between children and their fathers is in accord with recent research on livelihoods in South Africa. That research emphasises the many ways households are 'stretching' in the face of economic hardship and argues that concepts and methods need to be extended beyond co-residence.²² Just as we propose extending the categories of paternal relationship beyond the limits of the residential household Murray, for instance, advocates a

‘dispersed intensive’ method that captures intra- and inter-household connections in order to study the enormous diversity in livelihood strategies.²³

On the strength of our own ethnographic research, and in accord with research in other areas, we suggest that the prevalence of children with only a social connection to their fathers is an indication of profound structural changes in the social position of men.²⁴ The percentage of children under five years old in this population who had only a social connection to their fathers increased from 12 per cent for children born between 1981 and 1985 to 28 per cent for those born between 1996 and 2001.²⁵ One possible explanation for this change is that, as economic conditions make it increasingly difficult for men to establish and maintain their own households, men are increasingly likely to remain members of, and retain connections to, their households of origin. At the same time, these men’s sisters also remain members of their households of origin and make claims on their brothers for themselves and on behalf of their children. In these circumstances, men remain contributing members of their households of origin while establishing paternal relationships to children who are members of different households. This arrangement is a structural innovation in a formally patrilineal society. If it becomes increasingly common, then co-residence and even household membership will become increasingly deficient as indicators of paternal presence.

Conclusion

Research into the involvement of fathers in the lives of children in South Africa has frequently used co-residence as a proxy for ‘father presence’,²⁶ and much of the research on policy effectiveness makes the assumption that the residential household is bounded and constitutes the most important form of social connection.²⁷ Further research is urgently needed on both the well-being of children who do receive paternal support and the nature and adequacy of the arrangements for the support of children who do not receive support from their fathers. Identifying both the children who are particularly vulnerable and the possible interventions to supplement or replace the contributions of parents requires that researchers understand the ways that children are positioned, supported, and constrained within webs of social connections that extend far beyond their nuclear families. We suggest that the cultural expectations of fatherhood and the nature of the social relationship between father and child are the keys to understanding fathers’ contributions.

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 16. We did not include households headed by refugees or recent immigrants from Mozambique among our 12 initial households because their legal and economic situations are different from those of the native-born population. None of the contact groups included such households.
 17. In this analysis we omitted the 25 children whose fathers were known to be dead in 2001, but retained children who had no contact with their fathers. Paternal death is certainly momentous for children, but it distorts the life-course picture of father–child relationships that is the focus of interest for this analysis. We recognise that some of the fathers with whom children have no contact may be dead, but for those children the loss of contact, not the subsequent death, was the crucial break in their relationship with their fathers. As a result of this restriction, the analyses in this article are conducted on 272 children aged 0–20 living in 83 residential households in 12 contact groups of between 4 and 9 linked households each.
 18. It was relatively straightforward, though time-consuming, to record a single child's history. Nearly all children had, however, lived with other children for some or all of their lives and we were determined to achieve both accuracy and consistency in all their histories. Thus if the record for child A showed that in a particular year child A was living with children X, Y and Z, then the records for that year should show these children all living with child A and all living with each other. The reconciliation was a formidable undertaking but was worth the effort, not only because

it improved the accuracy of our records but also because it brought to light many complications of residence, support, and movement that contributed to our understanding of children's lives.

19. We did not usually ask these questions as they are written here but rather made sure that we recorded the information we needed to answer them to our own satisfaction. If, for instance, a woman said that her husband had provided all the support for all their children since they moved to their own *stand* in 1988, and other people corroborated this, then we did not ask about each child and each year from 1988 to 2002.
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Figure 1.
Percentage of children receiving each level of support from their fathers: comparing children in four age groups in 2001

Figure 2.
Percentage of children receiving each level of support from their fathers: children born 1981-1985 at four age ranges

Figure 3.
Percentage of children receiving each level of support from their fathers: The experience of four birth cohorts at ages 0 to 4.

Table 1

Percentage of Children, Aged 0-20, who Received Various Levels of Support from their Fathers by the Type of Connection they had to their Fathers in 2001 (N=272).

Child's connection to father	Level of support child received from father					Total
	All n = 57	Primary n = 49	Secondary n = 10	School only ¹ n = 15	Some ² n = 131	None n = 141
Residential (n = 33)	24	33	0	3	60	40
Household (n = 111)	44	25	4	10	83	17
Social (n = 59)	0	17	10	5	32	68
No contact (n = 69)	0	0	0	0	0	100
Total (N = 272)	21	18	4	6	49	51

¹ 34% of the 272 children are not in school and thus not in a position to receive support for school expenses. 88% (170 of 193) of children over 5 and 11% (9 of 79) of children 5 and younger are in school.

² The figures for "some" support are the sum of the percentages for the four defined levels of support presented in the four columns to the left.

Pearson's chi-square for association between rows by pair-wise comparisons is significant at the p<.01 level.

Table 2A

Percentage of Children (aged 10–20 in 2001) by Percentage of Lifetime in Specified Connections to their Fathers (N=143)

Connection to Father	All	Percentage of Lifetime to Date					Ever
		75-99%	50-74%	25-49%	01-24%	None	
Residential	2.8	3.5	4.2	6.3	8.4	74.8	25.2
Household	37.6	9.8	6.3	6.3	5.6	34.3	65.7
Social	8.4	4.2	5.6	7.7	7.7	66.4	33.6
None	13.3	4.2	2.1	1.4	3.5	75.5	24.5

Table 2B

Percentage of Children (aged 10-20 in 2001) by Percentage of Lifetime Receiving Support and in Specified Connections to their Fathers (N=143)

Connection to Father	All	Percentage of Lifetime to Date				
		75-99%	50-74%	25-49%	01-24%	None
Residential	0.7	1.4	5.6	4.9	9.8	77.6
Household	28.7	9.8	8.4	5.6	10.5	37.1
Social	2.1	2.1	2.8	4.2	14.0	74.8
Some	40.6	11.2	9.8	7.0	7.7	23.8
						76.2

Table 2C

Percentage of Children (aged 10–20 in 2001) by Percentage of Lifetime Not Receiving Support and in Specified Connections to their Fathers (N=143)

Connection to Father	Percentage of Lifetime to Date					None	Ever
	All	75-99%	50-74%	25-49%	01-24%		
Some	7.0	7.0	6.3	9.8	13.3	56.6	43.4
None	13.3	4.2	2.1	1.4	3.5	75.5	24.5
All children ^I	23.8	7.7	7.0	9.8	11.2	40.6	59.4

^I „All children” combines children’s experience of having some and no connection with their fathers. The percentages in the two rows for “Some connection” and “No connection” do not sum to those in the row for “All children” because some children spent part of their lives in connection with their fathers but receiving no support and part of their lives with no connection.