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*Baba: Men and Fatherhood in South Africa* is a book that is long overdue. For far too long men, as subjects of academic research and writing in South Africa, have suffered from what David Gilmore (1990:2) refers to as ‘the taken for granted syndrome’. Admittedly, the study of men and masculinities in South Africa has slowly started to develop some momentum, with books such as *Changing Men in South Africa* (Morrell, 2001) providing some invaluable insights into the construction of masculinities in local contexts. There has however been precious little written about men in one of their most important roles as fathers. In a country where as many as ‘57 per cent of all children, and 63 per cent of African children specifically [have] fathers who [are] “absent” or deceased’, the importance of looking at men in the role of father cannot be underestimated (Dorrit Posel and Richard Devey in Chapter 4 of *Baba: Men and Fatherhood in South Africa* p. 49).

The book’s point of departure is that understandings of fatherhood, and the roles fathers play in a child’s life, ‘can and do change over time and according to context’ (Morrell and Richter, 2006:1), depending on factors such as material resources, political climate and popular social discourse. The first section of the book deals with the central issues upon which the rest of the book builds. Robert Morrell’s chapter in the section somewhat broadly connects fatherhood with masculinity by arguing that fatherhood is not in fact a biological given, but rather something which is contested and understood based on what it means to be a man in a particular context. Francis Wilson then presents some of these contextual influences by stressing that poverty, often hand-in-hand with migrant labour and HIV/AIDS, has resulted in a ‘dislocated social structure’ (p.30), frequently resulting in fathers being unable to fulfil social and economic responsibilities to children.

The next section of the book then puts fatherhood in historical perspective by revealing how factors such as migrancy, institutionalisation and poverty have over more than half a century played a role in changing understandings of fatherhood as well as the roles these fathers play in the lives of children. Mamphele Ramphlele and Linda Richter, for example, provide a brief but insightful look into how the lives of 16 children from New Crossroads in Cape Town were affected by economic and social deprivation linked to the absence of their fathers brought about by apartheid’s legacy. Mark Hunter in his chapter then provides some tentative insights into why some Zulu men have abandoned
their ‘social role of fatherhood’ (p.100). He suggests that since the 1970s, increasing unemployment among Zulu men has led to the decline in their ability ‘to meet accepted social roles of fatherhood’ (p. 106). Their disempowerment has led in turn to changes in the construction of fatherhood that casts it in a negative light.

In the third section of the book, authors then critically examine how fatherhood is constructed in our minds and represented in the media, arguing amongst other things, that in order to change what it means to be a father we need to understand and change how fatherhood is represented. In her chapter Jeanne Prinsloo, for example, discusses how men in fathering roles are ‘invisible in most media forms’ (p. 139), with men being represented in ‘macho roles in which force and violence frequently feature ...’ (p.143). She shows how these representations are problematic as they provide inadequate reference points for ‘how we expect fathers to be “good” fathers’ (p.144). In contradistinction, Solani Ngobeni compellingly argues, through an analysis of John Singleton’s movie Boyz n the Hood, that by romanticising fatherhood in the media we run the risk of overemphasising the importance of fathers to the healthy development of children and in turn ‘castigate’ (p. 153) families headed by single mothers – the predominant family structure in South Africa. Perhaps the most interesting contributions to the section, provided by Desmond Lesejane and Nhlanhla Mkhize, argue the case for using the image of fatherhood found in traditional South African culture to restore and redefine understandings of what it means to be ‘father’, understandings that were damaged by colonisation, migrant labour, apartheid and unemployment.

The penultimate section of the book endeavours to uncover what it means to be a father in South Africa today by discussing how fathers are positioned in relation to their children in terms of the law, the world of work and the effect of HIV/AIDS. Grace Khunou provides an impassioned critique of family law, by arguing that while fathers in South Africa have the obligation to pay maintenance, they still do not necessarily have concomitant rights to access their children. She then argues that this bias prevents many devoted fathers from developing essential relationships with their children. Marlize Rabe, using interview data, compares the role expectations of migrant and resident fathers working on a goldmine in Johannesburg, suggesting that, despite the absence of some fathers, being a good father for most of these men means more than simple economic provision. Finally, chapters by Chris and Cos Desmond and by Philippe Denis and Radikobo Ntsimane, discuss the immense social and economic impact of the high rate of absentee fathers in families affected by HIV/AIDS. They argue that in order for families, and children in particular, to cope with the pandemic, fathers need to become more emotionally and economically involved with their children.

Finally, the book outlines how programmes initiated both locally and abroad can help promote and support the role men can play as fathers in society. Dean
Peacock and Mbuyiselo Botha, for example, discuss what men can do to promote gender equality by becoming more involved in programmes which promote ‘healthier and more responsible models of masculinity’ (p.284). They then briefly examine how programmes such as the Men in Partnership Against Aids Programme (MIPAA) and the Men as Partners (MAP) Network have all played a role in promoting men’s involvement in increasing gender equality. In the final chapter Tom Beardshaw, the Network Director of Fathers Direct in the United Kingdom, makes some qualified suggestions on how research, policy and programmes can be changed or enhanced to improve ‘work with men in families’ (p.306). As this brief tour of the contents of the book reveals, the issue of fatherhood in South Africa can be approached from many different angles. I however found that this has limited the impact of the collection somewhat. I found that I was left wanting more from the authors: more detailed data and analysis and chapters that were more clearly linked by a common thread. Much of what is presented in the book is tentative and some of the chapters fail to live up to their promise. These and other shortcomings of the book were probably unavoidable. The book is the first of its kind in South Africa and so it was bound to reflect a lack of research into fatherhood. What the book does do, however, is allude to some of the causes of the troubled, and all too often non-existent, relationships children have with their fathers. Therefore the book’s value lies not in its ability to provide answers, but in its ability to raise some important questions. As such, it is a ‘must read’ for anyone interested in the frequently troubled nature of fatherhood in South Africa.

References
