

**“THE FATHER WOUND”: NARRATIVES OF PATERNAL
ABSENCE, SELF-WORTH AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT
AMONG YOUNG MEN IN JOS, PLATEAU STATE**

Enitan Oyenuga

Department of Psychology, Baze University, Abuja, Nigeria

*enitan_oyenuga@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT: This qualitative narrative article explores how young men in Jos, Plateau State, make meaning of paternal absence and how this absence shapes self-worth, emotional development and masculine identity. Guided by Attachment Theory, Trauma Theory and masculinity perspectives, the article asks how young men narrate father-related absence as a lived emotional and developmental experience rather than only a family-structure problem. It draws on composite narrative reconstructions from eight young men aged 20 to 35 whose childhoods were marked by death, separation, abandonment, harsh fathering, inconsistent care or emotional distance within the home. Narrative conversations were examined through reflexive thematic analysis, with attention to shame, longing, anger, guardedness, substitute father figures and attempts to break intergenerational patterns. Findings suggest that paternal absence did not affect participants in a uniform way. For some, it produced a lasting search for validation; for others, it appeared through excessive self-reliance, distrust of older men, difficulty with intimacy or anger that concealed sadness. Mothers, uncles, pastors, teachers, friends and personal reflection sometimes served as protective influences, although participants rarely described these supports as complete replacements for paternal recognition. The article argues that young men’s emotional struggles should not be dismissed as weakness or irresponsibility because many are negotiating childhood injuries within cultural expectations that demand toughness, provision and silence. It recommends trauma-informed, male-sensitive counselling, family psychoeducation and community spaces where father-related pain can be discussed without ridicule or moral judgement.

Keywords: Paternal Absence; Father Wound; Self-Worth; Emotional Development; Young Men; Jos; Qualitative Narrative Study

INTRODUCTION

Fatherhood is often discussed in terms of provision, discipline and household authority, yet the emotional meaning of a father’s absence is less often heard from young men themselves. In many Nigerian families, a father may be remembered as the person who paid fees, enforced rules or represented the family publicly (Habeeb & Odutayo, 2024). However, for some young men, the deepest wound is not only material deprivation. It is the memory of growing up without affirmation, guidance, protection and emotional recognition from the man whose presence was supposed to carry weight.

The phrase “father wound” is used in this article as a descriptive expression rather than a clinical diagnosis. It refers to the lingering emotional mark left when a young man grows up with a father who is dead, absent, rejecting, violent, inconsistent or emotionally unreachable (Opadele et al., 2026). In Jos, Plateau State, this experience may be shaped by migration, family separation, economic pressure, communal tension, death, divorce, polygynous family arrangements and the wider expectation that boys should become strong early. Some fathers are physically absent; others remain in the home but are emotionally unavailable. Both forms of absence can shape how young men understand self-worth, closeness and manhood.

Recent African and Nigerian scholarship supports the relevance of this concern. Osborne and Ahinkorah (2024) show that paternal influence has implications for cognitive, emotional, social and behavioural development in Africa. Nigerian studies also connect family structure, parental involvement, childhood adversity, parenting style and self-esteem with young people’s psychological adjustment and self-perception (Adewuya et al., 2026; Angwaomaodoko, 2023; Joseph et al., 2024; Lawrence & Adebawale, 2023). Yet many discussions still treat father absence as a demographic or moral issue rather than a lived emotional experience. This article asks how young men in Jos narrate paternal absence as an experience carried in memory, self-evaluation, anger, silence, relationships and imagined fatherhood.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The literature on father absence increasingly suggests that paternal absence should not be understood only as the physical absence of a father from the household. A more useful interpretation is that father absence becomes psychologically significant because of what the father is expected to represent in the emotional and social development of a young man. Mkhwanazi et al. (2024), for instance, found in South Africa that young men valued fathers not only because of economic provision, but also because of recognition, guidance and emotional care. Their position moves the discussion beyond the narrow idea that a father’s relevance lies mainly in his ability to provide financially. While financial support is clearly important, Mkhwanazi et al. (2024) show that young men also need fathers as figures of affirmation and emotional presence.

Zharima et al. (2026) extend this argument by showing that biological father absence can affect young men’s sense of identity, cultural belonging, social support and imagined masculinity. Compared with Mkhwanazi et al. (2024), who emphasise recognition, guidance and care, Zharima et al. (2026) push the discussion further into identity formation and masculine self-understanding. Both studies agree that fatherhood cannot be reduced to money, but Zharima et al. (2026) provide the stronger explanation for the present article because they show how paternal absence may enter the deeper question of who a young man believes himself to be. This is particularly useful for a study on young men in Jos because fatherhood in many Nigerian settings is not only a private family role; it is also connected to lineage, discipline, authority, social recognition and the meaning of becoming a man.

This does not mean that every young man without an involved father automatically becomes psychologically damaged. That conclusion would be too simple. The evidence instead suggests that paternal absence can create a gap that is both emotional and symbolic. A father may be missed not

only because he was unavailable, but because his absence leaves the young man without certain forms of validation, guidance and emotional anchoring. In this sense, the “father wound” is not merely about a missing person. It is about the meanings young men attach to that absence: whether they interpret it as rejection, abandonment, unworthiness, punishment or a lesson that men must survive without emotional softness.

The Jos setting adds a further layer to this argument. Plateau State has a long history of communal tension, farmer-herder violence, resource contestation and displacement, and Babatunde and Ibnouf (2024) show that conflict in Plateau has been intensified by identity politics, contested resource governance and the actions of state and local actors. Their analysis is not a study of father absence, but it matters here because communal violence and migration can reshape family life by removing men from households, separating children from paternal kin, weakening livelihoods and making fatherhood more difficult to practise consistently. Otorkpa et al. (2024) also found that young people displaced by conflict face mental-health risks that are worsened by prior trauma, poverty, parental violence and separation. Read alongside the fatherhood literature, these studies suggest that paternal absence in Jos should not be detached from the wider local pressures that unsettle family structure and emotional security.

Local Nigerian evidence also supports the argument that father absence and wider family disruption are connected to psychological wellbeing, although the studies approach the issue from slightly different angles. Yusuf and Aliero (2024) found psychological distress among fatherless secondary school students in Birnin Kebbi. Their study is useful because it provides a direct Nigerian link between fatherlessness and emotional difficulty. However, its focus on secondary school students means that it does not fully explain how father absence continues to shape young men as they move into adulthood. Ibigbami et al. (2024), on the other hand, do not focus only on fatherlessness, but they show that early childhood adversity can affect depressive symptoms through pathways involving resilience and self-esteem. Their contribution is important because it suggests that the problem is not simply the absence of a father in itself, but the way early adversity may weaken or reshape a young person’s self-evaluation and capacity to cope.

DadeMatthews et al. (2024) add another dimension by identifying family and social conditions among predictors of depression among Nigerian adolescents. While Yusuf and Aliero (2024) make fatherlessness more visible as a specific risk factor, and Ibigbami et al. (2024) explain the possible role of self-esteem and resilience, DadeMatthews et al. (2024) remind us that paternal absence does not occur in isolation. It is often located within wider family, social and economic conditions that may intensify or reduce its psychological impact. This article therefore takes a balanced position. It does not treat father absence as the only explanation for young men’s emotional struggles, but it also does not minimise its importance. Rather, it argues that paternal absence becomes most psychologically meaningful when it interacts with self-worth, family support, social expectations and young men’s understanding of masculinity.

Angwaomaodoko (2023) and Joseph et al. (2024) also help to clarify why the family context must remain central to the analysis. Angwaomaodoko (2023) emphasises parental involvement in students’ educational development, while Joseph et al. (2024) link parenting style with adolescents’ self-perception in Gombe State. Although neither study examines the father wound directly, both

support the wider point that young people do not develop self-understanding in isolation from family relationships. The present article builds on this position but moves beyond educational and adolescent outcomes by asking how young adult men narrate the emotional meanings of paternal absence in their own words.

The gap in the literature is that many studies explain father absence and early adversity through outcomes such as distress, depression, resilience and self-esteem, but fewer studies show how young men themselves narrate these experiences. Yusuf and Aliero (2024), Ibigbami et al. (2024) and DadeMatthews et al. (2024) provide Nigerian evidence that family-related adversity matters. Even so, their findings leave open an important question: how do young men describe the inner meaning of growing up without a father's emotional presence? This is where the present article makes its contribution. It shifts attention from father absence as a variable to father absence as a lived and narrated experience.

The article is guided by Attachment Theory, Trauma Theory and masculinity perspectives. Attachment Theory, particularly as developed by Bowlby (1982) and extended through Ainsworth et al.'s (1978) work on attachment patterns, is relevant because it explains how early relationships can shape emotional security, trust and expectations of closeness. From this perspective, an absent or emotionally unavailable father may influence whether a young man sees relationships as safe, reliable or threatening. Trauma Theory, especially Herman's (1992) view that traumatic experiences can disrupt safety, memory, emotional regulation and relationships, adds a different but related explanation. It suggests that painful father-related experiences may not remain only as memories; they may continue through anger, avoidance, bodily tension, emotional numbness and difficulty expressing vulnerability. While Attachment Theory helps explain the wound through broken emotional security, Trauma Theory helps explain why the wound may continue to appear later in behaviour, relationships and emotional regulation.

Masculinity scholarship is necessary because young men do not experience father absence in a gender-neutral way. Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity is useful here because it explains how certain cultural expectations of manhood can privilege toughness, control and emotional restraint. Barkley et al. (2026) describe masculinity as a kind of social box that can constrain how young men understand mental health. This argument is useful because it shows that even when young men are hurting, they may not have the social permission to express that pain directly. Genuchi et al. (2025) support this view from a different angle by linking traditional masculine ideology, thought suppression and externalised depressive symptoms among men. While Barkley et al. (2026) focus more on the restrictive social meanings attached to masculinity, Genuchi et al. (2025) show how those meanings may become psychologically expressed through suppression and externalised distress.

The present article supports this combined position because it explains why paternal absence may appear in young men's lives as anger, silence, emotional guarding or overachievement rather than direct sadness. If a young man grows up without paternal affirmation and is also taught that men should not appear weak, he may learn to hide longing under toughness. This is why father absence should not be treated only as a childhood event. It may become an emotional script that teaches young men how to handle closeness, shame, rejection, anger and vulnerability.

Taken together, the literature shows that father absence is best understood as a relational wound rather than a simple family-structure problem. Mkhwanazi et al. (2024) and Zharima et al. (2026) show that fathers matter for recognition, guidance, identity and masculine belonging. Yusuf and Aliero (2024), Ibigbami et al. (2024) and DadeMatthews et al. (2024) show that family disruption, early adversity, self-esteem and psychological distress are important within Nigerian youth contexts. Barkley et al. (2026) and Genuchi et al. (2025) further show that masculine expectations may make emotional pain harder for young men to name openly. The present article therefore argues that the “father wound” among young men in Jos should be understood through the interaction of paternal absence, self-worth, emotional development and masculine identity. It does not claim that father absence determines a young man’s future, but it insists that the meanings young men attach to that absence deserve careful psychological attention.

METHODOLOGY

This article adopted a qualitative narrative inquiry design. Narrative inquiry was appropriate because the concern was not to measure father absence statistically, but to understand how young men remember, interpret and organise father-related experiences within the story of their lives. The focus was therefore on meaning, memory, emotional language and the links participants made between childhood experiences and present self-understanding.

The article draws on narrative conversations with eight young men aged 20 to 35 living in Jos, Plateau State. Participants were selected purposively because they described childhood or adolescent experiences of paternal absence, including death, abandonment, separation, inconsistent contact, harsh fathering or emotional distance within the home. Recruitment was conducted through informal referral networks and youth/community contacts, with care taken not to pressure anyone to disclose painful family experiences. The conversations were held in private and safe settings chosen with the participants’ comfort in mind. Each conversation lasted approximately 40 to 70 minutes and followed a flexible topic guide covering childhood memories, self-worth, emotional expression, relationships, substitute father figures, coping and hopes for future fatherhood. English was used as the main language of conversation, although participants were allowed to use familiar Hausa, Pidgin English or local expressions where these better captured their meaning.

Ethical care was central to the study because the subject matter involved rejection, grief, family conflict and emotional pain. Ethical approval was obtained through the relevant departmental research ethics process, and participants gave informed consent before taking part. They were informed of the purpose of the study, their right to decline any question, their right to withdraw, and the measures taken to protect confidentiality. No real names, exact addresses or identifiable family details are presented. Participants were also advised that the conversations were not a substitute for therapy, and information about counselling support was made available where emotional discomfort arose.

The narratives were analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2022) reflexive thematic analysis, while retaining the narrative concern with how participants organised events and meanings across time. The researcher first read the interview notes repeatedly, wrote reflective memos, coded repeated meanings and then developed broader themes around absence, self-worth, masculinity, emotional

guarding and healing. The initial themes were compared against all eight accounts to ensure that they reflected the fuller set of narratives rather than only the most vivid quotations. The analysis was partly inductive and partly theory-informed: the themes emerged from participants' accounts, but Attachment Theory, Trauma Theory and masculinity perspectives were later used to interpret why these patterns mattered psychologically.

The quotations are presented as composite narrative reconstructions rather than verbatim transcripts. This choice was made because the topic was sensitive and the pool of participants was small, making direct extracts potentially identifiable even after names were removed. Each composite voice was built from overlapping meanings across the eight conversations, not from invented incidents. The pseudonyms David, Luka, Samuel, Musa and Gideon therefore represent analytic voices that bring together related experiences across the participant group. The use of five quoted voices does not mean that only five participants informed the findings; rather, the five voices were selected to represent themes that were checked against the full set of eight accounts.

The researcher approached the topic from a psychological and interpretive position, recognising that father absence can be easily moralised in Nigerian social conversation. Reflexive notes were therefore used to avoid treating participants either as damaged victims or as irresponsible men. The aim was to preserve the complexity of their accounts: the pain of paternal absence, the strength of substitute support, and the active effort some young men made to become different kinds of men.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Five major themes emerged from the narratives: growing up with the empty chair; searching for worth in a father's silence; learning manhood without a map; anger, distance and emotional guarding; and mothers, mentors and becoming the father they needed. These themes emerged from the narrative accounts before being interpreted through attachment, trauma and masculinity perspectives. The five pseudonymous voices used below are composite reconstructions drawn from the full set of eight participants, and each theme was checked against the wider data rather than treated as the experience of one individual alone.

Growing Up with the Empty Chair

The first theme concerned the felt presence of absence. Participants did not describe father absence only as a missing person in the household. They described an empty emotional space: nobody to ask certain questions, nobody to approve of their growth, nobody to defend them publicly, and nobody to model steady masculine presence. For some, the father was dead or gone. For others, he was physically present but emotionally unreachable.

"When people say I grew up without my father, they think it means he was not around the house. But even when I saw him, I still felt fatherless because there was no closeness, no advice, no place to rest my mind."

David's account shows that father absence is not always measured by residence. A father can be close in space and distant in meaning. This supports Mkhwanazi et al. (2024), who found that young men associated fathering with emotional care and recognition, not provision alone. It also reflects Osborne and Ahinkorah's (2024) argument that paternal involvement matters for emotional and social development. In the Jos narratives, the empty chair was therefore both physical and symbolic: it represented the missing conversation, the missing blessing and the missing assurance that the participant mattered to a father.

Searching for Worth in a Father's Silence

The second theme was self-worth. Participants often interpreted paternal distance as a statement about their value. Even when they intellectually understood that poverty, family conflict or adult choices contributed to the absence, emotionally they still asked whether something was wrong with them. This was especially strong among participants whose fathers cared for other children, remarried, or showed public kindness to outsiders while remaining cold at home.

"I used to ask myself what was wrong with me. If he could advise other people and even help other people, why was it difficult for him to look at me like his own son?"

Luka's statement reveals how paternal silence can become self-blame. The young man does not only lose a father's attention; he begins to question his own worthiness of love. Nigerian evidence makes this concern important. Ibigbami et al. (2024) link childhood adversity with depressive symptoms through self-esteem and resilience pathways, while Habeeb and Odutayo (2024) show that self-esteem among adolescents is shaped by family and social conditions. In the present narratives, wounded self-worth did not always appear as low confidence. Sometimes it appeared as overachievement, sensitivity to correction, fear of rejection or a strong need to be respected.

Learning Manhood Without a Map

A third theme was the struggle to learn manhood without consistent paternal guidance. Participants wanted more than financial support. They wanted someone to explain failure, anger, women, responsibility, faith, discipline and tenderness. In the absence of such guidance, some learnt from mothers, pastors, uncles, teachers, social media, peer groups or painful trial and error.

"Nobody really taught me how to be a man. I picked things from different places. Some were good, some were not good. Sometimes you copy hardness because that is the only thing that looks like strength."

Samuel's narrative shows that masculinity can be assembled from fragments. Hardness may become attractive because it appears to protect the young man from shame. Zharima et al. (2026) similarly found that biological father absence affected young men's sense of masculine and cultural identity. Barkley et al. (2026) also show that young men may experience masculinity as a social pressure that limits emotional expression. The Jos accounts suggest that young men did not simply

want fathers who commanded obedience. They wanted fathers who could offer correction without humiliation, authority without fear and strength without emotional starvation.

Anger, Distance and Emotional Guarding

The fourth theme concerned emotional development. Many participants described anger before they could name sadness. Some avoided deep conversations, became uncomfortable with affection, distrusted older men or entered romantic relationships with a quiet fear of abandonment. Others appeared responsible and hardworking, yet remained emotionally difficult to reach. This suggests that paternal absence may influence emotional intelligence by teaching boys that vulnerability is unsafe.

“I do not like begging people to stay. Once I sense that somebody can leave me, I leave first. People call it pride, but for me it is protection.”

Musa’s account reframes emotional distance as protection rather than mere arrogance. What appears as pride may be an old defence against rejection. Contemporary men’s mental-health research supports this interpretation. Genuchi et al. (2025) show that thought suppression can mediate the relationship between masculine ideology and externalised depressive symptoms, while Padma Sri Lekha et al. (2025) connect adverse childhood experiences, masculinity and emotional regulation with men’s wellbeing. In this article, anger and withdrawal are therefore interpreted as emotional languages through which young men communicate pain they have not been permitted to name directly.

Mothers, Mentors and Becoming the Father They Needed

The final theme concerned support and healing. Participants repeatedly honoured mothers who carried financial and emotional responsibility, but they did not romanticise maternal sacrifice as if it erased father-related pain. Uncles, pastors, teachers, neighbours and older friends also offered guidance. Still, participants often distinguished support from replacement. A good mentor could help, but he did not always remove the question of why their own father was absent.

“My mother tried. She became everything. But there are some questions you want to ask a man who is your father, not because your mother is weak, but because you want to know where you came from.”

Gideon’s statement avoids two extremes. It does not minimise mothers’ strength, but it also refuses to pretend that the father wound disappears because another caregiver stepped in. Protective relationships matter, as Adewuya et al. (2026) and Opadele et al. (2026) suggest, but they work best when they create room for honest processing rather than silence. Some participants also described healing as a decision to become different fathers in the future.

"I cannot say I am fully healed. But I know the kind of father I do not want to be. I want my child to know that strength can also speak gently."

This closing account presents young men not only as wounded sons, but also as possible agents of intergenerational change. However, resilience should not be used to minimise their need for support. The desire to father differently requires emotional education, mentoring and trauma-informed spaces where men can examine pain without ridicule. In Jos and similar Nigerian settings, faith communities, schools, counselling centres and youth organisations could help young men translate wounded silence into reflective growth.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This article explored paternal absence as a lived emotional and developmental experience among young men in Jos, Plateau State. The narratives show that the father wound is not limited to a father's physical disappearance. It can also arise from emotional distance, harshness, silence, inconsistent care and lack of recognition. Across the accounts, paternal absence shaped self-worth, masculine identity, trust, emotional expression and future parenting imagination.

The central argument is that young men's emotional struggles should not be dismissed as pride, weakness or irresponsibility without examining the relational histories that formed them. Father-related pain may be hidden beneath toughness because many young men have learnt that vulnerability attracts ridicule. A qualitative narrative approach is therefore valuable because it allows paternal absence to be understood through memory, meaning and everyday emotional language rather than through family categories alone.

The article recommends trauma-informed counselling services for young men in Jos and similar Nigerian settings. In practical terms, this means counselling that treats anger, silence, avoidance and emotional numbness as possible signs of unresolved relational pain rather than simply as bad behaviour. Male-sensitive counselling should create room for men to speak without shame, use culturally familiar language rather than only clinical labels, involve trusted mentors or family members where appropriate, and help clients connect father-related memories with present patterns of self-worth, intimacy and emotional regulation. Group-based support led by trained counsellors, psychologists, faith leaders and youth mentors could also reduce the isolation that many young men experience.

Community-based mentorship should be strengthened through schools, faith communities, youth organisations and psychologically informed male support spaces. Family psychoeducation is needed to help fathers understand that provision without emotional presence may still leave developmental gaps. Further qualitative studies should examine paternal absence among young women, compare rural and urban experiences in Plateau State and explore how mothers interpret the burden of raising sons in the absence of reliable paternal involvement.

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