



**Exploring the psychological and emotional experiences of father
absence on recent matriculants in Phahameng, Bloemfontein:
Resilience factors and coping mechanisms**



— Dissertation submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Philosophy in Arts (Psychology) at IIE MSA (2025)

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30/ 01 /2026

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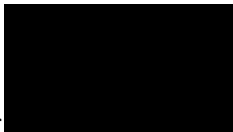
Declaration

I, Lebohang Matijane, hereby affirm that this dissertation, submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Philosophy in Arts at IIE MSA, represents my own original work. It has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for the attainment of any other degree or qualification at any university or institution. To the best of my knowledge, all sources and contributions from other authors have been properly acknowledged and referenced within the text.

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Signature

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of the author.

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Dedication

This dissertation is lovingly dedicated to my late father, who passed away just a few months before I could complete my Master's degree. Though he is no longer here to celebrate this achievement with me, his spirit, love, and guidance continue to live within me.

Your unwavering belief in my potential and the sacrifices you made throughout my life have been my greatest source of strength and motivation. Every page of this work is a reflection of your influence and encouragement. This accomplishment is not mine alone, it belongs to you. May your precious soul continue to rest in peace, knowing that your dreams for me live on through this milestone.

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Abstract

Father absence continues to pose a significant developmental and social challenge within South Africa, particularly in township contexts where unemployment, migration and mortality frequently destabilize family structures. Although extensive global research has examined the psychological and emotional consequences of father absence, limited scholarship has contextualized these experiences within South African township settings. This study explored the psychological and emotional experiences of father absence among recent matriculants in Phahameng, Bloemfontein, with a specific focus on resilience factors and coping mechanisms that shape their developmental trajectories. Adopting a qualitative phenomenological design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten participants who matriculated between 2022 and 2024. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns of emotional distress and adaptive resilience.

Findings revealed that father absence often engendered deep seated feelings of abandonment, identity confusion, and unresolved grief, which frequently manifested as symptoms of anxiety and depression. Nonetheless, participants demonstrated considerable resilience through reliance on maternal figures, community support networks and goal directed behavior. Gender norms were found to influence emotional expression, particularly among male participants who exhibited restricted emotional openness. The findings were interpreted through Bowlby's Attachment Theory, emphasizing the role of secure attachment in emotional regulation and psychological stability and Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which highlights the influence of observational learning and modeling on the development of coping behaviors and resilience. The study underscores the need for contextually responsive psychosocial interventions that strengthen emotional support systems and foster adaptive coping among youth in township communities.

Keywords: Adolescents, Coping mechanisms, Father absence, Psychological and emotional well-being, Resilience, South Africa and Township

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SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Study Introduction

Father absence has become a significant social issue in many communities worldwide, South Africa included (Papaleontious-Louca & Al Omari, 2020). For a number of individual, the father absence during constructive years has the potential of leave emotional scars that one carries even in their adulthood years. (Bennett, 2025) mental health risks, including anxiety and depression, as well as impact social development and relationships can be increased by this lack of a fatherly influence in an individual's life. Ramatsetse and Ross (2022) found that individuals who experienced father absence during childhood reported emotional distress, low self-esteem, and a persistent sense of abandonment, which continued to affect their psychological well-being into adulthood. The relationship between father absence and these challenges have been widely studied and continues to be studied, Kucukkaragoz (2025) reveals that individuals from father absent homes often face more emotional and psychological difficulties.

This study focused on recent matriculants, being the class of 2022 to class of 2024, from Phahameng, Bloemfontein, who are uniquely positioned to provide insights into their lived experiences of father absence during their critical transition from high school to higher education or the work space. Young adults who have recently completed their high school have navigated this important life stage and are likely to have experienced the negative outcomes of father absence on their educational and personal development (McLanahan et al., 2013). By exploring their lived experiences and perspectives, this study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of how father absence shapes their emotional and psychological lives, resilience factors behind those who make it as well as the coping mechanisms they apply.

Phahameng was selected as the study location due to its unique demographic characteristics, which align with the research objectives. According to Van Rooyen et al. (2024), 80.3% of fathers become absent during child birth in Bloemfontein, which later may result in them being absent in a child's life. Phahameng being one of the largest locations in Bloemfontein, exploring father absence in this area gave a deeper insight of the psychological and emotional experiences children go through. Furthermore, its socio-economic profile and cultural context made it an appropriate setting for exploring the research questions. The study aimed to explore the psychological and emotional experiences of the recently matriculated young adults in Phahameng, who have grown up without the presence of their fathers. By unpacking the psychological and emotional distress, as well as resilience factors and coping mechanisms involved, this research sought to provide a deeper understanding of how father's absence shaped the emotional and psychological lives of these individuals.

1.2 Background of the Study

Father absence is a significant and persistent issue in South Africa, particularly in historically disadvantaged communities. Research has shown that father involvement can have lasting positive impacts on a child's psychological and emotional development (Diniz et al., 2021), this then shows that father absence can have lasting negative impacts on a child's psychological and emotional development. In South Africa, father absence is often linked to socio-economic issues such as unemployment, migration for work, and family breakdowns (Mavungu et al., 2013). Father absence can lead to psychological and emotional distress in individuals, including feelings of abandonment, low self-esteem, and emotional instability (Johnson-Baddy, 2020).

Moreover, a lack of positive male role models can leave a significant void in guidance and support, that are essential during an individual's

psychological and emotional development (Nakanishi et al., 2019). The State of South Africa's Fathers (2024) states that in 2023 more children (40.3%) in the country live with men who are not their fathers than those who live in the same households as their biological fathers. 31.3% of children in South Africa lived with both biological parents. Only 3.3% lived with their biological fathers and not mothers, while 44.8% lived with their biological mothers and not fathers. In 2023 only 35.6% of children in South Africa lived with their biological fathers in the same household. Recent matriculants are a critical group to study as they are in a transitional phase of their lives, navigating between high school and higher education or the work space. This stage is crucial for their future success, and understanding how father absence shaped or continues to shape their life experiences, this can then provide valuable insights into how to support young adults faced with same challenge.

1.3 Problem Statement

Father absence remains a significant social problem in South Africa, with particularly high prevalence in township communities. National data indicate that a large proportion of children grow up without the presence of their biological fathers, with approximately 31.3% of children living in households where fathers are absent (Statistics South Africa, 2024). In the Free State Province, father absence is reported as a common family structure, especially in low-income areas such as Phahameng township, where unemployment, poverty, relationship instability and historical labour migration continue to affect family cohesion. For recent matriculants in Phahameng, father absence presents serious developmental challenges during the transition from adolescence to adulthood. This life stage requires young people to form a stable identity, develop independence, pursue further education or employment and establish healthy social relationships.

The absence of a father figure may limit emotional support, behavioural modelling and access to financial and social resources, which can negatively

affect academic performance, socialisation, self-confidence and self-actualisation. Research has shown that father absence is associated with attachment difficulties, poor emotional regulation, increased psychological distress and behavioural problems during adolescence and early adulthood (Luo et al., 2012). Young people without active father involvement are more vulnerable to stress, anxiety, depression, and difficulties in forming healthy interpersonal relationships. However, despite the high prevalence of father absence in South African townships, limited research has focused specifically on how adolescents in Phahameng experience father absence, and how they cope and build resilience during the transition into adulthood.

This indicates a gap in local, context-specific knowledge regarding the psychological and emotional impact of father absence among adolescents in township settings. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the psychological and emotional well-being of adolescents transitioning into adulthood in Phahameng township, with particular attention to their coping mechanisms and resilience in the absence of a father figure.

1.3.1 Psychological and Emotional Impact

Father absence has been linked to feelings of abandonment, low self-esteem, and emotional instability, all of which can hinder young adults' ability to navigate new life stages successfully. These individuals may also experience increased behavioral problems and reduced motivation, which can negatively affect their academic performance and career aspirations.

1.3.2 The Role of Resilience

Despite the challenges that come with father absence, resilience plays a crucial role in helping young adults cope with the adverse effects. Resilience, defined as the ability to recover from or adapt to adversity, can serve as a protective factor that helps individuals regulate their emotions and remain focused on their goals. Identifying and strengthening resilience factors may help mitigate the negative effects of father absence and improve personal outcomes.

1.3.3 Research Significance

Understanding the psychological and emotional experiences of recently matriculated individuals affected by father absence is essential. The insights gained from this study could contribute to developing better support systems and interventions to enhance their well-being and long-term success. By addressing these issues, the research aimed to provide valuable knowledge that can inform policies and programs aimed at supporting young adults in black communities.

1.4 Aim of the Study

The aim of this study was to explore the psychological and emotional role of father absence on recent matriculants in Phahameng, with a focus on resilience factors and the coping mechanisms they employ during their transition into adulthood. The study sought to identify how father absence influences the psychological and emotional behavior of these individuals, as well as exploring resilience factors behind those that make it, despite not having a present father in their lives, mechanisms through which resilience can mitigate the negative effects of this absence (Freeks, 2024). Having done so, the study aimed to provide valuable insights that can inform the development of targeted interventions and support programs to enhance young adults' psychological and emotional well-being.

1.5 Main Objectives

To understand how father absence influences the psychological and emotional well-being of recent matriculants in Phahameng, Bloemfontein, by exploring their lived experiences, resilience factors, and coping mechanisms.

1.5.1 Sub-Objectives:

1. To explore the specific emotional and psychological challenges faced by recent matriculants due to father absence.
2. To investigate the resilience factors that contribute to their ability to cope with father absence.

3. To analyze the different coping mechanisms recent matriculants use to manage emotional and psychological distress.

1.6 Research Questions

1. How do recent matriculants experience and describe the emotional and psychological impact of growing up without a father?
2. What resilience factors have helped them cope with the absence of theirs.
3. What coping mechanisms do they use to navigate the challenges of father absence?

1.7 Scope of the Study

This study focused on exploring the psychological and emotional experiences of a father's absence on recent matriculants in Phahameng, Bloemfontein. The study explored the lived experiences of recent matriculants in Phahameng who have grown up without their fathers. It focused on the psychological and emotional effects of this absence and examined the resilience factors and coping strategies that may mitigate these challenges.

This is a pivotal stage in every individual's educational journey, as it marks the transition from secondary to tertiary education or entry into the workforce (Lombard, 2020). This critical phase significantly influences the future academic, career and personal paths. The period following matriculation is characterized by significant life changes, including navigating varsity life, entering the workforce and developing independence. As such, it was essential to explore the experiences, resilience factors and coping mechanisms of recent matriculants, particularly those that grew up in a fatherless household.

Participation in this study was open to individuals who matriculated from 2022 to 2024, from the Phahameng community, in Bloemfontein, who have experienced father absence and are 18 years or older. The study delved into various resilience factors, including social support, positive self-esteem, adaptive coping skills, and the presence of supportive mentors or role models (Magqamfana &

Bazana, 2020). Data collection employed qualitative methods, using semi-structured interviews to capture participants' lived experiences and subjective meanings. The study is geographically confined to the Phahameng community, providing a culturally specific context to understand the various psychological and emotional challenges and resilience mechanisms faced and used by these individuals.

The findings from this study are intended for development of support programs in communities tailored to the needs of individuals experiencing a father's absence in their lives, with the goal to improve their psychological and emotional well being, which may result in a good and fruitful future for them and the community at large.

1.8 Relevance of the Study

1.8.1 Theoretical Relevance

This study contributed to the body of knowledge that already exists on the impacts of father absence on young adults by integrating insights from psychological and emotional distress and resilience theories. By exploring the psychological and emotional experiences of a father's absence on recent matriculants within the Phahameng community, in Bloemfontein, the study expanded understanding on how a father's absence influences mental health, as well as investigating the mechanisms through which resilience factors can buffer these negative effects, providing a broader understanding of the relationship between adversity and coping in the context of a father's absence.

1.8.2 Practical Relevance

By identifying the psychological and emotional experiences of father absence on recent matriculants, the study offered evidence-based insights that can guide the development of targeted community interventions. Educational authorities, school counselors, and community organizations can utilize this information to design and implement support systems that address the unique needs of young adults experiencing a father's absence. These programs can focus on enhancing

resilience factors such as social support networks, positive self-esteem, and access to mentors, ultimately aiming to improve academic and career outcomes as well as emotional and psychological well-being.

Additionally, the study's recommendations can inform policies aimed at fostering a supportive and inclusive educational environment for all individuals, regardless of their family structure. The main focus of the study was on the lived psychological and emotional experiences of father absence on recent matriculants, as well as resilience factors and coping mechanisms.

1.9 Theoretical Frameworks

This study employed Attachment Theory and Social Learning Theory to explore how recent matriculants experience father absence, develop coping strategies and build resilience.

1.9.1 Attachment Theory

Bowlby's Attachment Theory suggests that early bonding with a primary caregiver forms the basis for a person's internal working model, influencing emotional regulation, expectations of relationships and resilience (Bowlby, 1969). Within the context of this study, Attachment Theory helped explain how young adults growing up without fathers may experience disrupted attachment processes and, as a result, vulnerability in emotional development.

1.9.2 Social Learning Theory

Bandura's Social Learning Theory argues that individuals acquire behaviours through observation, imitation and modelling (Bandura, 1977). A central construct is self efficacy, meaning the belief in one's capacity to organise and execute the actions required to manage prospective situations (Bandura, 1977). Within this study, Social Learning Theory predicts how young adults without fathers may develop resilience and adaptive coping mechanisms by observing alternative role models, such as maternal figures, community mentors or peers, engaging in emotional regulation, perseverance and problem-solving behaviours.

It also underscores the role of the social environment, in providing models from which young adults learn coping strategies and resilience.

1.9.3 Application of Theories to This Study

Attachment Theory provides insight into how insecure or disrupted early attachments, may lead to emotional distress, identity confusion or difficulties in forming supportive relationships. Social Learning Theory illustrates how, despite such attachment disruptions, individuals may still acquire resilience and coping behaviors by observing and modeling alternative figures and strategies. This theoretical combination enabled an integrated understanding of how recent matriculants in township contexts navigate psychological and emotional challenges arising from father absence and concurrently build resilience and adaptive coping mechanisms.

SECTION TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction: Literature Review

This study delved into the literature surrounding the psychological and emotional experiences of father absence on recent matriculants within the Phahameng community. This section aimed to provide a comprehensive overview of existing research and theoretical perspectives that clarify the relationship between father absence, psychological and emotional well-being and resilience. It explored the multifaceted nature of psychological and emotional distress and resilience factors, examining how these elements interplay to influence the psychological and emotional experiences of recent matriculants in Phahameng. By critically analyzing recent studies and empirical data, this section sought to contextualize the psychological and emotional challenges faced by recent matriculants from father-absent households and highlight the significance of supportive mechanisms that can mitigate negative outcomes.

2.2 Literature Review

2.2.1 The Role of Fathers in Transitioning to Adulthood

Da Silva (2024) indicates that fathers contribute to their children's development by providing emotional stability, cognitive support, and encouragement for positive behavior, further show that an engagement that is active between a father and a child is essential for building self-esteem, emotional intelligence, and social competence. Da Silva (2024) further highlight that fathers provide not only psychological and emotional support but also discipline, motivation, and role modeling, all of which are critical for young people embarking on adulthood. These attributes are particularly significant during transitional milestones such as finishing high school, entering tertiary education, or joining the workforce.

Diniz et al. (2021) indicate that father engagement is linked with a range of positive developmental outcomes. Specifically, children in two parent households whose fathers are highly involved in school related activities tend to earn mostly distinctions, enjoy school more, and are less likely to repeat grades. This demonstrates that active paternal involvement positively influences academic performance, motivation, and educational consistency, highlighting the critical role fathers play in supporting their children's cognitive and emotional development. The landscape of father involvement reveals both similar patterns and unique challenges. Tataokhona Project (2024) states more children (40.3%) in the South Africa lived with men who are not their fathers than those who lived in the same households as their biological fathers, while only 35.6% of children in South Africa lived with their biological fathers in the same household.

These statistics emphasize the prevalence of social fathers, men who may step into care giving roles in place of absent biological fathers and highlight the need to recognize diverse forms of paternal involvement. Importantly, the report highlights that father absence in South Africa is not just about physical absence but also about the quality and meaningful nature of engagement.

Children's Bureau (2025) states in their findings that high levels of father involvement have an impact on the higher levels of sociability, confidence, and self control in children. Kids with involved fathers are less likely to act out or engage in risky adolescent behaviors. Fatherhood engagement impacts professional, career-based, and personal relationships. However, these and many other studies do not necessarily fit in the South African context. Bitalo et al. (2024) highlight that fatherhood in South Africa is shaped by historical, economic as well as cultural factors. Both apartheid and relocating for employment purposes disrupted family structures, often forcing fathers to focus on financially providing for their families rather than direct involvement with their children. Bitalo et al. (2024) furthermore emphasize that understanding fatherhood in South Africa requires considering these social

and historical and contexts rather than relying solely on conventional definitions of parental presence.

2.2.2 Psychological Well-being and Emotional Challenges

The absence of a father during this transition phase of life in an individual's life can have profound psychological and emotional consequences. Freeks (2022) stated that the effects of father absence stand in the way of children feeling and showing love, which adds on to the persistent behavioral problems. According to Da Silva (2024), fathers have an influence on their children beyond physical presence, it includes being emotionally involved and being an active part of day to day routines. Da Silva (2024) continues to elaborate in their findings that fathers play an important role in teaching problem solving skills, self discipline as well as emotional regulation through how they interact with their children. For young adults who have just completed their high school studies, these qualities are particularly important during high-pressure periods such as going into the work force and starting varsity life, when emotional regulation and stress management are critical.

Editor (2024) states that without the presence of a father, children, boy in particular are likely to become vulnerable to situations that are emotionally unstable and mental health challenges. Without both the presence of a father and support, they are most likely to experience higher stress levels, anxiety and depression, due to the lack of the emotional security as well as the guidance that a father's involvement typically give. Adding on to that, Culu (2025) also stated that children who grow up not having a present father that is positive more often than not, have difficulty building close bonds, which has a greater chance of having an impact on future relationships, friendships, and even romantic partnerships.

Culu (2025) continued to say in their findings that depression and anxiety are mostly found among people who had no present father as the lack of

guidance may result in children feeling lost and not supported. Bennett (2025) States that according to research, children with fathers that are emotionally are 2-3 times more likely to fall into depression when compared to those with involved fathers. This results from lack of emotional support, leading to feelings of loneliness, isolation, and disconnection.

Bennett (2025) found out in another study that one of the most significant effects of growing up without a father is that feelings of insecurity and low self-esteem develops. The study shows that in cases like this, children struggle to understand why their father is absent, which leads them to questioning themselves about their own worthiness of love and attention. This may result in them feeling inadequate or unlovable, making it challenging for them to form healthy relationships in the future (Bennett,2025). Simnikiwe et al. (2020) found out that individuals who were faced with father-absence from an early age are most likely to be exposed to adversarial factors later in life, such factors may include poorer intimate relationships and autonomy.

2.2.3 Resilience Factors and Protective Mechanisms

While father absence poses significant psychological and emotional challenges, many young adults demonstrate remarkable resilience in navigating these difficulties. Resilience is often shaped by a combination of individual, familial, and community-level factors. Louw (2018) suggested that the combination of grandparents, uncles, teachers and coaches are sufficient to provide the guidance and support that is needed by adolescents to aim them in forming a perception of family resilience. According to Daily Mom (2021), children who have a relationship with their grandparents and extended family happens to be happier and more emotionally regulated. The study states that children are in need of their grandparents and extended family not for simply saying they have “family”, but for the fact that this family offers necessary support, love and memorable moments.

According to Van Breda (2019), spirituality is certainly the source to resilience in South Africa, across all culture groups, South Africa is known to be a country that highly religious. Llistosella et al. (2023) stated that school is a key context to promote resilience. Kucukkaragoz (2025) emphasized that schools and community programs serve as critical interventions when it comes to supporting children that come from father absent households. His findings continued to show that educational institutions carry the potential to create inclusive environments that are specifically targeting social emotional learning and provide resources that facilitate child and family support.

2.2.4 Cultural and Socio-Economic Nuances in South Africa

Ramatsetse & Ross (2023) highlighted that father absence in South Africa cannot be understood without considering the broader socio-cultural and economic context. Historical factors, such as apartheid-era labor migration policies, have left a lasting legacy on family structures in black communities. The study stated that considering all those and the economic landscape of South Africa, all of which have contributed to a larger occurrence of father absence, addressing this issue still remains an important area of study (Ramatsetse & Ross, 2023). Freeks (2024)'s analysis show that, father absence is identified as a major and concerning that is bringing about socio-economic changes throughout Africa, with South Africa experiencing particularly pronounced impacts. Today, economic inequality and unemployment continue to disrupt family dynamics, often forcing fathers to work far from home or rendering them unable to fulfill traditional parental roles. Cultural attitudes toward fatherhood also play a significant role.

According to Managing the Social Risk of Father Absence in South Africa (2025), the nature of fatherhood in South African is in most cases framed around the role of financial provision rather than emotional or everyday caregiving. When fathers do not have the capacity to provide because of unemployment, they may pull back from the family unit. Managing the Social

Risk of Father Absence in South Africa (2025) emphasis that this pattern creates a cycle of father-absence that is deeply entangled with broader economic disadvantages..

2.2.5 Conclusion and Research Implications

This literature review highlights the complex interplay between father absence, psychological well-being, resilience, and educational outcomes in South African communities. While existing research provides valuable insights, significant gaps remain, particularly in understanding the lived experiences of young adults in specific contexts like Phahameng. By addressing these gaps, this study seeks to provide a deeper insight into the challenges and potential opportunities linked to father absence, with the goal of guiding the creation of targeted interventions that support resilience and enhance the well-being of recent matriculants.

2.3 OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF TERMS

2.3.1 Father Absence:

Father absence refers to the physical or emotional unavailability of a father figure in a child's life due to various reasons such as death, divorce, separation, incarceration, or abandonment (Bridge, 2019). In this study, father absence is operationalized as the lack of a father or father figure in the household during the child's upbringing.

2.3.2 Psychological experiences:

Psychological experiences encompasses a range of emotional and mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and stress, that negatively impact an individual's well-being. In this study, psychological experiences will be measured using standardized self report interviews to assess symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress among recently matriculated young adults.

2.3.3 Emotional experience:

Emotional experiences refer to a range of feelings and emotional responses that individuals go through when a father is not present in their lives. These can include emotions such as sadness, anger, abandonment, confusion, and longing (Brown, 1999). The absence of a father can lead to feelings of insecurity, low self-esteem, and a sense of loss, impacting a child's emotional development and psychological well-being (Brown, 2018).

2.3.4 Resilience Factors:

Coping mechanisms are understood as the specific ways in which recent matriculants from Phahameng, who have experienced father absence, deal with the emotional and psychological challenges associated with this absence. These may include seeking support from mothers, extended family members, peers, or mentors; engaging in religious or spiritual practices, relying on community networks, developing self-reliance, or in some cases, adopting maladaptive strategies such as withdrawal, aggression, or substance use (Erdem & Safi, 2018). For this study, coping mechanisms are therefore defined as the strategies, both adaptive and maladaptive, that young adults employ to navigate the psychological distress and socio emotional struggles that arise from growing up without a father.

2.3.5 Coping Mechanisms

The psychological, emotional, and behavioral strategies that individuals use to manage stress, adapt to challenges, and maintain well-being in response to the absence of a father figure (Fingerman & Bermann, 2000). These mechanisms help mitigate the negative effects of psychological distress and promote resilience.

2.3.5 Recent Matriculants:

Individuals who have recently completed their high school level and have received their senior certificates. (Department of Basic Education, 2022). This focused on recent matriculants within black communities in the Free State province.

2.4 CONCLUSION

This section provided a thorough look at the existing research on the psychological and emotional experiences of recent matriculants facing father absence in black communities in South Africa. The studies reviewed highlight the significant challenges that come with father absence, including higher levels of psychological and emotional distress (Yi & Nel, 2020). However, the literature also shows that resilience factors can help reduce these negative effects, suggesting ways to offer support and intervention. This detailed review lays the groundwork for the following sections, which will dive deeper into these themes using qualitative research methods. The goal is to enhance our understanding and support for recent matriculants affected by father absence.

SECTION THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction: Research Methodology

The section outlined the research design, approach, and methods employed to explore the psychological and emotional experiences of father absence among recent matriculants in Phahameng, Bloemfontein. This study adopted a qualitative research approach, which is particularly suited for understanding the subjective and lived experiences of individuals in their social contexts.

By employing a phenomenological research design, the study aimed to delve deeply into the meanings and interpretations that participants attach to their experiences of father absence. Data collection methods employed semi-structured interviews to allow participants to narrate their experiences, as well as thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes within the data. This approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being explored.

3.2 Research Setting- Phahameng, Bloemfontein:

Phahameng is a township located in Bloemfontein, the capital city of the Free State province in South Africa. Established in 1956 as part of apartheid policies, it was designed for Sotho-speaking communities and separated from other residential areas by physical buffers, such as roads and railway lines, to enforce racial segregation (South African Historical Online, 2011).

Phahameng forms part of the Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality and is situated to the east of Bloemfontein's central business district. Over the years, the area has developed a vibrant social and cultural identity despite socio-economic challenges stemming from its historical context. The legacy of apartheid has left Phahameng with economic disparities, high

unemployment rates, and limited access to quality education and healthcare (South African Cities Network, 2022)

These factors influence family structures and have contributed to the prevalence of father absence in the community. In Bloemfontein, studies highlight that up to 81% of fathers were absent at the time of their child's birth, with employment-related migration cited as a leading factor (South African Cities Network, 2022). This trend is reflective of broader national challenges concerning father absence in South Africa.

Phahameng was a suitable setting for this study due to its socio-economic and historical context, which provides a unique lens through which to explore the psychological and emotional impacts of father absence. By focusing on recent matriculants, this study contributed to understanding how young adults in underprivileged communities navigate the challenges of transitioning into adulthood without paternal support.

3.3 Research Paradigm

This study adopted the interpretivism paradigm to explore the psychological and emotional experiences of father absence among recent matriculants in Phahameng, Bloemfontein. Interpretivism, which posits that reality is subjective and socially constructed, provided a framework for understanding participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attribute to those experiences (Nickerson, 2024). This paradigm emphasized the importance of contextualizing participants' perspectives within their unique social and cultural environments, making it highly suitable for the goals of this research. The interpretivism paradigm was appropriate because it focuses on understanding complex and subjective phenomena, such as the emotional and psychological experiences of father absence (Nickerson, 2024).

Given that father absence affects individuals in unique ways depending on their personal, cultural, and societal contexts, this paradigm enabled the

study to uncover the nuanced ways in which recent matriculants in Phahameng experience and make sense of these challenges (Nel, 2019). It also helped achieve the goal of exploring the emotional depth and diversity of participants' experiences, aligning with the study's focus on understanding psychological distress, resilience, and coping strategies. This paradigm complemented the qualitative approach of the study, which used semi-structured interviews. The method fit well with interpretivism, as it gave participants the freedom to express their experiences in their own words, allowing the researcher to uncover the personal meanings within their stories (Nel, 2019).

By interpreting these stories through the lens of the participants' social and cultural realities, this study produced a rich, holistic understanding of the emotional and psychological experiences of father absence. Additionally, the interpretivism paradigm considered the influence of social and cultural contexts on human experiences (Nel, 2019). Since this study focused on recent matriculants in Phahameng, Bloemfontein, a community with a unique socio-economic and cultural dynamics, interpretivism enabled the study to situate participants' experiences within their broader environment (Nel, 2019). This contextual focus enhanced the study's ability to provide relevant and meaningful insights about how father absence shapes the lives of matriculants in this specific community.

Finally, interpretivism was instrumental in exploring the constructs of psychological and emotional distress, resilience factors and coping mechanisms, which are central to this study. These constructs are complex and multifaceted, requiring an approach that goes beyond objective measurements to understand how individuals perceive, experience, and through navigate them (Nel, 2019). The interpretivism paradigm facilitated a deeper exploration of how matriculants in Phahameng cope with the emotional challenges of father absence while

building resilience, thereby contributing to a comprehensive understanding of these phenomena (Nel, 2019).

3.4 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design, which is ideal for exploring the lived experiences and subjective meanings associated with father absence among recent matriculants in Phahameng. Qualitative research focuses on understanding participants' perspectives within their natural context (Nwabuko et al., 2024). By employing this approach, the study aimed to gather rich, detailed narratives that reflected the emotional and psychological impacts of father absence. The research design is informed by a phenomenological approach, which is particularly suitable for examining the essence of individuals' lived experiences (Rahi, 2017). This approach sought to uncover how recent matriculants interpret and make sense of their experiences without a father figure in their lives, providing insights into their emotional and psychological responses.

3.5 Data Collection Method

Data collection is a critical component of any research study, as it involves gathering the necessary information to answer research questions and achieve the study's objectives. In qualitative research, data collection methods are designed to capture rich, detailed, and nuanced insights into participants' lived experiences, making them especially suitable for exploring complex social phenomena (Bhattacharje, 2012). For this study, which explored the psychological and emotional experiences of father absence among recent matriculants in Phahameng, Bloemfontein, semi-interviews have been selected as the most appropriate data collection method.

This approach allowed the study to delve deeply into participants' personal narratives, providing a platform for them to express their emotions, thoughts, and experiences in their own words (Rahi, 2017). By fostering a

conversational and flexible structure, semi-structured interviews can uncover the subtle and subjective dimensions of how father absence influences the lives of these individuals, aligning with the study's phenomenological foundation. Additionally, this method offered the opportunity to establish connection with participants, facilitating a safe space for open and honest communication, which was essential for collecting authentic and meaningful data.

3.5.1 Semi-structured interviews

This study used semi-structured interviews as the main method of data collection to explore the psychological and emotional experiences of father absence among recent matriculants in Phahameng, Bloemfontein. Semi-structured interviews are well-suited for qualitative research because they enable an in-depth understanding of participants' personal stories, emotions, and perspectives in their own words (Gill et al.,2008). This method aligned with the study's goal of capturing the lived experiences of young people navigating the transition from secondary school to university or the workforce while coping with father absence.

The interviews featured open-ended questions designed to guide the conversation while allowing participants the flexibility to share their experiences freely. This structure ensured that critical areas of inquiry are covered while also accommodating the uniqueness of each participant's story (Gill et al.,2008).

All interviews were conducted online via zoom and the interviewer was in a private and neutral setting to promote a safe and comfortable environment for the participant online, ensuring that they felt at ease to express themselves. Each interview was approximately 45-60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' informed consent. The audio recordings were later transcribed verbatim to facilitate accurate data

analysis. The interviewer used active listening, non judgmental communication, and culturally sensitive approaches to build connection and encourage openness. This method ensured that the collected data was authentic and reflective of participants' lived realities.

3.5.2 Justification for Using Zoom for Data Collection

The use of Zoom as a data collection tool in qualitative research has gained recognition due to its accessibility, convenience, and ability to facilitate in-depth discussions. One of the main reasons for selecting Zoom in this study is its accessibility, as it allows participants to take part from any location. Recent matriculants may have academic or work commitments that make face-to-face interviews difficult; therefore, Zoom provides flexibility that accommodates their schedules (Archibald et al., 2019). In addition, father absence is a sensitive topic, and a virtual setting allows participants to share their experiences from a familiar and comfortable environment, which may encourage openness and honesty (Archibald et al., 2019).

Zoom is also cost-effective, as it eliminates travel and venue costs, making it an efficient method of data collection (Archibald et al., 2019). The platform's recording and transcription features enhance data accuracy and support rigorous thematic analysis by reducing the risk of data loss or misinterpretation (Archibald et al., 2019). Furthermore, the use of Zoom aligns with current ethical and practical research approaches, especially in contexts where remote data collection is necessary. Given the sensitive nature of father absence, the possibility of emotional distress or emotional abreaction was carefully considered. To manage this risk in a remote setting, participants were informed during the consent process that they could pause, skip questions or withdraw from the interview at any time without penalty.

The researcher remained attentive to signs of emotional distress during interviews and was prepared to stop the interview if a participant became overwhelmed. To ensure participant support after the interview, participants were provided with a list of local counseling and mental health support services available in Bloemfontein and the Free State. Where necessary, participants were encouraged to seek professional support following the interview. A short debriefing session was conducted after each interview to help participants emotionally regulate before ending the session. These measures ensured that participants were not left distressed after remote data collection.

While remote interviews present ethical and technological challenges, including connectivity issues and confidentiality concerns, appropriate safeguards were implemented. Participants were advised to join interviews from private spaces, and all recordings were securely stored and deleted after transcription. Overall, with these ethical precautions in place, Zoom was considered an appropriate, safe and effective method for collecting qualitative data on a sensitive topic.

3.5.3 Participants

The participants for this study included recent matriculants, who completed their high school from the year 2022 to 2024 residing in Phahameng, Bloemfontein, who have experienced father absence during their adolescent years. These participants represented a population likely to provide insights into the psychological and emotional impacts of father absence during a critical life stage.

3.5.3.1 Inclusion Criteria:

Recent matriculant (completed grade 12 within the last three years).

18 years and above

Experienced father absence (defined as the lack of an active father figure or minimal contact during adolescence).

Residing in Phahameng, Bloemfontein.

Willing to provide consent to participate in the study conducted in English.

Have access to Zoom and the internet

3.5.3.2 Exclusion Criteria:

Those unable or unwilling to provide consent.

Those who could communicate effectively with English

Those who have not matriculated

Those with a father figure in their lives

3.5.4 Justification for selecting recent matriculants as participants:

3.5.4.1 Transitional Life Phase

Recent matriculants are at a critical transitional life phase, navigating the challenges of adolescence to young adulthood (Arnett et al., 2020). This period is characterized by significant physical, emotional, and psychological changes (Arnett et al., 2020). Father absence during this phase can exacerbate the already existing vulnerabilities, making this group particularly sensitive to the psychological and emotional impacts of father absence.

3.5.4.2 Proximity to Father Absence Experience

Recent matriculants have recently completed their secondary education, a critical period during which the absence of a father figure can significantly impact their emotional and psychological well-being. By studying this group, the study was able to have an insight of their recent experiences

and emotions, providing richer, more nuanced insights into the impacts of father absence.

3.5.4.3 Developmental Relevance

The experiences and challenges faced by recent matriculants can inform strategies for supporting adolescents and young adults navigating similar circumstances (Masten, 2025). By examining the resilience factors and coping mechanisms employed by this group, the study can contribute to the development of targeted interventions and support systems.

3.5.4.4 Empirical Gap

Existing research on father absence has primarily focused on younger children or older adults. Recent matriculants, as a distinct group, have received relatively less attention. This study aimed to address this empirical gap by exploring the unique experiences and challenges faced by this demographic.

3.5.5 Verifying Father Absence Among Participants

Ensuring that participants in this study have genuinely experienced father absence was essential for maintaining the credibility and reliability of the findings. One method of verification which was involved were screening questions during participant recruitment. Prospective participants were asked direct questions such as, "Have you grown up without a father or a consistent father figure?" or "Who has been your primary caregiver?" These questions served as an initial filter to confirm eligibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, a demographic questionnaire at the start of the study collected background information regarding household structure, further supporting the verification process.

Moreover, narrative verification was utilized during interviews. Participants' lived experiences were explored for consistency in describing their

upbringing and interactions within a father absent household. Qualitative research often relies on rich, detailed narratives to establish the authenticity of experiences, and inconsistencies in responses indicated potential inaccuracies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By implementing these verification methods, this study ensured that the selected participants genuinely fit the study criteria, thereby enhanced the validity of the research findings.

3.5.6 Sample Size and Justification:

The study included ten participants. This sample size was appropriate for a qualitative study with an in-depth exploration of lived experiences, as it allowed for rich, detailed data collection while maintaining manageability (Guest et al., 2006). Fewer participants were sufficient when the focus is on understanding specific phenomena, and data saturation can often be achieved with eight to ten interviews in studies involving narrow research questions (Guest et al., 2006).

3.5.7 Sampling Strategy:

The study employed a purposive sampling strategy in order to select participants who met the study's inclusion criteria. The use of this approach helped ensure that only individuals with relevant experiences of father absence and have matriculated were included, enhancing the depth and relevance of the findings (Palinkas et al., 2015).

In addition, snowball sampling was utilized to recruit people to participate through referrals. This strategy was particularly effective in accessing the populations that is hard to reach, such as young adults who may have not been easily identified through formal recruitment channels (Etikan et al., 2016).

3.5.8 Recruitment Process:

This study employed a combination social media outreach and snowball sampling to engage participants (Baltar & Brunet, 2012). Social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook were used to share information about the study and invite eligible individuals to participate, as these platforms are widely accessible and commonly used within the targeted community (Baltar & Brunet, 2012).

In addition to online outreach, direct word-of-mouth recruitment was applied to ensure personal engagement and trust-building with potential participants. This method allowed the researcher to explain the study in person, clarify any questions, and foster a sense of comfort and openness prior to participation.

To further strengthen recruitment, a snowball sampling strategy was utilized (Baltar & Brunet, 2012). This approach involved initial participants referring other potential participants who met the study's inclusion criteria. By leveraging personal networks, this method increased the likelihood of reaching individuals who might not have otherwise been identified, thereby improving participant diversity and engagement (Baltar & Brunet, 2012).

3.6 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted for data analysis, specifically employing an inductive approach to identify and analyze patterns and themes within the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2017). This approach allowed for the exploration of participants' experiences without preconceived notions, focusing on the meanings they ascribe to father absence (Braun & Clarke, 2017). Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases, which are designed to ensure a systematic and rigorous analysis of the data:

1. Familiarization with the Data: The interviewer began by transcribing the interviews verbatim and immersing themselves in the data through

repeated readings. This step was crucial for gaining a comprehensive understanding of the participants' perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

2. Generating Initial Codes: Significant phrases and concepts were identified, and initial codes were created. These codes captured key features of the data that were relevant to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2017).

3. Searching for Themes: The initial codes were grouped into broader themes that encapsulate the essence of the participants' experiences. This step involved considering how different codes may combine to form overarching themes (Braun & Clarke, 2017).

4. Reviewing themes: The developed themes were carefully examined and adjusted to ensure they truly represented the data. This process included checking how well each theme aligned with the coded extracts and the overall dataset to maintain clarity and consistency (Braun & Clarke, 2017).

5. Definition and Naming of Themes: Each theme was clearly defined, articulating what each theme represents in relation to the research questions. This step ensured that the themes are not only descriptive but also provide insight into the participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2017).

6. Producing the Report: The final analysis was compiled into a narrative that integrates the themes and supported them with direct quotes from participants, illustrating their lived experiences and the emotional impact of father absence (Braun & Clarke, 2017).

By following these phases, the thematic analysis provided a robust framework for understanding the psychological and emotional experiences of recent matriculants in Phahameng, Bloemfontein in, regarding father absence. The inductive approach used in this analysis allowed themes to

naturally develop from the data, making sure the results reflected the participants' own perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2017).

3.7 TRUSTWORTHINESS AND RIGOR

To enhance the trustworthiness and rigor of the study, several strategies will be implemented, focusing on the key criteria of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability:

1. Credibility: To ensure the accuracy and credibility of findings, the interviewer engaged in checking of members by sharing preliminary findings with participants. This process allowed participants to verify the interpretations and provide feedback, ensuring that their perspectives are accurately represented. Additionally, the researcher actively sought peer debriefing by discussing the research process and findings with supervisors and colleagues, gaining insights that enhanced the study's validity (Shenton, 2004).

2. Dependability: To establish dependability, an audit trail was maintained throughout the research process. This included documenting all decisions made during the study, from participant selection to data analysis. Regular check-ins with supervisors was also conducted to review the research process and ensure adherence to the proposed methodology, which allowed for adjustments as necessary (Shenton, 2004).

3. Transferability: Thick descriptions of the research context, participants, and findings were provided to facilitate transferability. By offering detailed accounts of the socio-cultural environment and the specific experiences of participants, readers can assess the applicability of the findings to other similar contexts. This comprehensive contextualization helped in understanding the nuances of the research setting (Shenton, 2004)

4. Confirmability: To enhance confirmability, the researcher reflected on their own biases and values throughout the study. This reflexivity was

documented to acknowledge how the researcher's perspectives may have influenced the research process and interpretations. Engaging in regular self-reflection helped mitigate biases and ensure that the findings were grounded in the data rather than the researcher's preconceptions (Shenton, 2004)

By systematically addressing these aspects of trustworthiness and rigor, the study aimed to provide a credible and reliable exploration of the psychological and emotional experiences of father absence among recently matriculated individuals in Phahameng.

3.8 Ethical Consideration

The study adhered to ethical research principles to ensure the safety, dignity, and well-being of participants. The following measures will be implemented:

3.8.1 Voluntary Participation

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Participants were informed of their right to choose whether or not to participate without any coercion. They were provided with a detailed informed consent form outlining the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights (Israel, 2006).

3.8.2 Right to Withdraw

Participants were made aware that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any point, without providing a reason, and that doing so will not result in any penalties or negative consequences. This ensured that their autonomy is respected throughout the research process (Israel, 2006).

3.8.3 Emotional Support and Well-Being

Given the sensitive nature of the study, addressing psychological and emotional impacts of father absence, provisions were made to support participants who may experience distress, the support included:

3.8.3.1 Identification of the need for support

The interviewer was mindful and observant on signs of emotional distress such as crying, agitation, or difficulty focusing. In cases like these, the participants were acknowledged and immediate reassurance was provided.

3.8.3.2 Immediate Support:

When emotional distress arose during interviews, the interviewer paused the session and offered empathy and reassurance. Participants were given the option to take a break or discontinue the interview if needed (SADAG, 2024).

5.8.3.3 Referral Options:

Professional Counseling or Therapy: Participants were recommended licensed psychologists and counselors, with contact information provided for free, those available at local hospitals or community centers, community hospitals for free counseling and therapy services.

Helplines and Crisis Support: Details for 24/7 helplines, such as the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG), were provided (Super User, 2023) for participants who felt the need to seek therapeutic help virtually, because some people do not feel free expressing themselves face to face, they are more confident over the phone.

Community Resources: Support groups relevant to grief, trauma recovery, and mental health were also suggested for participants who needed continuous societal support.

Spiritual Support: Where appropriate, participants were referred to trusted faith leaders for pastoral counseling and spiritual support, depending on their preferences.

Follow-Up: Follow-ups were conducted and still to ensure participants accessed the necessary help. Confidentiality is maintained, and participants' autonomy was respected (Super User, 2023).

3.8.4 Confidentiality and Anonymity

The privacy and confidentiality of all participants was protected: -

3.8.4.1 Anonymity: Participants' personal information was not be linked to their data. Pseudonyms and codes were used to protect identities in all reports and publications. Their real names were not used for safety purposes.

3.8.4.2 Confidentiality: All data collected is securely stored in password-protected digital files, accessible only to the researcher and supervisors.

3.8.4.3 Data Disposal: Upon completion of the study, data will be securely destroyed in accordance with ethical guidelines (Israel, 2006).

3.8.5 Informed Consent

Participants were required to sign a detailed informed consent form before participating in the study. The form included information on the purpose and objectives of the study, the procedures involved in data collection, potential risks and benefits and lastly, their rights, including the right to withdraw and to confidentiality (Israel, 2006).

3.8.6 Ethical Approval

Ethical clearance was obtained from the IIE MSA Research Ethics committee before commencing the study. All research activities complied with the standards and guidelines set by the institution.

3.8.7 Limitations and Justifications

3.8.7.1 Small Sample Size: The study included ten participants, which limited the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. This limitation was justified because qualitative research prioritizes depth over breadth, aiming to capture detailed and nuanced personal experiences rather than general trends (Vasileiou et al.,2018)

3.8.7.2 Subjectivity of Qualitative Data: The study relied on participants' subjective accounts, which might introduce personal biases or variations in the data. However, this limitation is inherent to qualitative research, and steps such as thematic analysis and peer debriefing were used to enhance credibility and reliability (Braun & Clarke, 2019)

3.8.7.3 Homogeneity in Sampling: The use of purposive and snowball sampling methods resulted homogeneous participant group, potentially excluding individuals with diverse experiences of father absence. This limitation was justified as the study targeted participants with specific and shared characteristics relevant to the research question.

3.8.7.4 Social Desirability Bias: Participants might have altered their responses to present themselves in a favorable light, particularly on sensitive issues like father absence. To mitigate this, the study ensured a confidential and non judgmental interview environment to encourage honest and open responses.

3.8.7.5 Time and Resource Constraints: Conducting semi-structured interviews and analyzing data for ten participants is time- ntensive. This limitation was justified as the study's qualitative nature required a smaller sample size to ensure a thorough exploration of individual experiences.

3.9 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this section has detailed the research methodology which was designed to explore the psychological and emotional experiences of father absence on recent matriculants in Phahameng, Bloemfontein, with a focus on resilience factors and coping mechanisms as well. By employing a qualitative approach, the study aimed to capture the lived experiences of the participants (Verity et al., 2024). The outlined methods of data collection, sampling, and analysis ensured a rigorous and ethical investigation.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presented the study's major themes, which are merged into three distinct parts: Findings, Analysis, and Discussion. This structure allowed for a systematic and clear account of the research, beginning with a detailed presentation of participants' lived experiences, followed by critical interpretation, and finally, an integration of these findings with existing scholarly literature. By following this approach, the chapter not only highlighted the lived experiences of these young adults but also allowed for an overview of their voices within the broader academic and social context of father absence.

This chapter furthermore sought to unpack the resilience factors and coping mechanisms that participants employed to navigate the psychological and emotional challenges they experience as a result of father absence in their lives. This double focus was important, as it balanced an understanding of psychological and emotional distress while also recognizing the strength, adaptability, and agency demonstrated by participants in the process.

This section presented the direct quotes of participants as directly as possible, highlighting the key themes that emerged from the interviews. Five themes were drawn from repeated patterns in their responses and supported with illustrative quotations. The section moved beyond description, providing a deeper interpretation of what these themes mean in relation to the study's objectives and research questions.

By structuring the chapter in this way, the study ensured that participants' lived experiences remained central while also demonstrating academic rigor through analysis and theoretical engagement. This approach also reinforced the qualitative research aim of giving voice to underrepresented groups. In this case, which was young adults navigating father absence in underprivileged communities. Ultimately, the chapter provided not only a descriptive account of the participants' challenges but also a critical understanding of how resilience

and coping strategies operate within contexts of absence, struggle, and identity formation.

The study successfully addressed its aim through the following key objectives:

1. To explore how recent matriculants experience and describe the emotional and psychological impact of growing up without a father.
2. To examine the resilience factors that have helped recent matriculants cope with father absence.
3. To investigate the coping mechanisms used by recent matriculants to navigate the challenges associated with father absence.

Table 4.1 showcased the demographic profiles of the study's participants. From the analysis of the data collected, several key themes and sub-themes emerged, offering deeper insights into the lived realities, resilience, and coping strategies of recent matriculants affected by father absence

4.2 DEMOGRAPHIC OF PARTICIPANTS

The study involved ten participants of which all of them have recently completed their matric and have grown up without their fathers.

TABLE 4.1

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Matriculation Year	Current status	Household composition
LM	19	Female	2024	Gap year	Lives with mother only
RS	21	Female	2021	Retail employed	Lives with uncle and mother
TT	22	Male	2021	Upgrading	Lives with

				marks	mother and siblings
MN	19	Female	2023	Employed	Lives with grandmother and uncle
KR	18	Male	2024	Gap year	Lives aunt and siblings
TR	22	Male	2021	Self employed	Lives with mother and uncle
PN	22	Female	2021	Second time applying to get into University	Lives with mother and grandparents
TM	19	Male	2024	Gap year	Lives with mother and siblings
PM	18	Male	2024	Gap year	Lives with mother and younger sister
KT	18	Male	2024	Gap year	Lives with mother and grandmother

The participants of this study were between the ages of 18 to 22 years old. Five participants were males while the other five were females. All participants communicated in English and were sourced from social media outreach and snowball sampling. They were all from Phahameng location. All participants indicated that they grew up in a father absent household.

4.3 PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The data collected from recent matriculants who grew up without their fathers with the use of semi-structured interviews, was analyzed and classified into major themes as well as sub-themes. Psychological and emotional impact of father absence, resilience and adaptive coping mechanisms, supportive systems and protective networks, interpersonal trust and relationship building and identity models are the five major themes that emerged during the data analysis. Discussion and presentation were made based on the findings as supported by the excerpts from the transcribed data collected from the recent matriculants who navigated through life without their fathers. Relevant literature and theoretical framework underpinning this study were used to support and/or contradict the emerged themes and the study's findings. Table 4.2 presents the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data collected.

TABLE 4.2 THEMES AND SUB-THEMES

THEME 1: Psychological and emotional impact of father absence	Sub-theme 1.1: Emotional void and grief Sub-theme 1.2: Psychological depth of loss
THEME 2: Resilience and coping mechanisms	Sub-theme 2.1: Emergence of self-efficiency Sub-theme 2.3: Adaptive resilience
THEME 3: Support	Sub-theme 3.1: Role of caregivers and extended family

systems and protective network	Sub-theme 3.2: Community and peer support
THEME 4: Interpersonal trust and relationship building	Sub-theme 4.1: Fragile interpersonal trust Sub-theme 4.2: Difficulty forming bonds

4.3.1 Theme 1 Psychological and emotional impact of father absence

The psychological and emotional consequences of father absence emerged as a dominant theme in this study. Participants consistently described how growing up without their fathers left them feeling abandoned, emotionally unsupported, and vulnerable. These findings are consistent with existing literature, which demonstrates that father absence is strongly linked to emotional distress, low self-esteem, and a sense of rejection among adolescents and young adults (Zharima et al., 2025).

4.3.1.1 Sub-theme 1.1 Emotional void and grief

Emotional void refers to the profound sense of emptiness or lack of fulfillment that one experiences when a central parental figure is missing (Dannels, 2018). This void is not merely about the physical absence of the father, but about the loss of emotional security, guidance, and affirmation that fathers are often expected to provide. The absence leaves many with a lingering gap in their identity and belonging, which can affect how they perceive themselves and their relationships with others.

The absence of a father leaves a persistent gap in a person's sense of self, belonging and identity. Over time, it evolves into a kind of ongoing grief, not for a death, but for the loss of paternal presence and support, an unclear mourning that resurfaces at key life moments and intensified feelings of abandonment, rejection, anxiety and low self-esteem (Ramatsetse & Ross, 2022). Early but not

middle childhood father absence was strongly associated with increased odds of offspring depression and greater depressive symptoms at age 24 years. Early childhood father absence was associated with higher trajectories of depressive symptoms during adolescence and early adulthood compared. In this way, emotional void and grief represent the dual dimensions of father absence, the inner emptiness caused by the loss of a key relationship, and the unresolved mourning that follows due to the lack of paternal presence and connection.

“Sometimes I feel like there is this empty space inside me that I can’t explain. Growing up without my father, it’s like something important was taken away before I even had the chance to know what it felt like. I see my friends talking about their fathers teaching them things or supporting them in difficult times, and I can’t relate. That emptiness makes me question myself, like maybe I’m missing a piece of who I am, and no matter what I do, I cannot fill that gap.” (KT).

“I’ve always felt like I’m walking around with a hole in my chest. My mom did everything she could, but the absence of my father left a void that no one could fill. It made me doubt myself, especially in relationships, because I keep wondering if people will also leave me behind. It’s not just sadness, it’s this ongoing sense of loss that never ends.” (PM).

“What makes the pain worse is when I see other people’s fathers at school events, graduations, or even just spending time with their sons. I pretend I’m okay, but inside I feel this deep grief because I’ll never know what that bond feels like. It’s a constant reminder of what I didn’t have, and that emptiness keeps following me into adulthood. Even now, it affects how I see myself and how I trust others.” (TM).

These statements reflect a deep emotional void and identity struggles created by father absence. The participant equates the absence with something being taken away, which underscores the perception that paternal presence is not only desirable but important to the development of a whole sense of self. The inability to relate to peers who share experiences of paternal guidance reinforces the

social comparison process, which can worsen feelings of inadequacy and alienation. In developmental psychology, identity formation is strongly tied to attachment relationships and the availability of role models, with fathers often providing important guidance for self concept development, gender role identity as well as resilience during adolescence (Stern et al., 2024). Without this anchor, participants describe a persistent emptiness in their sense of self and belonging, supporting findings from Ramatsetse and Ross (2023), who argue that father absence is frequently internalized as a symbolic loss and is experienced as a wound to identity (Ramatsetse & Ross, 2023).

This type of grief is particularly difficult to resolve because the absence is continuous rather than closed, and it often resurfaces at life transitions, prolonging psychological distress (Zharima et al., 2025). Existing research also highlights that children from father-absent households are at higher risk for persistent emotional difficulties, and may struggle to construct a coherent identity and stable interpersonal relationships as they move through adolescence into young adulthood (Culpin et al., 2022).

This findings not only illustrates the profound personal impact of father absence but also situates it within broader psychological frameworks of identity, belonging and loss. The participants' narrative demonstrate how father absence operates as both an internal struggle and a social disadvantage, reinforcing prior findings that unresolved paternal absence often perpetuates cycles of emotional distress and identity confusion in young adults.

“The hardest part is not just that my father wasn’t there, but that he was alive and just chose not to be around. That makes the pain worse because it feels like rejection. I carry that grief with me, like mourning someone who is still here but doesn’t want to be part of my life. Every birthday or big achievement feels incomplete because a part of me still hopes he would show up, and when he doesn’t, I grieve all over again.” (PN).

“When I think about grief, I used to think it only applied to losing someone through death. But with my father, it’s like I’m grieving every single day

because he is alive but chooses not to be here. That makes it confusing, because I can't get closure. It's a pain that lingers, especially when I face challenges where I desperately wish he was there to guide me. It makes me angry sometimes, but mostly, it leaves me feeling abandoned.” (KT).

The participants' responses highlight the profound emotional impact of father absence, particularly when the father is physically alive but emotionally unavailable. Their responses show a persistent sense of emptiness resulting from the lack of paternal guidance and affirmation and ambiguous loss. (Boss & Yeats). Such ongoing grief have a way of showing up during moments of life milestones, resulting in feelings of rejection and undermining self-worth, this resonates with another study which was highlighted earlier, where young men report identity disruption, emotional pain and a persistent sense of loss in father-absent households (Zharima et al., 2025).

This findings demonstrate that father absence, particularly when the father is alive but disengaged, creates both an immediate and lasting impact on emotional well-being, identity formation and relational expectations, reinforcing the importance of understanding father absence within the framework of developmental and attachment theory.

“For me, the grief is like a shadow. It's always there, even when I try to ignore it. When I achieve something big, there's always this voice in my head saying, 'If only your father was here to see this.' That thought takes away from the joy I should feel. It makes me feel incomplete, like I'm carrying an invisible wound. It's not something that just goes away it's something I've learned to live with, but it still hurts deeply.” (MN)

The participant's statement reflects how paternal absence not only diminishes the joy of success but turns achievements into bittersweet reminders. This experience corresponds with a concept that was mentioned earlier of ambiguous loss, in which the parent is alive but emotionally or physically absent, preventing closure and forging a chronic form of grief (Boss & Yeats, 2014). In such cases the mourning is neither socially acknowledged nor temporally bounded, but

instead it lingers, resurfacing during significant milestones and thereby muting what should be celebrations. Thus, the grief described is not only about the absence of a person but the absence of the relational and symbolic roles that father presence would have fulfilled. Over time, this absence accrues quietly, like a shadow and during the moments that should be important the participant experiences instead the echo of what was never there, reinforcing the persistent sense of fault, incompleteness and emotional deprivation.

Sub-theme 4.3.1.2: Psychological depth of loss

While the emotional void and grief highlighted earlier capture the immediate sense of emptiness and longing experienced by participants, a deeper layer of psychological pain emerges when examining how this absence is internalized over time. The participants' narratives reveal not only sadness and longing but also profound struggles with self-worth, identity formation, and emotional stability. Unlike transient grief, which may ease with time, the loss associated with father absence often takes on a psychological depth that shapes how individuals view themselves and their relationships with others (Flouri, E., & Buchanan, 2002). In this sub-theme, the participants highlight how father absence penetrates deeply into the psyche, resulting to chronic feelings of rejection, increased vulnerability to distress and long lasting wounds that influence both intrapersonal and interpersonal functioning (Bowlby, 1980).

“The hardest part for me is how much his absence has affected my confidence. I constantly doubt myself, even when I’m doing well. I keep thinking, ‘Would my father be proud of me, or would he still think I’m not good enough?’ That doubt follows me everywhere, into my relationships, my studies, even at work. It’s exhausting because it feels like I’m fighting an invisible battle inside my head every single day.” (LM)

“There are moments when I feel anger towards him, but then that anger turns inward. I start blaming myself, asking if I did something to push him away, even though I was just a child. That kind of thinking has left me with

a lot of unresolved guilt. It's not just sadness, it's a constant questioning of my own worth and my place in this world.” (KR).

The participants describe how the absence of paternal affirmation and support has left them wrestling with chronic self doubt, unresolved guilt and a fractured sense of identity. Both responses reveal how father absence penetrates deeply into the psychological world of young adults, shaping their self perceptions and emotional well being in profound ways. LM reflects on the persistent questioning of whether his father would have been proud of him, illustrating how the lack of paternal validation undermines self confidence even in moments of success. Similarly, KR demonstrates how emotions of anger toward the absent father are often redirected inward, resulting in misplaced guilt and a lingering sense of personal inadequacy.

What connects both is the way father absence is internalized, not merely experienced as a relational loss, but as evidence of personal failure or unworthiness. This aligns with what Hoeve et al. (2009) say about the relationship between parenting and behavioral issues, highlighting how certain patterns of parental absence or inconsistent involvement can contribute to difficulties in young people's emotional and behavioral development.

Nasution et al. (2023) also found that when fathers are absent in families, children can feel emotionally unsupported and struggle with school and friendships. This shows that father absence can have long term effects on a child's self-esteem, emotions, and social life. Attachment theory also provides a lens to understand these statements, as the absence of a secure paternal bond disrupts the internalization of positive self worth and destroys the capacity to form trusting, stable relationships later in life (Bowlby, 1980).

This findings reveal that the psychological depth of father absence is not expressed only as sadness or grief but as a persistent erosion of self esteem and identity. These struggles show that paternal absence is experienced as a wound that continues to shape one's live long after childhood, manifesting in internal

battles with self doubt, unresolved guilt and difficulties in affirming their own value in personal, social and professional domains.

“People often think you get over it as you grow older, but I feel the opposite. The older I get, the more I feel the loss. As a child, I thought maybe he was just busy or he’d come back one day, but as an adult, I realize he made a choice not to be there. That realization cuts deeper because it makes the rejection feel deliberate, and that’s a wound that never really heals.” (RS)

This participant emphasizes how the pain of father absence does not disappear with age, but rather gets worse as understanding deepens. As a child, the participant coped with the absence by rationalizing it, believing his father might return or that the absence was temporary. However, as he matured, the recognition that his father intentionally chose not to be present transformed the experience into one of the most profound rejection. Moila (2023) explains that this shift underscores the psychological depth of father absence, what begins as confusion in childhood often evolves into a deeply internalized sense of abandonment in adulthood.

Furthermore, research have shown that the perception of being deliberately abandoned can have lasting consequences on self-worth (Lereya et al., 2013). This aligns with the participant’s description of the wound as one that never really heals, illustrating how father absence creates a chronic emotional injury that persists throughout life. Lereya et al. (2013) note that the absence of paternal validation leaves enduring identity gaps, particularly evident during adulthood milestones where paternal involvement would typically be significant.

The findings reflect that father absence is not a temporary hardship but a lifelong psychological burden. The progression from childhood hope to adult recognition of rejection reveals how the absence deepens over time, shaping identity, self esteem and emotional well-being in lasting ways.

Theme 4.3.2: Resilience and Coping Mechanisms

This theme highlights how young adults who experienced father absence developed resilience and adopted various coping strategies to deal with emotional and psychological challenges. Despite their father's absence, participants demonstrated a strong capacity to adapt, maintain hope, and find meaning in their circumstances. Their resilience often emerged as a response to adversity, an intentional effort to protect their sense of self and navigate life's challenges independently.

Sub-theme 4.3.2.1

Many participants expressed that father absence forced them to cultivate emotional strength and independence from a young age. They described how the pain of growing up without guidance from their fathers motivated them to succeed and to be better adults than their absent fathers. This aligns with Mkhwanazi et al. (2024)'s findings that young men raised without fathers often develop an intentional drive for self reliance and emotional control as a form of adaptive resilience. Similarly, Ungar (2021) emphasizes that resilience is not merely about individual toughness but about using available personal and social resources to achieve positive outcomes despite hardship.

"I had to learn to depend on myself from a young age. My mother was always there, but there were things she couldn't teach me as a man. So, I started figuring things out on my own, how to behave, how to handle pressure, even how to fix things around the house. It made me realize that I'm capable of handling more than I thought." (TT)

"I used to think not having a father would define me, but as I grew older, I realized that I can still make something out of myself. Every time I achieved something, whether it was passing matric or getting a job, I proved to myself that I can succeed without needing a man to guide me."

(LM)

These participants highlight how father absence encouraged their early development of self reliance and problem solving skills. In the absence of direct paternal modeling, they drew from observation, experimentation and self guided learning to navigate life's demands. This aligns with Bandura (1997)'s concept of self efficacy, the belief in one's ability to organize and execute actions required to manage tough situations. Over time, their capacity to handle everyday challenges independently contributed to a growing sense of personal competence and agency.

The emergence of self efficacy among participants indicates a transformative process, shifting from dependency and vulnerability toward autonomy and empowerment. Initially, father's absence was viewed as a painful situation, but over time, many participants reframed this absence as a motivation for self growth. Their ability to set goals, make independent decisions, and manage challenges aligns with Belloir et al. (2024)'s notion that self efficacy influences persistence, effort and resilience in the face of adversity.

Sub-theme 4.3.2.2: Adaptive resilience

While father absence often generates profound emotional and psychological challenges, the participants' narratives also highlight their capacity for adaptive resilience. Adaptive resilience refers to the ability to cope effectively with adversity, maintaining psychological well being and functional growth despite significant stressors (Masten, 2025). In the context of father absence, this resilience manifests through strategies such as seeking supportive relationships with other family members, mentors or peers, cultivating self reliance and finding purpose in personal achievements or community engagement.

Participants' experiences suggest that resilience is not an innate trait but a dynamic process, shaped by both individual coping skills and social support systems (Theron et al., 2015). Many reported that, despite the emotional void and grief caused by paternal absence, they developed a heightened sense of determination, adaptability and self efficacy. These findings align with, Smith & Hayslip (2012), who emphasizes that resilience often arises in response to

adversity, particularly when individuals are able to access resources, both internal and external, that facilitate coping and personal growth.

This illustrates that while father absence can inflict emotional wounds and identity challenges, it also serves as a catalyst for the development of adaptive coping mechanisms and strength of character. Exploring these resilience factors provides a more holistic understanding of how young adults navigate father absence, revealing not only vulnerability but also growth, agency and resourcefulness.

“Even though not having a father was painful, it forced me to become independent very quickly. I had to figure things out on my own, how to manage my emotions, how to make decisions as well as how to survive. At first, I thought of it as a disadvantage, but now I see that it gave me a sense of strength. I don’t wait for someone to rescue me, I’ve learned to be there for myself” (LM)

This participant illustrates how father absence, while initially experienced as a source of emotional pain, became a catalyst for their development of self reliance. She reflects on the shift from perceiving the absence as a disadvantage to reframing it as an opportunity to cultivate strength and independence. This adaptive process reflects the concept of post traumatic growth, where individuals facing adversity develop new strengths and coping mechanisms that may not have emerged under different circumstances (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

The participant’s emphasis on being her own source of strength suggests a transition from dependency on external figures for validation or guidance to an internalised sense of resilience. This aligns with findings by Masten (2025), who describes resilience as ordinary magic, highlighting that protective processes can emerge even in contexts of risk, enabling young people to adapt positively despite hardship.

Additionally, what the participant said underscores the development of emotional self regulation and decision making skills, which are often facilitated by paternal

guidance in traditional family structures (Magqamfana & Bazana, 2020). In the absence of this guidance, the participant was compelled to construct these skills independently, resonating with the findings by Theron et al (2015) that resilience is not simply an absence of vulnerability but rather the ability to mobilize internal and external resources in the face of challenges.

“Even though not having a father was painful, it forced me to become independent very quickly” (RS)

“I had to teach myself the things that I imagined a father would have taught me, like responsibility, discipline, and how to keep pushing when life gets tough. It wasn’t easy, but I think it made me stronger, because I know that whatever comes my way, I can stand on my own two feet.” (MN)

Both participants highlighted how the absence of paternal guidance compelled them to develop independence and resilience. The shift from perceiving absence as a disadvantage to reframing it as a strength reflects processes of post traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The participants emphasise autonomy, discipline, and survival skills, showing how father absence, although initially a source of grief, fostered resilience by forcing them into early maturity. Masten (2025) describes this phenomenon as ordinary magic, a term that highlights the everyday adaptive processes through which individuals transform adversity into opportunities for growth and positive functioning.

“I found strength in my friendships. My friends became like brothers to me, and in their support, I found the kind of belonging I missed at home.” (KR)

“Sometimes I think my father’s absence made me more caring. I make an effort to be there for my siblings and to protect them. It gave me a sense of responsibility that keeps me grounded.” (PN)

“I think the pain taught me empathy. I know what it feels like to be left out or abandoned, so I try to make sure the people in my life never feel that way. It’s like I turned my hurt into compassion.” (TM)

These participants reflect the social dimensions of resilience, where external relationships and prosocial behaviors buffer the impact of father absence. KR highlights peer support as a substitute family structure, while PN and TM channel their pain into caregiving and empathy. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which emphasizes the central role of supportive microsystems, such as peers and siblings, in fostering resilience when parental support is lacking.

Research has shown that peer relationships are especially protective for adolescents and young adults facing family instability, offering both emotional validation and social identity (Werner, 2013; Mampane, 2014). Moreover, prosocial responses, such as empathy and caregiving, reflect what Luthar et al. (2000) term resilience through relational responsibility, where individuals strengthen their own coping by investing in the well being of others.

Theme 4.3.3: Support Systems and Protective Networks

This theme highlights the crucial role of social support and protective networks helping young adults cope with the psychological and emotional challenges that arise from father absence. The participants revealed that while the absence of a father figure often leaves a void in guidance, emotional security and identity formation, the presence of strong and reliable support systems helps many young people navigate these challenges and develop resilience.

They described how, in the absence of fathers, they turned to mothers, grandparents, siblings, and extended family members for emotional support, advice, and encouragement. Mothers were often seen as the primary source of strength and stability, providing not only material support but also comfort and reassurance during times of distress. In many cases, grandmothers or uncles stepped in to offer moral guidance and instill discipline, filling the gap left by an absent father.

Beyond the family unit, several participants mentioned drawing support from teachers, mentors and peers, especially during their matriculation year when emotional and academic pressure was at its highest. Teachers often acted as father figures by offering motivation, academic guidance and affirmations of potential. Positive peer relationships also served as safe spaces for emotional expression and shared understanding, helping participants feel less alone in their struggles.

Sub-theme 4.3.3.1: Role of Caregivers and Extended Family

The role of caregivers and extended family proved essential in helping young adults cope with the emotional and psychological effects of father absence. Many participants shared that they were raised by mothers, grandmothers, or aunts, who became their main sources of love, discipline, and encouragement. These caregivers offered emotional security and guidance that helped participants navigate feelings of loss and uncertainty associated with absent fathers.

According to Tan et al. (2024), nurturing relationships within the family are vital for building resilience and supporting positive adaptation during adversity. Extended family members, such as uncles and older cousins, also played significant roles by providing male guidance and serving as role models. Their involvement helped participants develop a sense of identity and belonging, which buffered against psychological distress. This reflects Tshivhase & Moyo (2025)'s view that in black South African communities, care giving is often a shared responsibility, rooted in the spirit of ubuntu, where extended families collectively nurture and protect children.

“My mother has always been both mom and dad to me. She sacrificed a lot just to make sure I don’t feel the gap my father left. There has never been a time I needed something and she failed to provide it for me, even for my siblings” (RS)

This participant reflected on the adaptive and nurturing role many mothers assume in father absent households. She was showing appreciation for her mother's effort to provide both emotional and instrumental support, often filling the void left by the absent father. It also highlights the emotional burden placed on single mothers, who must simultaneously nurture, discipline, and financially sustain their children. McLanahan et al. (2013) note that many mothers in father absent homes act as bridge figures, balancing care giving and authority to ensure their children's psychological stability and moral development. These mothers often go beyond traditional maternal roles, creating a sense of safety and belonging that helps children adapt positively despite paternal absence. The participant's reflection also demonstrates the protective influence of maternal resilience.

According to McKern et al. (2025), resilience in youth often stems from strong care giving relationships that model coping, perseverance, and emotional regulation. In this case, the mother's dedication and emotional presence likely contributed to the participant's ability to maintain hope and self-worth. Moreover, the quote underscores a recurring theme in South African literature, the strength of single mothers as agents of resilience. Mathe & Lekganyane (2025) argue that within many black communities, motherhood extends beyond biological care, it is a social and moral function that safeguards children from the broader psychological and social risks associated with father absence. Mothers' sacrifices and nurturing behaviors thus form part of what Masten (2018) refers to as ordinary magic, the everyday processes that foster resilience in children through consistent love, structure, and support.

"My uncle was like a father to me. He taught me how to handle pressure and make decisions. He has always treated me like his own child." (TT)

"My cousin always checks on me and gives me advice about life after

school. He reminds me that being a man is about responsibility, not anger.” (RS)

These participants illustrate the collective care giving system that exists within black South African communities, where child-rearing responsibilities are shared among family members. These participants’ experiences show that caregivers and extended family provided both emotional and social scaffolding that enabled them to cope with father absence. This aligns with Surzykiewicz et al (2022), who emphasize that resilience in young people often develops through supportive relationships that promote emotional regulation and adaptive coping. The participants’ reflections also embody what Masten (2025) states, the everyday care, stability, and encouragement provided by trusted adults that foster resilience and well-being even in the face of hardship.

Sub-theme 4.3.3.2: Community and Peer Support

Community and peer support emerged as vital protective factors that helped participants cope with the emotional and psychological challenges associated with father absence. For many, the absence of a father created a void not only within the family structure but also in their sense of belonging, guidance, and security. However, the presence of supportive community members, peers, and mentors provided compensatory emotional resources that alleviated feelings of abandonment and isolation. These relationships often acted as surrogate support systems, offering encouragement, advice, and emotional validation that mirrored the nurturing role typically associated with fathers.

In the absence of a father, community and peer relationships became critical mechanisms of resilience, fostering emotional stability and identity formation during vulnerable life stages. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1979), which underscores that development is influenced by interconnected social systems beyond the immediate family, such as peers, schools, and community institutions. In contexts where the nuclear family is

disrupted, these systems can compensate for missing relational functions.

“My friends became my brothers. Whenever I felt low or angry about my father not being around, they were the ones I could talk to. They helped me forget for a while that I was missing something at home.” (LM)

“It was my friends who kept me grounded. We would share our struggles and remind each other that we could still make something of ourselves, even without fathers.” (KT).

These participants emphasize how their friends were their pillar of strength and source of motivation. This emphasizes the importance of peer and community based support as protective factors in the absence of paternal involvement. Resilience in the face of adversity is often nurtured through social connections that provide affirmation, belonging, and shared coping strategies (Sutton, 2019). Peer relationships, in particular, serve as important relational resources that allow individuals to process emotional pain while developing adaptive skills. Among South African youth facing structural and familial challenges, peers often act as informal support systems that foster identity formation, hope, and self-worth (Shirima & Naude, 2024). These social bonds help young people re-frame their circumstances, reinforcing the belief that they can succeed despite family disruptions.

Furthermore, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory provides a useful lens for understanding these experiences. Within the micro system, the immediate social environment, peers play a crucial role in emotional development and social learning. This collective sense of care allows young adults experience belonging and identity continuity even in the absence of a biological father. The participants' statements exemplify how community and peer networks serve not only as emotional anchors but also as catalysts for resilience, enabling them to navigate their emotional struggles with a renewed sense of purpose and connection.

“Where I come from, neighbors were like family. If I needed help, someone was always there. That made life a bit easier because I didn’t feel completely alone.” (KT)

“Our community really looks out for each other. Even though my father wasn’t there, people around me always made sure I was okay.” (LM).

Both quotations illustrate the protective and nurturing role of community solidarity in mitigating the emotional effects of father absence. KT’s statement conveys how communal care provided a sense of belonging and emotional safety that substituted for paternal support. Similarly, LM’s reflection underscores how community members collectively filled the void left by the absent father, ensuring that the participant did not feel neglected or isolated. These accounts reflect a collective model of care common in many African contexts, where extended kinship networks and community relationships play a crucial role in child development and emotional well being. In contexts of adversity, including parental absence, community cohesion serves as a powerful resilience resource (Durcan & Yavuz, 2024). The findings show that people who grow up without their biological fathers, their emotional survival is strengthened through collective care, demonstrates how social capital and relational connectedness can compensate for the lack of paternal involvement.

Theme 4.3.4: Interpersonal Trust and Relationship Building

This theme captures how father absence significantly impacted participants' ability to form, sustain and trust relationships with others, both emotionally and socially. Growing up without a consistent father or a father at all had a negative impact on their understanding of trust, attachment and emotional closeness, leading to feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability in interpersonal relationships.

“I find it really hard to open up to people. Even when someone shows they care, a part of me keeps wondering when they’ll leave. I guess because my father left, I just assume everyone else will too.”(RS)

"Trust doesn't come easy for me. I've learned to keep my guard up because every time I let someone in, I feel like I'm setting myself up to get hurt again, just like when my dad walked out."(TT)

These participants reflect deep rooted struggles with trust and emotional security stemming from father absence, showing Bowlby's (1988) attachment theory that early relational disruptions can result in insecure attachment styles persisting into adulthood. Brodbeck et al. (2024) emphasizes how important roles in modeling reliability and emotional security, forming the foundation of interpersonal trust.

This findings show that the absence of a father has long-lasting emotional effects, particularly on trust and emotional security. Participants expressed deep fears of abandonment and rejection, which make it difficult for them to form close and trusting relationships. Their experiences suggest that early emotional wounds from an absent father continue to influence how they connect with others, leading to guardedness, self protection, and difficulty feeling emotionally safe even in caring relationships.

Sub-theme 4.3.4.1: Fragile Interpersonal Trust

Father absence undermined participants' ability to trust others, leading to emotional guardedness and fear of vulnerability. Many felt that if their fathers could leave, anyone else could too, translating into difficulties forming and maintaining close relationships.

"When people try to get close to me, I tend to push them away before they can disappoint me. It's like I'm preparing myself for the worst so I don't feel that pain again." (KR)

"In relationships, I struggle with trust. I question people's intentions because deep down, I don't believe anyone really stays. That comes from seeing my father choose not to." (PN)

These participants highlight the emotional and relational learning gaps that often result from father absence. PN's statement reflects the intergenerational transmission of emotional behavior, where children internalize or model what

they observe from parental figures. When a father is absent, children lose a critical emotional template for expressing affection, empathy and care within relationships. According to Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, much of human behavior, including emotional expression and relationship management, is learned through observation and imitation. Without witnessing healthy paternal affection, young adults may struggle to understand or demonstrate love effectively (Annor et al., 2024).

KR's statement gives reflects a similar challenge, the lack of relational modeling. Fathers often play a key role in shaping how their children perceive relationships, manage conflict and communicate emotions (Ramatsetse & Ross, 2023). The absence of such modeling leaves young adults to rely on trial and error learning, which can lead to emotional confusion, fear of vulnerability and difficulties sustaining intimacy. Research indicates that young adults from father absent households frequently struggle to build and maintain emotional closeness in adult relationships due to limited exposure to positive paternal affection (Chopik & Weidmann, 2023).

This findings show that father involvement fosters emotional literacy, the ability to understand, manage and appropriately express emotions. Without it, young adults may find affectionate behaviors uncomfortable or unfamiliar. The group of individuals often enter adulthood with uncertain models of love and connection, resulting in relational difficulties and emotional restraint. Father absence, therefore, disrupts emotional learning, leaving young adults unsure how to give and receive love, which not only affects romantic relationships but also impairs the ability to form meaningful friendships and express vulnerability.

Sub-theme 4.3.2.3: Difficulty Forming Bonds

The participants' experiences of father absence made it difficult for them to form and maintain close emotional connections with others. Many participants expressed that growing up without a father hindered their ability to understand emotional intimacy, express vulnerability as well as trusting in the permanence of

relationships. The absence of a paternal model during childhood disrupted their development of relational skills and emotional security, leaving them uncertain about how to navigate closeness in friendships, romantic relationships or even family ties.

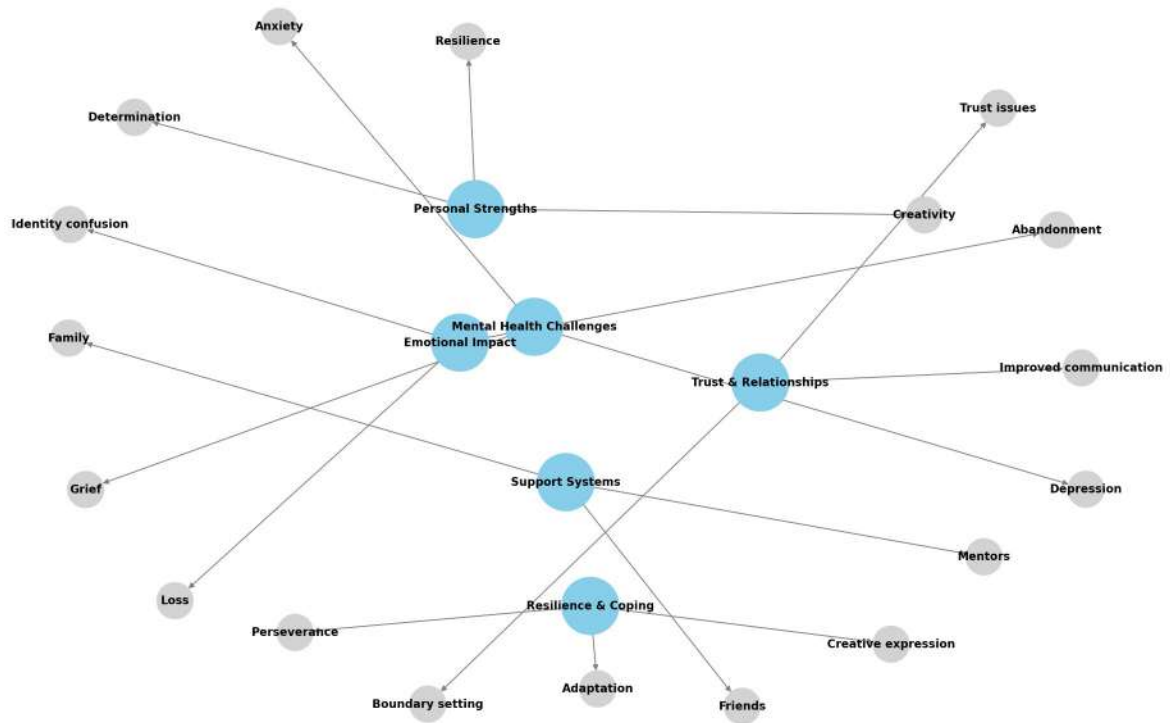
“I struggle to connect with people on a deeper level. I can be around friends or even in a relationship, but still feel emotionally distant. It’s like there’s a wall I can’t break, no matter how hard I try.” (KR)

“I think I built this habit of keeping people at a distance. It’s safer that way because I don’t want to depend on anyone and get disappointed like I was with my father.” (LM)

These participants reflect the emotional withdrawal and guardedness that often develop in individuals who experienced father absence. KR’s statement highlights a sense of emotional detachment and difficulty forming intimate relationships. This emotional distance often stems from a disrupted attachment system during childhood, where the absence of a father deprives the child of consistent emotional modelling and security. According to John Bowlby’s (1988) attachment theory, early relationships with caregivers form the foundation for how individuals experience closeness and trust later in life. When a father figure is absent, children may develop avoidant attachment styles, characterised by emotional withdrawal and fear of dependence on others (Ainsworth, 1989).

Similarly, LM’s reflection reveals a defensive coping mechanism developed to avoid emotional pain. This avoidance of closeness serves as self-protection against perceived rejection or abandonment, a pattern noted in research on father absence and relational development. Cruz et al (2022) argue that individuals with early attachment disruptions often exhibit hyper-independence, a belief that relying on others will lead to disappointment. This emotional self-sufficiency may show off as strength, but often masks underlying fear and unresolved grief. The findings show that this gap not only affects their romantic relationships but also influences their ability to build meaningful friendships and express vulnerability

Thematic Map: Emotional and Psychological Impact of Father Absence



4.4 Conclusion

The findings and analysis presented in this chapter highlight the multifaceted psychological and emotional impacts of father absence on recent matriculants in Phahameng, Bloemfontein. The study revealed that father absence contributes to experiences of emotional distress, social isolation, and challenges in forming trusting relationships. Participants emphasized the critical role of alternative support systems, including mothers, extended family, and community mentors, in buffering these negative effects.

Overall, the findings underscore that father absence is not solely a deficit but interacts with broader social, cultural, and familial contexts to shape developmental outcomes. These insights lay the groundwork for the subsequent chapter, which discusses the implications of these findings for policy, practice, and future research.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the overall conclusion of the study, drawing together the major findings and their implications. It reflects on how the study answered the research questions and met the objectives, while situating the findings within the broader literature on father absence, psychological well being, and resilience. Furthermore, the chapter outlines practical recommendations for educators, policymakers, mental health practitioners, and communities, with the aim of improving support structures for father absent youth. Finally, the limitations of the study are discussed, together with suggestions for future research.

5.2 Conclusion of the Study

The study set out to explore the psychological and emotional experiences of recent matriculants in Phahameng, Bloemfontein, who grew up without their fathers, with a focus on resilience factors and coping mechanisms. Through qualitative interviews and thematic analysis, the research has revealed a nuanced picture of how father absence shapes young people's development.

The findings showed that father absence leaves deep emotional scars, with participants reporting feelings of abandonment, rejection, and identity confusion. Mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and unresolved grief were common, often exacerbated by limited access to mental health support and restrictive cultural expectations that discouraged emotional expression, particularly among boys.

However, the study also highlighted resilience and growth as central themes. Despite emotional pain, participants demonstrated adaptive coping strategies, including engaging in creative outlets, sports, and academic focus. They also benefited significantly from the protective role of support systems, especially mothers, grandmothers, and other community members, who acted as stabilizers in the absence of fathers. These findings emphasize the power of communal

resilience and cultural practices in South African township settings, where collective parenting often mitigates structural challenges.

Furthermore, issues of trust and interpersonal relationships were central to participants' stories. Many struggled with trust, fearing betrayal or emotional detachment, yet some actively worked to overcome these difficulties by setting boundaries and improving communication. Most notably, participants' recognition of their personal strengths demonstrated evidence of post traumatic growth, with many reframing their experiences as opportunities to build determination, creativity, and resilience.

The study contributes to a growing body of knowledge on father absence by emphasizing both the psychological vulnerabilities and the adaptive capacities of young adults in township contexts. It provides insights into how cultural, familial, and individual factors interact to shape resilience, underscoring the importance of multi layered interventions that address both emotional wounds and potential for growth.

5.3 Recommendations

5.3.1 For Schools and Educators

Schools should implement gender-sensitive mental health programs, with particular attention to male learners who may be less likely to express emotional struggles. Guidance and life orientation classes can incorporate modules on emotional literacy, resilience, and coping strategies, creating a supportive environment that encourages learners to seek help when needed. Educators should also receive training to identify early signs of distress among learners affected by father absence and be equipped to refer them to appropriate support services, ensuring that interventions are timely and effective.

5.3.2 For Mental Health Practitioners

There is a pressing need for accessible counseling services within township schools and communities to support adolescents experiencing unresolved grief, depression, or anxiety due to father absence. Group therapy sessions or peer-support programs could provide safe spaces for young men to share their experiences and normalize emotional expression. Additionally, culturally appropriate therapeutic approaches, such as art, music, and storytelling, should be integrated into interventions to make them more relatable and effective for the youth in these communities.

5.3.3 For Families and Communities

Families should foster open communication regarding father absence, enabling children to process their emotions without fear of judgment or stigma. Community initiatives can also play a crucial role by promoting the involvement of social fathers, including coaches, teachers, mentors, uncles, and religious leaders, to provide consistent male role models for boys growing up without biological fathers. Furthermore, programs that support mothers and caregivers, who often shoulder the double burden of parenting, should be strengthened, recognizing their central role in building resilience among father-absent children.

5.3.4 For Policymakers

Policymakers should strengthen social and educational policies that address the psychological effects of family disruptions, particularly in under-resourced communities. Strategies that target structural contributors to father absence, such as unemployment, incarceration, and substance abuse, should be prioritized. Additionally, fatherhood programs and awareness campaigns can encourage men to take an active role in their children's lives, even where biological cohabitation is not feasible, thereby promoting positive child development outcomes.

5.3.5 For Future Research

Future research should focus on exploring the longitudinal impacts of father absence on adulthood outcomes, including employment, romantic relationships, and parenting practices. Comparative studies could examine differences in how male and female adolescents cope with father absence, providing a more nuanced understanding of gendered experiences. Further research is also needed on the intersectionality of race, class, and gender norms, and how these factors collectively shape the experiences and resilience strategies of father-absent youth.

5.4 Limitations of the Study

1. **Sample size and scope:** The research was conducted with a relatively small group of recent matriculants from a single township (Phahameng, Bloemfontein). This limits the generalizability of the findings to other contexts in South Africa or beyond.
2. **Gender focus:** Although both male and female voices were included, the study primarily focused on young men. The experiences of girls in father absent households may differ and require dedicated attention.
3. **Self-reported data:** The reliance on participants' narratives may be influenced by memory recall, social desirability bias, or reluctance to disclose deeply personal experiences.
4. **Cross-sectional design:** The study captured experiences at one point in time. A longitudinal design would provide deeper understanding of how resilience and psychological distress evolve over the life course.
5. **Contextual limitations:** Since the study was situated in a township community, the findings may not capture the experiences of father-absent youth in rural or more urbanized settings.

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04 March 2025



Proposal and Ethics Clearance for Master of Philosophy in Arts

Student name: Lebohang Brudance Matijane

Student number: [REDACTED]

Brand and campus: IEMSA



Dear Lebohang,



We are pleased to inform you that the Higher Degrees Committee considered and approved your research proposal titled: *Exploring the Psychological and Emotional Experiences of Father Absence on Recent Matriculants in Phahameng, Bloemfontein: Resilience Factors and Coping Mechanisms*, with minor revisions.



Your ethical clearance application has been approved as well. This means that you may proceed with data collection once you have revised the proposal to the satisfaction of your supervisor.

You are reminded to inform the IIE's Higher Degrees Committee of any changes made to the research methodology or title of the research prior to examination. Kindly ensure that all ethical considerations are duly applied whilst collecting, analysing and interpreting the data for the completion of your research.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact your programme team or supervisor directly

All the best with your research studies.



Dr Reza Hosseini

Chair: Higher Degrees Committee

SEMI- STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

TITLE: EXPLORING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES OF FATHER ABSENCE ON RECENT MATRICULANTS IN PHAHAMEMNG, BLOEMFONTEIN: RESILIENCE FACTORS AND COPING MACHENISMS

Introduction

- Welcome and thank the participant for taking part
- Reiterate the study's purpose
- Ensure informed consent and confidentiality
- Explain the interview's structure and estimated duration

Warm-up questions

- Can you tell me a little about yourself and your background?
- How did you feel about your recent matriculation experience? Father Absence Questions
- Can you describe your relationship with your father (or lack thereof)?
- How did growing up without a present father figure affect you emotionally?
- Did you feel any sense of loss, abandonment, or rejection?
- How did you cope with the absence? Psychological and Emotional Experiences
- How did father absence impact your self-esteem and confidence?
- Did you experience any anxiety, depression, or other mental health concerns?
- How did you navigate relationships with others (peers, teachers, etc.)?
- Were there any significant events or experiences that stand out to you? Resilience Factors
- What support systems helped you cope with father absence (e.g., mother, relatives, friends)?
- How did you develop resilience and adapt to challenging situations?
- Were there any role models or mentors who inspired you?

- What personal strengths or coping strategies helped you navigate difficult times?

Probing Questions

- Can you elaborate on that experience?
- How did that make you feel?
- What did you learn from that situation?
- How did you grow or change as a result? Final Questions
- Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experiences?
- Are there any messages or advice you'd like to share with others who may be going through similar situations?
- Are there any questions I haven't asked that you think are important?

Conclusion

- The participant will be thanked for their time and insights
- Confidentiality and data usage will be ensured
- Contact information will be provided for further questions.

This interview will be approached with empathy and understanding.

Participants will be allowed to share their stories and experiences freely, and the interviewer will be prepared to adapt the guide as needed.



Annexure H – PARTICIPANT OR RESPONDENT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Explanatory information sheet and consent form for participants

To whom it may concern,

My name is Lebohang Matijane and I am a student at The IIE MSA. I am currently conducting research under the supervision of PROF , ERHABOR IDEMUDIA about exploring the psychological and emotional experiences of father absence on recent matriculats from Phahameng, Bloemfontein as well as unpacking factors which contribute to their resilience. The study seeks to identify how the absence of a father influences the psychological and emotional behaviour of these individuals, while also exploring factors behind those that make it, despite not having a father figure in their lives; mechanisms through which resilience can mitigate the negative effects of this absence . I hope that this research will enhance our understanding of providing valuable insights that can inform the development of targeted interventions and support programs to enhance these recent matriculants' psychological and emotional well-being.

.

I would like to invite you to participate in my study. In order to explain to you what your participation in my study will involve, I have formulated questions that I will try to fully answer so that you can make an informed decision about whether or not to participate. If you have any additional questions that you feel are not addressed or explained in this information sheet, please do not hesitate to ask me for more information. Once you have read and understood all the information contained in this sheet and are willing to participate, please complete and sign the consent form below.

What will I be doing if I participate in your study?

I would like to invite you to participate in this research because you have recently completed Grade 12 and have experienced the absence of a father figure. Your insights and experiences will be valuable in helping us better understand the emotional and psychological impact of father absence, as well as the coping strategies that young people develop in this context. If you decide to participate in this research, you will be asked to take part in an interview that will explore your experiences related to growing up without a father figure, your emotional responses, and the strategies you used to cope during this time. The interview will last approximately 30 to 45 minutes and can take place in person or virtually, depending on your preference. Your participation is voluntary, and your responses will remain confidential.

You can decide whether or not to participate in this research. If you decide to participate, you can choose to withdraw at any time or to decide not to answer particular interview questions.

Are there any risks/ or discomforts involved in participating in this study?

Whether or not you decide to participate in this research, there will be no negative impact on you. There are no direct risks or benefits to you if you participate in this study. You might, however, indirectly find that it is helpful to talk about your father absence experiences. If you find at any stage that you are not comfortable with the line of questioning, you may withdraw or refrain from participating.

Do I have to participate in the study?

- Your inclusion in this study is completely voluntary;
- If you do not wish to participate in this study, you have every right not to do so;
- Even if you agree to participate in this study, you may withdraw at any time without having to provide an explanation for your decision.

Will my identity be protected?

I promise to protect your identity. I will not use your name in any research summaries to come out of this research and I will also make sure that any other details are disguised so that nobody will be able to identify you. I would like to ask your permission to record the interviews, but only my supervisor, I and possibly a professional transcriber (who will sign a confidentiality agreement) will have access to these recordings. Nobody else, including anybody at IIE MSA, will have access to your interview information. I would like to use quotes when I discuss the findings of the research, but I will not use any recognisable information in these quotes that can be linked to you.

What will happen to the information that participants provide?

Once I have finished all interviews, I will write summaries to be included in my research report, which is a requirement to complete my MPhil (Psychology). You may ask me to send you a summary of the research if you are interested in the final outcome of the study.

What happens if I have more questions about the study?

Please feel free to contact me or my supervisor should you have any questions or concerns about this research, or if there is anything you need to know before you decide whether or not to participate.

You should not agree to participate unless you are completely comfortable with the procedures followed.

My contact details are as follows:

Lebohang Matijane

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

The contact details of my supervisor are as follows:

Prof Erhabor Idemudia

[REDACTED]

Participant or respondent Informed Consent – Audio and Visual Recordings.

I agree to participate in the research conducted by Lebohang Matijane about exploring the psychological and emotional experiences of father absence on recent matriculants from

Phahameng, Bloemfontein as well as unpacking factors which contribute to their resilience. The study seeks to identify how the absence of a father influences the psychological and emotional behaviour of these individuals, while also exploring factors behind those that make it, despite not having a father figure in their lives; mechanisms through which resilience can mitigate the negative effects of this absence . I hope that this research will enhance our understanding of providing valuable insights that can inform the development of targeted interventions and support programs to enhance these recent matriculants' psychological and emotional well-being.

This research has been explained to me and I understand what participation in this research will involve. I understand that:

- I agree to participate in this research and be recorded for the purpose of data collection.
- My confidentiality will be ensured. My name and personal details will be kept private and confidential.
- My participation in this research is voluntary and I have the right to withdraw from the research at any time. There will be no repercussions should I choose to withdraw from the research.
- I may choose not to answer any of the questions that are asked during the research interview.
- I may be quoted directly when the research is published, but my identity will be protected.

Signature

Date