


Redefining Fatherhood in a Migratory Context: A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of African First-time Fathers in Belgium

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Abstract

Many African fathers face practices in their host countries that conflict with the conceptions of fatherhood in their countries of origin. They deal with negative stereotypes, including notions of paternal irresponsibility when it comes to embracing child care. This article looks at how exposure to the Belgian norms of fatherhood may redefine the fatherhood practices of African first-time fathers residing in Belgium. Drawing on a qualitative narrative approach, this article explores the perceptions and experiences of African migrant fathers in Belgium and examines how they adapt to a different fathering culture. The findings show that while African first-time fathers acknowledged their primary role as providers, they also embraced new practices that transgress defined gender lines in African culture. In the absence of a larger family support network, respondents face the responsibility of providing prenatal and postnatal support and sharing in child care responsibilities. Findings also shed light on how African fathers with European partners engage in shared decision-making and negotiate on core African values such as male circumcision.

Keywords

fatherhood, migrant fathers, narrative inquiry, acculturation, gender, Belgium

Introduction

The social construction of fatherhood is very intricately woven into the cultural, social, and religious beliefs of people across cross-cultural settings (Connell, 2000). The term “father” connotes several meanings in the literature (Hadley, 2019). In biological terms, “father” is used to describe a man responsible for impregnating a woman (Brannen and Nilsen, 2006; Hobson, 2003). There are “social” fathers, who have no biological claim to the child, but are responsible for supporting and raising the child (Bzostek, 2008). The term “fathering” is also conceptualized within socio-cultural contexts and encapsulates the daily practices associated with parenting in different cultures (Barry et al., 2019; Hearn & Pringle, 2006; Hobson, 2003; McGill, 2014). Some studies provide insight on fathering in African contexts (Hewlett, 2000; Hewlett & Macfarlan, 2010; Hosegood & Madhavan, 2012; Selin, 2014). Likewise, among Whites, North Americans, and Western elites, there is a wide range of resources on father relationships and interaction with their children (Gregory & Milner, 2011;

Hewlett, 2000; Lamb, 1987; Lamb et al., 1981; Selin, 2014). Fathering in contemporary times embraces a broader range of parenting functions including nurturing and caring for the child (Bruce et al., 1995; McGill, 2014).

The attention the academia, media, and public health has directed at fatherhood has continued to increase in the last decades as many societies go through cultural and socio-economic changes. Critical changes are influencing the roles of men and women in the family as a result of the shifting dynamics of the global male and female

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workforce, the increasing diversity in families, increasing migration, and the changing beliefs about parental roles (Cabrera et al., 2014; Roer-Strier et al., 2005). On the public health agenda, involving fathers in maternal health interventions has been advocated for as crucial for positive maternal and child outcomes and the well-being of the family (Yargawa & Leonardi-Bee, 2015), but achieving fathers participation has yet to be actualized because of diversities of family contexts worldwide (Cabrera et al., 2014, 2018).

Migration is occurring at a large scale globally, driven by many factors including the economic and political crisis in countries, the quest for better education and health care, and the dream of better economic opportunities in richer societies (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2009). Migration can be a complex process that requires many migrants to adopt new ways of life in their host countries (Roer-Strier et al., 2005). For fathers in a new and different cultural context, fathering can be more complex, as they often juggle familiar fatherhood traditions and values from their home countries with the practices in their hosts country. Several researchers have focused on the involvement of fathers in parenting from different countries in various migratory contexts (Cabrera et al., 2009; Chuang & Gielen, 2009; Chuang & Tamis-LeMonda, 2009; Este & Tachble, 2009; Lamb & Bougher, 2009; Qin, 2009; Riggs et al., 2016; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2009). From their studies, it is evident that the cultural adaptation and changes associated with migration require migrant fathers to assimilate into a new way of fathering and parenting while ensuring they can support their families as their traditions at home demand (Hernandez & McGoldrick, 1999). Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco's (2001) findings acknowledged the goal of fathers to provide and ensure a better life for their children as the primary motivation many migrant parents have and strive for in their host countries.

Many migrant fathers face challenges that impair their ability to provide for their growing families while also embracing their shifting fathering roles (Este & Tachble, 2009; Hernandez & McGoldrick, 1999; Riggs et al., 2016; Roer-Strier et al., 2005). While many migrant fathers come from societies where gender roles and norms are well defined for the sexes, in their host countries they face a reversal of roles such that they are equally responsible for child care and in some cases, their spouses are the main breadwinners (Shimoni et al., 2003). In the absence of work, it is assumed that many migrant fathers can take up more parenting roles in the family. Some studies have reported that unemployment, discrimination and social isolation are negatively impacting fathers such that they are unable to function in their role as fathers in their homes (Este & Tachble, 2009). In addition, research has also reported that many migrant

fathers lack experience in parenting and child care and are unable to fit in even if the opportunity arises (Roer-Strier et al., 2005). Consequently, many migrant fathers tend to struggle especially with gender role adjustments, thereby creating a crisis of roles that are considered a threat to the fatherhood status (Sluzki Carlos, 1992).

African migrants constitute a growing population in many societies, yet there is limited research on African fatherhood in a migratory context. In the context of migration, African fathers deal with negative stereotypes such as fathers' absence or minimal participation in child care (Bruce et al., 1995; Richter et al., 2006). This study argues that African first-time fathers' experiences of fatherhood in a migratory context can be a transformative force in redefining their perceptions and constructing their fathering practices in their host countries.

Materials and Methods

This article addresses the issue of African fatherhood in the context of migration, examining how fatherhood is redefined and shaped by a new socio-cultural context. First, this study explores the perceptions and experiences of first-time migrant fathers from sub-Saharan African countries experiencing fatherhood for the first time in Belgium. It also examines the impact of migration on African fathers dealing with alternative cultural fatherhood practices in a new country.

A qualitative methodology drawn from narrative inquiry was chosen for this study.

Narrative Inquiry in Qualitative Research

Narrative inquiry is used by qualitative researchers to capture vivid representations of people's lives in the past and present (Lyons & Coyle, 2016). It provides a rich framework with which human actions, stories, and experiences can be investigated to provide insight and meaning (Sparkes & Smith, 2014; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Unlike quantitative methods, qualitative research using narrative inquiry can be effective in understanding human complexities in all their richness in a way that the analyses of numbers cannot. Narratives cannot be told or analyzed in cultural isolation, because they are shaped by the sociocultural environment in which they occur (Webster & Mertova, 2007). In this study, a narrative approach provides the opportunity for each participant to freely give voice to how their daily experiences with their spouses, health settings and cultural environment were shaping their current perceptions of fatherhood as well as their perceptions of fatherhood from their native countries (Riessman, 2008).

Data Collection

Study Participants and Recruitment

The sample included 16 participants between the ages of 24 and 36, all residing in Belgium. Potential participants were recruited with the snowball method directly from the first author. The first three recruitments occurred at an African wedding. The objectives of the study were explained to the potential participants and they were willing to participate. The first author also gave her phone number to these participants to give to other eligible friends who also contacted the author. Through a phone call discussion, a brief introduction was given to subsequent participants, and the first author asked them to confirm their participation. For every man who was willing to participate, the date and venue were set up for the interview at their convenience.

To be eligible to participate, the men should have experienced fatherhood in Belgium for the first time, can speak French or English, and were born and raised in a sub-Saharan African country. Five countries were represented: Nigeria (11), Kenya (1), Ghana (1), Togo (1), and Cameroon (2). Eleven fathers were in a relationship (married/living together) with European partners at the time of recruitment.

Interview Process

The interview process occurred from June 2019 to February 2020. The first author conducted face-to-face interviews with 16 participants in their homes. All participants were already fathers for the first time at the time of the interview. At the onset of each interview, there was a short period of getting to know the participant to build familiarity. All participants were very welcoming and very eager to share their stories about their fatherhood experiences. To provide more context to fatherhood in their native countries, the fathers were encouraged to tell stories about their perceptions of fatherhood as practiced in their native countries. Most fathers reminisced on the experiences of an older family member, their friends, and the general perceptions of fatherhood when they still lived in their country of origin. They were also required to share their personal experiences of fatherhood in Belgium, including all events that occurred from their first antenatal checkup, preparation for birth, labor, and child care. In 10 of the 16 cases, the partners were present in the living room where the interview sessions occurred. There were some interruptions by the spouses especially when they remembered some additional experience that was linked to the story their spouses were sharing with me. Indeed, their interruptions were always timely because the fathers were able to expatiate further on some of their experiences. Interviews lasted from 60 to 120

minutes (an average of 90 minutes). Participants spoke freely; in some cases, they spoke for over an hour just narrating their stories before their first prompt. At the end of the interview sessions, the researcher engaged with the participants for clarity on other issues they shared that were not well explained on several topics. The prompts focused on how they prepared for their transition to fatherhood, what prompted some of their actions, and how the two cultural contexts shaped their involvement during pregnancy, birth/delivery, and early parenting. It was in one of those discussions that the issue of spousal negotiation of cultural values was raised. Consequently, a second interview session was set up with only two fathers to explore this topic. This second phase of interviewing occurred during the COVID 19 pandemic in July 2020. The fathers were purposefully selected because they were married to Europeans and were fathers to a male children. This second interview was necessary to follow-up on decision-making regarding sensitive topics like circumcision. The interviews occurred through video exchange with zoom and audio recorded with the permission of the participants (Table 1).

Ethical Considerations

The ethical committee of the Hospital Erasme granted an exemption for this study. All participants who agreed to participate in this study willingly gave consent and provided a convenient place and time for the interviews. On the day of the interviews, participants were presented with a consent form, where the objectives of the study were clearly explained, and the rights of each informant were laid out. To ensure anonymity, the real names and all identifying characteristics of participants have been changed in all quotes used in the results section. For the second phase of the interviews, participants gave oral consent for the interviews to be conducted and for the interviews to be audio recorded.

Data Analysis

Data were systematically analyzed through the lens of thematic narrative analysis (Lyons & Coyle, 2016; Riessman, 2008). The analytical process began with the corresponding author listening repeatedly to each voice recording before transcribing the recordings word for word. The first author coded and recoded the data. As each story unfolded, the focus of the first author was on what fatherhood meant to them back home, their current perceptions and their behavior at each phase of the process (the pregnancy, at birth and as parents). While listening, the researcher meditated on participants' words, seeking to understand the deeper impressions and reasons behind their thoughts and actions. This iterative process

Table 1. The Country of Origin of the Fathers and Their Partners, including the Ages, Work and Educational Characteristics of the Fathers.

Pseudonym	Gender (child)	Age	Nationalities	Partners nationality	Job role	Education
FF1	F	29	Nigerian	Netherlands	Factory staff	University level
FF2	F	33	Nigerian	Belgian	Interim staff	University level
FF3	F	30	Nigerian	Belgian	Factory staff	University level
FF4	F	29	Nigerian	Belgian	Child tutor	University level
FF5	M	36	Nigerian	Estonia	Technician	University level
FF6	F	31	Kenya	Netherlands	Cleaner	O level
FF7	M	26	Nigerian	Nigerian	Technician	University level
FF8	M	32	Nigerian	Nigerian	Logistics	University level
FF9	F	29	Nigerian	Ghana	Chef	O level
FF10	F	33	Ghana	Ghana	Administrative staff	University level
FF11	M	31	Togo	Morocco/BEL	Teacher	University level
FF12	M	32	Cameroun	Belgian	Logistics	University level
FF13	M	34	Nigerian	Estonia	Industrial staff	O level
FF14	M	35	Cameroun	Belgian	Logistics	University level
FF15	F	24	Nigerian	Belgium/Nigerian	Factory staff	University level
FF16	M	28	Nigerian	Belgian	Engineer	University level

Note. M = male; F = female. O Level (Secondary school education).

of data immersion not only created a familiarity with the data but also raised questions in the mind of the first author and stimulated the search to find answers in the data. The key questions each story was expected to answer were: how did the participants perceive fatherhood in the African context and Belgium, what were their expectations, and struggles, and how did the fathers define their roles in Belgium? The first author was in close discussion with the authors during the coding process. The authors grouped the codes into similar categories. While doing so, we noticed that some of the categories overlapped, so we regrouped them again. Going back and forth over the stories in this way was important to connect the dots and create new meanings (Lyons & Coyle, 2016). During this process, themes were identified within their narratives, especially the conflict of perceptions around fatherhood between the African and Belgian contexts and their individual experiences in the Belgian context. All themes were discussed again between authors, without breaking confidentiality. To provide a critical appraisal of this process, the second and third authors' contributions were very crucial for generating clarity and for a more reflective interpretation of the entire analysis.

During the data analysis, the thought of how the first author's background as an African could influence the data interpretations was an area of concern. Therefore, keeping a research journal throughout the research process was crucial and allowed her to reflect on her thoughts over time. Also, the back-and-forth discussions with the research team were crucial in keeping these subjective inputs in check.

Results

The findings presented in this section reveal the themes that describe the experiences of the young fathers, especially how they were redefining fatherhood in their host country. In the analysis of this study, temporality was indeed taken into consideration. Temporality was linked to the stories of the fathers regarding their lives before the onset of pregnancy (the past), the pregnancy and delivery (which are highlighted in the themes: facing new realities, shared decision making and negotiation of cultural values, changing identity and life priorities) are linked to both the present and future. Illustrative quotes were integrated into the thematic explanations for greater insight.

Expecting Fatherhood

The theme 'expecting fatherhood' highlights the father's reflections about their lives before the pregnancy news was announced. The desire of all the participants to become fathers was apparent in their narratives. As one participant put it, "I was very expectant to have a child" (FF14). However, there appeared to be a conflict between this sense of expectation and their preparedness. Around the time when they received the pregnancy news, most of the fathers spoke about the control they had over their social lives, the freedom to go anyway and be anywhere and plan their time with no extra responsibilities. As their stories progressed, many fathers acknowledged how unprepared they were for what they experienced. One father said "I underestimated what I was going to experience . . . I had to learn during the process" (FF11). Probing further into what participants thought about the role of

fathers during pregnancy, all participants believed that their major role is to support their partners. “The main thing is being supportive because she can’t do it all alone” (FF3). However, for many fathers “supportive” was still a term that many could not define at the beginning of this journey to becoming fathers.

Facing New Realities

The analysis highlights the theme “facing new realities” as a focal point in describing the differences in fathering cultures between African and Belgian contexts. It also highlights the redefinition of fatherhood perceptions toward the host’s fathering practices. Participants’ new realities were explored in these sub-themes: (a) losing freedom, (b) adapting to survive, and (c) the clash of cultures and the changing perception of fatherhood practices.

Losing Freedom

Participant narratives revealed their initial struggles with the perceptions of a father’s role in providing support here in Belgium. They spoke about the loss of personal freedom to the increasing daily commitments and responsibilities during the pregnancy and then as fathers. Their new reality was described as “a total nightmare, not in a bad way but in a very good way” (FF13). As their stories suggest, the new reality conveyed a period of their lives with less fun, as if the interesting part of their lives was over. Especially among fathers with European partners, these expressions of their loss was more intense as they embraced roles their counterparts back home would not even think of doing. Participants narrated vivid comparisons of the life of a typical father back home and compared it with their experiences in Belgium. Below is a narrative from an African father with a European partner.

I wasn’t doing my regular fun activities like watching football, doing the things I loved to do. All I did was what I could do at that moment. I was there for my wife and the baby. Before then, I went to play football like twice a week, I could not do that anymore. All my fun activities just ended with my new reality. (FF1)

Adapting to Survive

Many fathers admitted that they expected that there will be cultural differences following their migration to Belgium and acknowledged that adapting to their host’s new way of fathering and life, in general, was crucial for their survival. Especially for fathers with European partners, it felt like adapting was the only way to become the father their new environment and partners expected them to be. As one father said,

I knew there would be differences if I change from my home country to another country . . . if I have to survive, I have to adapt to the new way of life . . . Now in our home, I cook, back home I never cooked. (FF1)

The Clash of Cultures and Changing Perception of Fatherhood Involvement

The clash of cultures refers to the struggle the fathers faced with the western practice of fatherhood in Belgium that were contrary to their own conceptions of fatherhood. For example, the perception of a father’s role in African settings was described in these words:

The father’s role in my country is mostly to see that there is no problem with finances. From my own experience with fathers I knew back home, none of them said they were going to the hospital with their wives for checkups or other things, but they are always supporting, like buying vegetables, buying fruits and providing money for the needs of the family. But being physically present, I don’t think that’s the case. On the day of the delivery, many of them were at work or somewhere else when they were told that their wives had delivered. (FF1)

The clashes in perceptions are described in four instances: spousal participation in hospital settings, shared domestic responsibilities, the absence of extended family support, and preparation for birth.

Spousal Participation in Hospital Settings. To all the participants, the African father back home only had a financial responsibility toward the mother of his unborn child. Here in Belgium, it was an entirely different experience. In the words of a participant,

Since the very first appointment with the doctor, I had always been present, which is not customary where I come from . . . Back home, as a man, if your wife is pregnant or your wife delivers nothing changes, you just continue with your life. It’s like you get a phone call, your wife has delivered, you are so happy, you tell your friends your wife is at the hospital, she has just given birth . . . nothing changes. Because usually, her mother is there with her and the husband has no role to play there. (FF1)

Shared Domestic Responsibilities. The fathers acknowledged that being the man did not exempt them from domestic responsibilities, as is the case back home. Instead, fathers in Belgium were expected to share parental and domestic duties equally.

What I saw growing up was the ladies do more of taking care of the kids and the men go out to fend for food . . . Here it is different, it is 50-50. Here there is no male, there is no

female. You just know your roles and try to support each other. (FF3)

Absence of Family Support Systems. The fathers repeatedly spoke about the absence of family support within the European context. One father acknowledged that:

Our culture makes it that the mother of the wife comes to live with her daughter to help her in the first months after the child is born. If the woman's mother is not there the man's mother will come or the sister or any other close female relative can play that role. (FF3)

The fathers, especially those with European partners, acknowledged how they had to quickly adjust to their new and demanding role as a father from day 1.

I saw a lot of men and women taking care of their children alone and planning for everything. I knew it wouldn't be my mum who would be assisting us in everything. It's just going to be me, my wife, and the baby. (FF2)

Preparation for Birth. Experiencing fatherhood in a cultural setting where the coming of babies is prepared for by the parents themselves was something new for many of the African fathers. They acknowledged their awkwardness when shopping for the unborn or at information sessions where they practiced baby feeding or diaper changing a dummy baby. For example, as one participant stated:

I finally understood that in this culture, that's the way it works. Families prepare for babies' arrivals like that, and it took me a long time to realize that it's normal here . . . the other aspect of the preparation is the training and information sessions we had with my wife . . . They told us how the birth will go, and how we were going to carry the baby, how we were going to wash him and everything. And especially the moment when we did simulations with plastic babies, it felt very real. (FF11)

Shared Decision-Making and Negotiation of Cultural Values

In African culture, men are key decision-makers in key issues that involve their families. For migrants with African partners, decision-making on core values such as male circumcision was easier to make because both partners had similar views and upbringings. However, for the fathers with European partners, they were faced with the task of negotiating on some of their core values with their partners, such as child naming and male circumcision; the fathers spoke about the compromises and the constant conversations they have with their spouses to reach a decision on issues that an African father would have so

easily decided. For instance, one father spoke about the process he and his spouse went through regarding the choice of name for their son. He being Christian and his spouse Muslim did not make the process easy. They had to work through several name choices to come up with a name that did not sound religious and yet one that could be acceptable by both extended families.

For all the fathers with male children who participated in this study, the issue of male circumcision was still unclear. One father spoke about being attentive to his partner's choices, but careful not to give up his beliefs completely in the process. Their narratives affirmed that it was a kind of ongoing negotiation with their spouses, where they ensure they both can come to a logical common agreement they were both willing to accept.

For some people, the issue of circumcision is an issue of religion. In my case, it's more cultural, than religious. It's what we do, culturally. Even though I share a similar religion with my spouse, and so it should be easy to decide about circumcision, but my son is not circumcised yet. Because Belgians don't believe in circumcision and the hospitals are not yet equipped to handle that, I have had to look at it logically and see if it matters. We are both Catholics and here it's not a priority for Catholics in Belgium. I have had to look at the logic of it and I am not convinced in myself to continue in that culture if it is not ok with her. It doesn't make sense to force her to accept it. (FF16)

Changing Identity and Life Priorities

Many of the participants' words described how becoming fathers in Belgium changed their lives and exposed them to new perceptions about fatherhood that were unfamiliar. In the words of one participant, "I have to be honest; I didn't expect that the pregnancy would change my life this much initially" (FF11). The narratives of the first-time fathers revealed changes in their identity and a shift in their priorities as new fathers. Many spoke about changing life goals and priorities. One participant spoke about how his journey to fatherhood had helped define a new meaning for his life. He spoke about working hard to create a different life for his children, far better than his upbringing. Beyond the new responsibilities the men embraced in the home, the fathers spoke about scheduling work around their family needs.

Sometimes you, as the man, have to reschedule things to assist. I work in shifts. If I have the morning shift, then she can feed the baby at night and vice versa. We support each other like that. She doesn't do everything like the housework. We all shuffle it out. (FF3)

One informant described this phase as a time of evolution from a "me" mentality to a "us" mind-set (FF6). This

notion of changing mindsets was portrayed as a change in lifestyle from seeking personal goals to being more family-oriented. One way of becoming more family-oriented was described when they emphasized taking holidays to spend time with their families versus working hard to send money back home. They also spoke about the life lessons fatherhood had taught them and the kind of father they were becoming.

Fatherhood has taught me a lot . . . I have learned to pull myself together, to re-evaluate my choices to adapt to my new life. This has made me cultivate a kind of patience and a kind of introspection about how I function as a father—FF11.

Discussion

This narrative study unpacks the fatherhood experiences of African first-time fathers in a different cultural context. The above findings are summarized in two main topics: negotiating gender roles and core cultural values and understanding father roles and extended family support.

Negotiating Gender Norms and Core Cultural Values

This study demonstrates the flexibility of African fathers in adopting new socio-cultural norms in their new environment. It highlights the conflicting gender-based assumptions African fathers have to deconstruct to fit into the image of fatherhood in the Belgian context. The first-time African fathers embraced new fatherhood practices that crossed the perceived gendered lines of male and female roles in the home. The fathers acknowledged being co-players with their partners at each stage from pregnancy, birth, and in child care. Even though they strongly believed in their role as breadwinners, they were willing to also embrace domestic and child care responsibilities as well.

Many researchers believe that migration is a gendered process (Choi, 2019; Fresnoza-Flot & Shinozaki, 2017; Hagan, 1998; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Mahler & Pessar, 2006; Palriwala & Uberoi, 2008; Phizacklea, 2002) that is capable of impacting male identity and their roles in their families (Choi, 2019). To understand the fatherhood practices, the African fathers had to adjust to in Belgium, Lamb's definition of a father's involvement as "engagement, accessibility and responsibility" provides clarity about how fatherhood is perceived in most western contexts¹ (D'Angelo et al., 2012; Lamb et al., 1981). Fitting this definition into our study context, "engagement" covers the quality time participants spent in shared activities such as attending antenatal sessions or co-laboring with their partners. "Accessibility" speaks of their physical presence and availability in providing support, as evident

when they sacrificed fun times with their friends to be available at home. "Responsibility" was linked to welfare, such as when they carried out domestic tasks or changed diapers, and so on (D'Angelo et al., 2012; Lamb, 2000). We argue that the new fatherhood culture challenged the ideals of African masculinity as breadwinners and protectors. In the context of migration, the fathers were challenged to add to those ideals by being present, involved, and responsible for domestic tasks and child care. Adopting these Western constructs required them to redefine gender roles in the home and be comfortable with taking up responsibilities that they had previously perceived as "feminine" (McGill, 2014). Although challenging at first, many of the fathers were able to adjust to their new role with time and even prioritized their family time over other personal needs.

Several reasons might have contributed to the changes in the perception of the African fathers and why they adopted the fathering features of the host country. First, the African fathers acknowledged attending antenatal sessions. During these sessions, the fathers acquired knowledge about each stage of the pregnancy and even practiced with dummy babies. Our findings suggest that carrying out these activities allowed the African fathers to develop the self-confidence needed to adjust to their new roles in the absence of extended family support. As highlighted by researchers, lack of information hinders involvement and sensitivity even in motivated fathers (Cramer, 2018; Lamb et al., 1981; Reinicke, 2020). Therefore, we believe that providing relevant information to migrant African fathers is necessary for their successful transition to fatherhood in their host countries (Eggermont et al., 2017; Onyeze-Joe & Godin, 2020).

Migrant groups have been reported to adhere to their native cultural values while also adopting the cultural values of the host country to ensure a faster integration process (Ghimire, 2019; Roer-Strier et al., 2005). One of the core cultural practices in many African communities is male circumcision (Wilcken et al., 2010). For many of the African fathers in this study, this cultural practice of male circumcision was unnegotiable. However, for a few African fathers with European partners, this was a tough negotiation because their partners did not accept male circumcision at the time this study was carried out. As migrants in a culture that promotes gender equality, these African fathers acknowledged that they could not enforce circumcision without the consent of their partners. Emerging from this study is that the fathers shared decision-making with their spouses is an indication of acculturation motivated by a quest to fit into the host culture and to possibly gain acceptance. Brown described "fitting in" as adjusting oneself to be who one needs to be to gain acceptance in a particular situation (Brown, 2010). Hence, the degree to which a migrant can fit into a society

can influence the degree of acceptance they can receive from their host countries. The more migrants blend in, the less they are victims of cultural, relational, and socioeconomic marginalization, and social exclusion (Ghimire, 2019). Further research is needed to better understand these core value decision-making processes among mixed partners in Belgium.

Understanding Father Roles and Extended Family Support

The African fathers in our study agreed that a father's most important role is to provide in African cultures. Hence, it is expected that the "other support" is filled by extended female family members, especially at the critical moment of birth and early child care. However, there is a gradual erosion of these gendered models especially in urban cities with the growing number of women who can no longer fulfill these obligations because they also work long hours to support their families (Ampim et al., 2020). Other studies also confirm how this widening rural–urban migration gap in sub-Saharan African contexts is increasingly separating many urban families from their extended family support (Ampim et al., 2020; Badasu Delali, 2014; Waerness, 2012b). Hence, there is a possibility that this gap created by the absence of extended family support might inspire many African partners toward alternative ways of coping with gendered norms in the home. A recent study in Ghana has reported a "private" social transformation in which fathers acknowledged supporting their partners in domestic work and child care at home (Ampim et al., 2020). Sadly, in public, the fathers continued to assume the traditional gendered male stance out of fear of stigmatization (Ampim et al., 2020). A study in Nigeria also acknowledges this group of "private" involved fathers too (Onyeze-Joe & Godin, 2020). Perhaps, this suggests an evolving fatherhood culture especially among younger African fathers, who are more flexible toward practising a more involved or hands-on form of fatherhood (Ampim et al., 2020; Enderstein & Boonzaier, 2015). Also, considering that the fathers in our study were young first-time fathers, there is a possibility that they might have been observing these changing trends occurring in their native countries. Consequently, this might have contributed to their flexibility in adopting new fatherhood ideals as migrants in a more enabling environment, even though they acknowledged the existing traditional model back home.

Study Limitations

This study provided insights into the perceptions and challenges of African first-time fathers in Belgium. But there were limitations to this study that should be acknowledged. First, the fathers interviewed for this study were already in relationships and involved in child care, our study did not include fathers who were unable to face the new

responsibilities of fatherhood in their host country. Second, our study did not target single or divorced fathers, having this group in our study would have provided greater insights. Third, we acknowledge the bias that could have occurred because some of the fathers were interviewed with their partners present. Perhaps, this might have impacted their responses or other details they would have loved to share in the absence of their spouses. Fourth, conducting this study during the COVID 19 season limited our ability to recruit and interview more fathers to understand decision-making among mixed partners.

Conclusion

This narrative study bridges the gap in the literature about how migrant African fathers perceive and adjust to their new fathering roles in a Western cultural context. It reveals African fathers' native perceptions of fatherhood and explores how they redefine their conceptions of fatherhood to embrace changing views on deep-seated cultural and gender ideologies. It provided new insights into how African fathers negotiate on native cultural core values in a migratory context. It also highlights the key factor of extended family support in African fatherhood culture and provides insights on how African fathers are coping without family support in their host countries.

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Note

1. Western context refers to South and North America, European countries, New Zealand, and Australia.

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