

## Presence of the absent father

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# Presence of the Absent Father: Perceptions of Family among Peacekeeper-Fathered Children in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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## Abstract

The United Nations Missions in the Democratic Republic of Congo have faced heavy allegations of peacekeeper-perpetrated sexual exploitation and abuse. Reports indicate that sexual encounters between members of peacekeeping forces and female civilians have resulted in the birth of children; however, no conclusive information on these children exists to date. This is the first study to explore the perspectives of youth who were fathered and abandoned by peacekeepers. We analysed semi-structured interviews with 35 peacekeeper-fathered children (PKFC) regarding their perceptions of family in light of their fathers' absence. The results show that PKFC's lack of knowledge about their fathers significantly impacts their self-conception and social identity. Not relying on paternal support was perceived to exacerbate poverty while the inability to uncover paternal roots and family ties presented a barrier to cultural integration. Although increasingly reliant on their maternal family, PKFC received limited care from their mothers' kin networks, causing some to compare their upbringing to that of orphans. The resulting divergence between participants' ideals of family and their subjective life experiences created cognitive dissonance which was reduced through a situational attribution of neglect. PKFC without support mechanisms engaged in wishful thinking about relationships to their unknown fathers and increased the value of searching for them. Derived from their hope to overcome hardship, they saw the pursuit of ideal-typical family relations as the route to happiness and financial security. Based on the emotional presence of their absent fathers, we discuss family and identity-related challenges for PKFC and make recommendations for positive change.

**Keywords** United Nations peacekeeping · Democratic Republic of Congo · Children born of war · Family perceptions · Absent father · Cognitive dissonance

## Highlights

- Explores the perspectives of children born of war through data collected with child and adolescent PKFC.
- Analyses family relations via qualitative interviews and visual research.
- Illustrates youth's mental scripts of fatherhood and family life in the Democratic Republic of Congo.
- Identifies wishful thinking as a form of coping with father absence and related challenges in patrilineal societies.
- Adds to the limited knowledge about paternal orphans in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Sexual misconduct during United Nations (UN) peacekeeping (UNPK) has been reported since the 1990s when

peace support operations increased rapidly in numbers and strength. With rising awareness of sexual contact between

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members of UNPK forces and local host populations, mechanisms and policies were put in place to prevent what became recognised as a systematic problem of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA). While the extent to which SEA occurs varies with mission-level factors such as size and staffing of troops, every UN mission to date has been tainted by SEA allegations in one way or another, a strong indicator that it provides a serious challenge to UNPK (Nordås & Rustad, 2013). In 2003, the UN adopted a “zero-tolerance” stance and announced “special measures for protection from SEA” (UN General Assembly, 2003). Since then, the organization has strongly discouraged all forms of sexual interactions between UNPK personnel and beneficiaries of assistance, based on an assumed imbalance of power. Notwithstanding these regulations, two decades later, sexual misconduct is still widespread.

Crucially, women and men are no longer the only focus of discussions surrounding peacekeeper-perpetrated SEA. Since 2007, children conceived as a result of sexual relations between UNPK personnel and local women and girls have been acknowledged as an unintended consequence of peacekeeping (UN General Assembly, 2007). Known by the euphemism ‘peace-babies’, peacekeeper-fathered children (PKFC) have sporadically made international media headlines, yet there is little empirical data about them (Bastick et al. 2007; Simić and O’Brien 2014). The first study addressing PKFC showed that in Haiti mothers were often left alone with child caring responsibilities and raised their children in settings of extreme socio-economic deprivation (Lee & Bartels, 2019; Vahedi et al. 2019). Lee and Bartels (2019) found that in resource-deprived Haitian communities where many lacked essential goods for survival, financial hardship was both a key factor pushing women and girls to have sexual relations with peacekeepers and a key result of the abandonment of peacekeeper fathers (The World Bank, 2021b). This suggests that peacekeepers who negate their paternal obligations increase the economic and social vulnerability of mothers and subsequently, leave their children to grow up in unfavourable circumstances.

The present study uses the peacekeeping missions in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) as a case study to fill the substantial knowledge gap surrounding the life courses of PKFC. The UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO, formerly MONUC) is one of the most significant UN interventions based on its size (20,000-strong peacekeeping force at peak), budget (\$1,5 billion USD/year at peak) and years of operation (1999-present) (UN Peacekeeping, 2021). It is also widely implicated in scandals and allegations of SEA (Kovatch, 2016). The duration of the mission, the large size of armed troops and the scope of accusations would suggest that there are a significant number of PKFC in the DRC. Furthermore, the DRC remains one of the economically poorest and most

conflict-ridden countries in the world, with structural imbalances, informal labour markets and transactional sexual relations increasing the number of children conceived with UNPK personnel. Ranked 175 out of 189 countries on the Human Development Index, 73% of the DRC’s population lives on less than \$1.90 USD/day (The World Bank, 2021a). High levels of poverty, political instability, and inequitable gender norms are likely to make the consequences of absent peacekeeper fathers more burdensome (UN Development Programme, 2019). Thus, we believe exploring the situation of PKFC in the DRC stands to provide a crucial foundation for further research and broader conceptualisations regarding their life courses. Before describing the methodology and empirical findings, we briefly discuss the academic debates in which this research is situated.

## Children Born of War

Children born from sexual encounters between foreign soldiers (members of foreign military or peacekeeping forces) and local civilian mothers are referred to in scholarship as Children Born of War (CBOW) (Lee & Mochmann, 2015). Although there is no reliable data about the numbers of CBOW, their existence is considered a global and significant phenomenon with conservative estimates suggesting a minimum of 500,000 children having been born in various 20<sup>th</sup> century conflicts (Grieg, 2001). Research in different geopolitical or historical contexts has identified CBOW as marginalised groups who face similar challenges growing up (Lee, 2017). Psychological studies show a higher prevalence of childhood adversities, maltreatment and psychiatric disorders like depression and anxiety (Glaesmer et al. 2012, 2017; Kaiser et al. 2015). Stigmatisation and ostracization, in particular, represent formative experiences in the childhood and adolescence of many CBOW that affect their emotional development (Aßmann et al. 2015; Stelzl-Marx 2015). The common perception of CBOW as ‘illegitimate’ or ‘foreign’ complicates identity development and has a negative impact on their position within families and communities (Wagner et al., 2022b).

Since CBOW rarely grow up with their fathers, interpersonal relationships with other family members fundamentally impact their psychosocial well-being (Stelzl-Marx, 2015). Nonetheless, their perceptions of family are relatively unexplored, and few studies have attempted to answer how the uncertainty about their biological origin affects their sense of self and purpose. Studies which explored vital questions around fatherhood showed that paternal absence and non-disclosure of paternal ancestry are critical aspects for CBOW’s self-perception that might lead to identity crises (Denov & Piolanti, 2020; Mitreuter et al. 2019;

Stelzl-Marx 2009). This uncertainty eventually pushes many CBOW to embark on a search for their fathers, often with limited success.

In contrast to children born in the aftermath of other conflicts in central Africa whose mothers were often abducted, violently raped or forcefully impregnated (e.g., those conceived during the Rwandan genocide or the Lord's Resistance Army conflict in Northern Uganda), the circumstances of PKFC's conception are frequently less violent and at times consensual (Lee, 2017). Nonetheless, peacekeeper fathers who conceive children in asymmetrical relations with local women typically negate their responsibilities, causing PKFC to be raised by single mothers or in alternative family arrangements (Lee & Bartels 2019; Vahedi et al., 2019). The absence of peacekeeper fathers increases PKFC's chance of living in poverty and limits their familial support networks. Given their father's lack of involvement and unknown identities, PKFC share cultural commonalities with paternal orphans, whose living conditions have been more widely researched.

## Paternal Orphans in Sub-Saharan Africa

Since no participant in this study lived with their biological father, the research is situated amongst academic debates about children growing up in absent father homes. Although the norms of family and kinship are changing throughout Africa, family structure in patriarchal settings is traditionally comprised of parents, children and generations of other close relatives like grandparents and unmarried siblings (Odimegwu et al. 2020). Officially an orphan is defined as a child who lost one or both parents due to death (UNICEF, 2006). However, in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), the term is also used to describe 'social orphans', children with family members who are unable to care for them or who have abandoned them due to circumstances such as poverty (Johnson et al., 2012). Multi-generational family networks play a pivotal role in the care of youth who are separated from one or both parents (Odimegwu et al., 2020). This is particularly important in the context of poverty where the public infrastructure for other forms of assistance is lacking (Aldersey et al., 2016), and orphanages are often ill-equipped, with evidence documenting insufficient beds, food and clothes (De Buhr, 2006).

While some research focusing on paternal orphans has found indicators of diminished child well-being (Amato, 2005; McLanahan et al., 2013), most studies suggest that healthy family dimensions like affection and communication are more important than family structure. Yet, researchers have noted that problems with mental health and development might occur if the missing parentage leads to low household income or a general lack of support

(Golombok 2015; Weinraub et al. 2002). In line with that, Richter and Morrell (2006) argue that depending on the particular context and reasons for parental absence, psychological and social consequences for children will differ. In patrilineal societies like DRC, children are born into their paternal families, and it is mostly the father's responsibility to provide for children (Tonheim, 2012). The absence of fathers puts children at a higher risk of financial insecurity and deprivation of other essential goods (e.g., Eddy et al., 2013; Hermenau et al., 2015; Operario et al., 2008). Thus, the implications of growing up in absent-father homes are culturally embedded. While male parentage appears less relevant in studies conducted in western cultures, findings from patrilineal societies where the father's lineage determines children's social status present different outcomes.

South Africa is experiencing one of the world's highest figures of fatherlessness and thus has become the centre of research on Orphaned and Vulnerable Children (OVC) in SSA (Hall and Sambu 2018). Hall and Sambu estimate that less than one-third of South African children live with both their biological parents. Previous research in South Africa has shown that family structure (nuclear, single-parent, extended family) is linked to educational outcomes (Operario et al. 2008). Moreover, the presence of fathers was found to be associated with the coverage of children's basic needs and their healthy psychological and cognitive development (Eddy et al. 2013). The limited availability of resources (e.g., access to health care, schooling, inheritance) might further reduce their chances of pursuing social stability and cause psychological strain on their well-being in the long term (Hermenau et al. 2015).

Country-level estimates for DRC state that 12% of children do not live with any parent, and 26% only live with their mothers (UNICEF, 2018). The likelihood of becoming a paternal orphan increases with age and is higher in urban areas and impoverished neighbourhoods (UNICEF, 2018). In DRC, substantial resources flow within family and community networks to help raise children who are abandoned or separated from a parent (De Herdt 2007; Shapiro & Oleko Tambashe 2001). Linked to clan structures, kin networks go to considerable length to assist single mothers in caring for children (Foster 2007). Nonetheless, first-hand perspectives of paternal orphans are lacking, and little knowledge exists on the socio-cultural scripts that shape children's perceptions of family in this context. Reportedly, OVC who live in extended families might fall into a 'sub-servient role' and not be granted the same rights or privileges as biological children in the household, especially if resources are already sparse, preventing all children from being educated (Tonheim 2012; Verhey 2004). This evidences the important link between family structure and economic well-being and illustrates the implications of fathers' absence for PKFC.

## Present Study

Despite indications that PKFC are a sizeable group within CBOW, their perspectives are missing entirely from the scholarly and political discourse (Lee, 2017). By analysing the views of 35 PKFC regarding family relationships, the present study addresses three substantial gaps in research on CBOW. First, academic studies focusing on family relations and familial identity of CBOW have not been conducted widely. The role of fathers, in particular, remains largely unexplored. Oliveira and Baines (2020) and Mitreuter et al. (2019) provide a starting point in discussing CBOW's perspectives on what fatherhood should entail but many aspects of their unique biographical narratives and family situation are not yet well understood. The present study is concerned with how PKFC conceptualise their families in light of their fathers' absence and undisclosed paternal roots, providing a key contribution to the field of CBOW research. Second, existing testimonies of CBOW are based mainly on their perspectives as adults which might not reliably portray their concerns as children and adolescents. By interviewing PKFC between the ages of 6 and 19, we present their perceptions at earlier stages of life and evaluate how their unique background affects their formation of a sense of self. Third, comparing the experiences of CBOW in recent conflict settings has shown that there are similarities and differences across geopolitical locations, yet few case studies from SSA exist (Lee, 2017). We address this issue by exploring PKFC's relationship with their families in eastern DRC and relating their experiences to those of paternal orphans in SSA. Hence, the findings extend the limited knowledge about CBOW and OVC in SSA.

## Methods

A total of 35 individual interviews with Congolese youth were conducted; 22 with children aged 6–12 and 13 with adolescents aged 13–19. Depending on the group of participants interviewed, we used a mix of semi-structured interviews and participatory visual research to explore their experiences and examine the role of family for PKFC's life courses. Since children were expected to be less responsive to a traditional interview format, they were asked fewer questions and instead were engaged through a family drawing and photo-elicitation task (Fury et al., 1997; Kaplan & Main, 1986). Adolescents received more detailed and lengthy questionnaires about their perceptions of family and identity and did not participate in visual research.

We designed the data collection strategy as part of a larger mixed-methods study that explored peacekeeper-civilian relations in DRC from May to August 2018. Permission to speak with the youth was provided by guardians

who were recruited through a snowball technique and had previously shared their perspectives in an interview. Verbal assent was further obtained from the youth themselves. Children aged six years or older were eligible for participation if their guardian stated that they were aware of their paternal heritage. The present article will focus exclusively on data collected with PKFC. More information concerning the larger study and interviews conducted with guardians of PKFC can be found in Wagner et al., 2020.

Interview locations included Bukavu, Kalemie, Beni, Bunia, Kisangani, and Goma, where UN bases were established. The sites were chosen according to base size, years of operation, and nationality of the troop contributing country. Two community-based partners implemented the study: Multidisciplinary Association for Research and Advocacy in the Kivus by United Junior Academics (MARAKUJA) and Solidarité Féminine pour la Paix et le Développement Intégral (SOFEPADI). MARAKUJA is a non-profit organisation that connects Congolese researchers to realise large-scale data collection projects. They facilitated the broader mixed-methods research. SOFEPADI is a non-governmental organisation that advocates for gender equality and women's rights. Two female SOFEPADI research assistants who had previous experience working with vulnerable populations carried out the qualitative interviews analysed here. They completed a five-day training on research ethics, data management, and collecting data with young people prior to the study.

## Family Drawing Paradigm

Over the last two decades, there has been a significant conceptual shift when thinking about children as contributors of unique perspectives, rather than reproducers of knowledge on their way to adulthood (Einarsdottir et al., 2009). Since research with children raises specific challenges (e.g., ability to consent and quality of the collected information), scholars have debated which data collection tools align best with their emotional and cognitive abilities. Methods involving drawings are considered a nuanced, yet playful tool to gain insight into children's psychology and they have therefore reached particular popularity in work with very young participants (Mitchell, 2008). Since drawings function mostly independent of linguistic ability and development, they are versatile and prominent in contexts where the formal education level of participants is unknown and verbal interview skills are still limited. The family drawing paradigm (FDP) has been recognised as a standardised technique that facilitates understanding of children's place within a family unit and familial relationships (e.g., Gullone et al., 2006; Madigan et al., 2003; Roe et al., 2006). Designed to gain insight into children's representational models of family in early childhood (Fury

et al., 1997; Kaplan & Main 1986), researchers have adopted the FDP in clinical settings to explore aspects of family separation (Carmela et al., 2019) and dysfunctionality (Arteche & Murray, 2011). In the present study, we employed family drawings to explore the household composition of PKFC and their engagement with family members despite the potential absence of those individuals. In order to facilitate these conversations, participants in the age group 6–12 were asked to “draw your family” using the provided A4 sheet of paper and a choice of coloured pencils. No further instructions were given. Since the drawings were generated within a specific cultural context, they were followed up by a subsequent discussion that encouraged participants to describe their finished drawings and voice their rationale. As part of the assessment, research assistants addressed each individual in the drawings and asked: “can you tell me something about this person?”. The children’s subsequent comments served as the basis for our evaluating how closely the visual material reflected the children’s living situation.

### Semi-Structured Interviews

Interview guides with topic questions and prompts were constructed to serve the unique situation of PKFC but drew from existing literature about family and identity in the context of CBOW (Lee & Mochmann, 2015; Lee 2017; Mitreuter et al. 2019). They were initially drafted in English, translated into Kiswahili, Lingala, and French and then independently back-translated to ensure accuracy, with discrepancies discussed among the research team. Interviews were delivered in Kiswahili, Lingala, or French as preferred by the participant. SOFEPADI team members evaluated the questions for cultural sensitivity, relevance, and appropriateness. The interview guides for children contained questions concerning their (1) family demographics, (2) sense of belonging, (3) family and community acceptance, (4), knowledge about the UN and relationship to their fathers. In the first part of the interview, they were asked for insight into their living situation and relationships with family members. This was done via the FDP. They then received topic questions and prompts concerning their sense of belonging and acceptance. The last part of the interview employed photo-elicitation as a visual element to probe PKFC to discuss their relationship with their fathers in more detail (Harper 2002; Pyle 2013). More specifically, children were presented with photographs of MONUSCO personnel playing with Congolese children. The photos (sourced from the UN website) were anticipated to invoke comments about the UN and peacekeeper fathers without explicitly mentioning PKFC’s heritage.

Adolescents who were expected to be more advanced in their identity formation received more detailed and lengthy

questions about how the participants’ representation of family, or lack thereof, shaped their identity construction. They were prompted to discuss their (1) family demographics, (2) knowledge about their fathers and emotions towards them, (3) relationship with their mothers, (4) sense of belonging and acceptance, (5) desired communication with their fathers and (6) contact with other PKFC. A significant difference between the interviews with children and adolescents was that child interviews did not explicitly refer to PKFC’s background while adolescent interviews directly addressed their heritage in the questions, e.g.,: PKFC 6–12: “Some people might think that you are different or more special than other children in your community. Do you know why they might say that?” PKFC 13+: “Some people might think that you are different or special because of who your father is. Is this something you have noticed?” This served to mitigate potential risks for children to find out undisclosed information about their origin but also allowed the research team to judge whether identity-related aspects of being a PKFC were actually tangible for children. The full interview guides are included in the article’s appendix. Questions were broad, open-ended and tailored towards youth’s responses and their willingness to share lived experiences (Aitken, 2001). Non-directive probes facilitated structure while letting PKFC drive the discussion. This was done to ensure that participants were at ease during the interview and did not feel pressured to stay on topic and complete a research activity at the expense of their comfort.

The duration of each interview was determined by the participant’s openness and willingness with which information was provided. Due to the non-invasive questioning (broad and open interview style) and participants’ varying cognitive/emotional ability to address survey items, the duration of interviews varied between participants. Most interviews took 15 to 20 min to conduct with the family drawing exercise taking up about half of the interview time with children. Depending on personal preferences, interviews mostly took place outdoors in a quiet area or in participants’ homes, as long as venues provided enough privacy. If requested by children in the age group 6–12, mothers were present during the interviews as silent observers. All interviews were audio-recorded using Zoom H4n Pro devices. They were later transcribed verbatim and translated to English by professional translators.

### Ethical Approval

Youth’s interviews were first discussed with guardians, and the guardians’ informed consent was obtained. Having participated in the research themselves, guardians understood the goals of the research. PKFC were told that sharing their ideas was meaningful and important so that those

looking to improve their situation could understand how they feel. After discussing the project in an age-appropriate manner, they then gave verbal consent themselves. Written consent was waived due to anticipated differing levels of literacy and the child-centred approach minimising ethical risks. Both guardians and PKFC were given the opportunity to ask questions and could withdraw their consent to the study at any time. No identifying information was collected, and the research took place in private locations, often in the homes of PKFC. The study protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Birmingham (ERN\_18-0083) and by Queen's University (6019042). Participants did not receive financial compensation but were provided with refreshments during the interview.

### Data Analysis

The qualitative thematic analysis was data-driven and performed using NVivo 12.2.0. The translated and typed transcripts were assessed following an inductive explorative approach (Walters, 2001; Maxwell, 2012). The first author generated initial codes by reading the transcripts for emerging themes and dividing the content into precise units of meaning (Mayring, 2004). The first author then re-read the interviews at a latent, interpretative level, defining common narratives and patterns in semantic content and establishing relationships between codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The codes from the qualitative interviews were triangulated with codes developed from analysis of the FDP. Adapting elements of the rating scale by Tognazzo (1999), the assessment of the family drawings focused on content interpretation more than the graphic level of the pictures. Similar to the coding of transcripts, the first author identified intergroup trends regarding features that emerged in several drawings (Stanczak, 2007). This resulted in an assessment of cohesion within the family unit: (a) the inclusion and exclusion of family members (who is in the drawing) and (b) the presentation of family members (how are the individuals positioned/characterised). The importance of these two aspects has previously been discussed in studies focusing on familial identity that have highlighted family composition and grouping of individuals as an indicator of children's adjustment to altered family life, e.g., their response to marital conflict (Dunn et al., 2002).

The codebook of themes, categories, and subcategories was shared and discussed with the wider research team. The SOFEPADI research assistants who carried out the interviews, as well as Congolese translators were consulted during the coding stage to critically assess themes and incorporate relevant knowledge regarding the Congolese culture into the analysis.

In the remainder of this article, we highlight the conceptualizations produced by PKFC regarding their families.

The first section depicts relationships with family members, or lack thereof, as experienced in daily life. As part of this section, the consequences of absent fathers and the role of mothers and maternal family members in raising PKFC are discussed. The second section captures the representational models of family shared in the FDP. Representative quotes and drawings are used to illustrate key themes during the conversations, although it should be acknowledged that these were chosen by the authors, who are non-Congolese researchers, and thus there may be some cultural bias in the analysis.

### Results

As per inclusion criteria, all PKFC were aware of their paternal heritage. Yet, few mentioned details about their context of conception or discussed their parents' relationship. Most participants had not lived or previously spent time with their fathers; and many did not know their fathers' names. The majority of PKFC had been told that their father left around the time of pregnancy or birth. None of the participants were in contact with their fathers when the interviews took place in 2018, except for a PKFC whose Congolese father worked for UNPK in the Central African Republic. Two PKFC (twins) received occasional support from their father, in the form of clothing. All others reported no financial contributions from their fathers to the household where they lived at the time of the interview. PKFC seldom specified their father's ethnicity but referred to them as white or black men, Europeans or foreigners. A subsection identified the fathers' nationality, amongst them Beninese, Nepalese, Moroccan, and Tanzanian.

The majority of PKFC lived in poverty. They were deprived of food, housing, education, school supplies, clothing or personal hygiene products. While the levels of these unmet needs differed, all PKFC struggled with access to at least one basic resource. Living situations of PKFC varied widely. Reportedly, no child was raised by both their biological parents and few lived with a stepfather. Instead, it was relatively common for PKFC to be brought up by other relatives and half the participants indicated that they were living in a household of maternal grandparents or aunts and uncles. One-third of PKFC no longer lived with their mothers due to maternal death, child abandonment, mothers living abroad or having relocated to other cities. Three PKFC spoke about mothers returning to their compound only infrequently. PKFC occasionally lost touch with siblings, and no PKFC specified receiving support from older siblings.

### Father and Paternal Family

Participants reported several challenges associated with fatherlessness. First and foremost, the vast majority discussed

the financial implication of their limited paternal care. Participants of all ages expressed frustration about the lack of material support from fathers, indicating that even the youngest children saw their insufficient access to resources as unjust and directly linked to their father's absence. For example, "I remember my mother, but I know nothing about my father. This is the reason why I am always hungry. If he was living with me, I wouldn't be hungry." (Bukavu, 10). PKFC imagined that if present, their fathers would have provided for them and contributed to their general well-being.

Younger children mentioned that showing others what one receives from one's father, e.g., clothes or toys, was a matter of pride and social acceptance; not being able to do that marked them as outsiders: "My friends sometimes decry me by saying that I use their dolls while never bringing any of my own. This makes me feel sad and upset and triggers thinking of my departed father. They sometimes insult me saying that I am crazy, stupid, imbecile and poor. They insult me this way because of poverty." (Bukavu, 12). This suggests that economic constraints, in conjunction with fatherlessness, had social repercussions.

Economic deprivation also denied many adolescents the chance of completing or accessing formal education. Since DRC is a patrilineal society, participants widely perceived it as a paternal obligation to ensure that youth pursued their studies. Living with limited educational opportunities, they felt that their fathers had failed them in not assuming that responsibility, leaving them with fewer prospects than their peers, as illustrated by this youth, "I feel sad and disappointed because my father has never schooled me. I wish he would take me to school and help me buy shoes and clothes." (Bukavu, 12).

The father's absence was characterized as missing social support and emotional guidance in navigating daily challenges, especially when coupled with difficult living conditions. Several PKFC showed signs of depression or anxiety that they associated with the stressors of their daily lives and lack of paternal care: "My mother always goes here and there. My neighbours hate me and say that I have to look for my father. I am worried a lot; I am not stable enough to live such a life. Therefore, I often wonder where my father is by saying 'father, where are you? Come take me'." (Kisangani, 15). Many PKFC did not fully comprehend the reasons for their father's absence and not only felt deprived of a relationship with their fathers but also of any knowledge about them. PKFC in our study rarely had narratives or information regarding their paternal origin: "Since I was born, I have never had the chance to learn anything about him apart from hearing that I have one. I really know nothing about him. I have never heard his voice, not even once." (Bukavu, 13). The described lack of memories, or representation of fathers in participants' homes, makes their absence more absolute and aggravating.

Nevertheless, PKFC seemed reluctant to question the matter; maybe to avoid disconcerting confrontations or to comply with social standards of respect towards their mothers. Left in the dark about this vital part of their biographies, some PKFC created stories justifying or explaining their father's reasons for leaving to partially fill this void: "My mother told me that my father came for service purposes. Then he made my mother pregnant and left for America. Maybe his mission was over, and he was supposed to leave, I don't know." (Kisangani, 13). These experiences echo those reported by youth in similar contexts in SSA (Manyatshe 2013; Nduna & Sikweyiya, 2015).

Several adolescents struggled with uncertainty around their lineages and ethnicity. Not knowing their father's nationality made it difficult for some to form racial reference groups: "My mother gave me a Congolese name. People say that I am Congolese because of my skin colour. Sometimes they also challenge me, saying that I am not Congolese. That offends me." (Kisangani, 13). Although family has a critical role in helping youth cope with stressors that impact their sense of self, PKFC in our study were often left to their own devices with the task of resolving their identity.

Generational contracts implicit in patriarchal family structures determine the social value of paternal kinship groups and that men are carriers of cultural identity. With mothers struggling or refusing to disclose their paternal identities, PKFC not only lacked the support of their father as an individual but also that of their paternal families and clans. Relatedly, PKFC reported that the difficulties experienced concerning their absent fathers were compounded by a sense of illegitimacy, due to the unknown family ties and tribe. Due to these missing connections, PKFC might experience challenges related to inheritance or marriage in the long term and thus might be compromised in establishing their own families. For many Congolese, marriage is a way of ensuring lineage making, access to resources and social acceptance through association with a clan. Hence, fathers and paternal families serve as a link between family and society (Makofane, 2015). With absent fathers, participants relied increasingly on their single mothers and maternal family networks. We will therefore now look at the role of mothers and the consequences of non-nuclear families.

## Mother and Maternal Family

The support and love of mothers are especially vital to children's well-being in single-parent households. In the present study, PKFC reported conflictual feelings towards their mothers and tension-filled mother-child relationships. Some talked about lengthy periods of separation from their mothers, or only saw them intermittently. In these scenarios,



mothers typically lived elsewhere or travelled to other provinces for employment or new relationships. This is consistent with prior research in SSA, highlighting the migration of single mothers to urban areas for work, while grandmothers raised the PKFC (De Herdt 2007; Odimegwu et al. 2020). In instances where mothers had relocated yet maintained a relationship with the PKFC, they usually contributed to the household income of fostering families. In other cases, PKFC believed mothers had migrated to start a new chapter in their lives without them, as was the case for the following participant, “I don’t talk to my mother any longer. She is in Kinshasa; here I live with my grandparents. I really don’t know much about my siblings because I don’t stay with them. I only stayed with one for a short period of time. I have never seen my father, and I only saw my mother for a little while.” (Kisangani, 15).

Many PKFC lived in extended families. The relationship to members of the larger family or kin group was generally described as nurturing and supportive. In some instances, coresident attachment figures like maternal grandparents, uncles or aunts filled the parental gap in PKFC’s lives. In line with what has previously been described as ‘social fathering’ of OVC (Denov & Piolanti, 2020; Nduna & Sikweyiya, 2015; Richter & Morrell, 2006), some PKFC found alternative father figures in other adult males. One youth explained,

My mother delivered me, she left and abandoned me when I was two months old. She dropped me off at my grandparents. When my uncle saw that I was suffering there, he picked me up and took me to his house four years later. He started supporting me very much, including feeding me, buying me clothes and shoes, schooling me and everything. At this moment, I am still living at my uncle’s where they take good care of me. They consider me as if my uncle was my father and my aunt my mother. (Bukavu, 14)

Traditionally, fatherless children in DRC are raised as part of a larger household and mothers are supported by close relatives. After conceiving children with UNPK personnel, mothers sometimes faced stigma and rejection by their families (Wagner et al., 2020). Low-income family networks were not always able to carry the expenses of childcare. In extreme cases, this led to PKFC being cut-off from maternal family networks, with mothers needing to provide economically; in addition to fulfilling the role of the sole caretaker. Many mothers were young when they gave birth and had not completed their education to a degree that enabled gainful employment. Thus, the loss of maternal family connections made it very difficult for them to raise PKFC, as this child concluded, “My mother has a miserable life; she does not feed us quite well.” (Goma, 10). Two PKFC reported that their mothers were sex-workers and

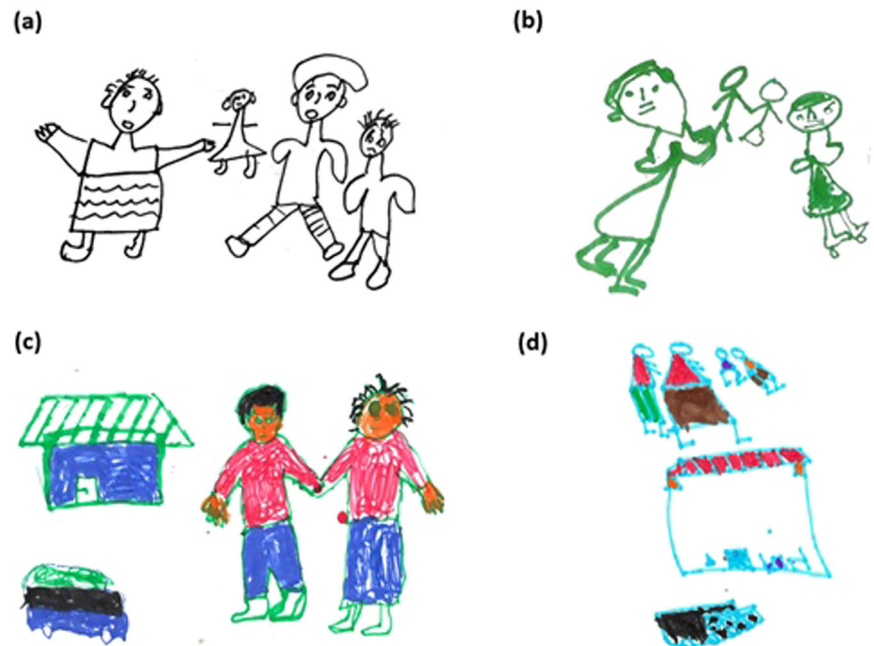
considered their clients fluctuating new partners. Such circumstances are likely to constitute an unstable environment for youth that might impact their sense of security (Mpot-seng, 2019). Participants occasionally felt ill-treated by their mothers, blaming them for not assuming parenting roles or having cut their emotional and financial connection to them. These PKFC indicated that their mother’s abandonment was the source of their unmet needs:

I don’t know what to say about my mother. I don’t think she considers me her child any longer since she remains quiet when people [extended family] are asking her for money. These days during which my uncle is sick and can’t obtain money, my so-called mother responded by saying ‘stop disturbing me’ and switched off her phone[...] She abandoned me and my two younger brothers. (Bukavu, 14)

### Orphan Identity

PKFC discussed the presence and involvement of family members as essential for their identity construction and community acceptance. This indicates that their sense of self is salient in relation to others and that as is common in DRC, identity is culturally determined and rooted in communalism. As illustrated above, the fathers’ absence held significant financial consequences, and was perceived as a barrier to psychosocial well-being. Many youth were cut off from paternal and, in some instances, maternal family ties and expressed an intimate need for care, security and love. They chose to identify with OVC due to the limited support available to them. Participants expressed that their lack of care resulted in a sense of isolation and otherness. The absence of family due to parents being unknown, dead or living elsewhere was perceived as a void in social identity: “I am like an orphan. MONUSCO should remember us who were left here in Kisangani. We are considered orphans.” (Kisangani, 13). The term orphan or “Yatima” in Kiswahili was used independently of whether PKFC were living in isolation or with their mothers; the fact that they were excluded from parts of traditional family life seemed to weigh heavily on their identity, as expressed here, “I would like to tell him to think about me wherever he is. He needs to know that he left me in DR Congo. I am suffering. He should know that I don’t have a family. If my mother dies, who will raise me?” (Kisangani, 13). The adoption of an orphan identity might further reflect PKFC’s uncertainties regarding the future. In areas with exceptionally low life expectancy due to poverty, armed conflict and lack of health care, family networks are a crucial form of security for youth with precarious caregiver circumstances. The story of a ten-year-old boy, who claimed he watched his mother die before running away from war,

**Fig. 1** Examples of family drawings that include absent peacekeeper fathers



indicated the despair in losing one parent without being able to rely on the other: “My mother told me that my father is white, but she didn’t show him to me. I was asking her about him, but she didn’t tell me anything until she died. I don’t know where my father is.” (Bunia, 10).

Without extended family networks intervening to care for paternal orphans, PKFC in DRC experienced barriers of belonging to their communities and needed to negotiate their legitimacy as individuals. One PKFC mentioned that the family she was born into, and the family she grew up in, used different names to address her, indicating that she needed to navigate different identities depending on each context: “My mother named me Lucia, the family I grew up in calls me Marie-Laure and at school people use Maombi.” (Bukavu, 14).

Most salient was the sense of a missing purpose or direction in life. Not knowing their roots and their family’s history left a void regarding self-worth and social conscience among PKFC. In addition, the deprivation of relationships and material possessions led PKFC to consider themselves orphans: “Let me tell you that I never go to school. I have no food support and even when I do get food, I start thinking about my mother who is living abroad and my father who I have never seen. I feel meaningless in a household where I can’t be around my parents. When I think of the deep poverty I’m in, I feel much despair.” (Bukavu, 13).

### Wishful Thinking

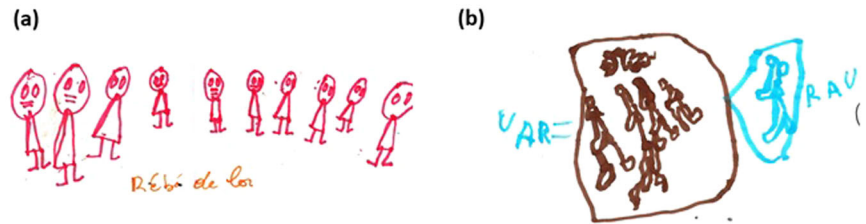
By evaluating children’s drawings along with the analysis of the interviews, we found that the vast majority of produced

images included absent family members. As illustrated in Fig. 1, PKFC drew families with mothers and fathers, despite them having no memory of nuclear family life. Thus, physically absent fathers remained paramount in PKFC’s lives and held an important role in their perceptions of family.

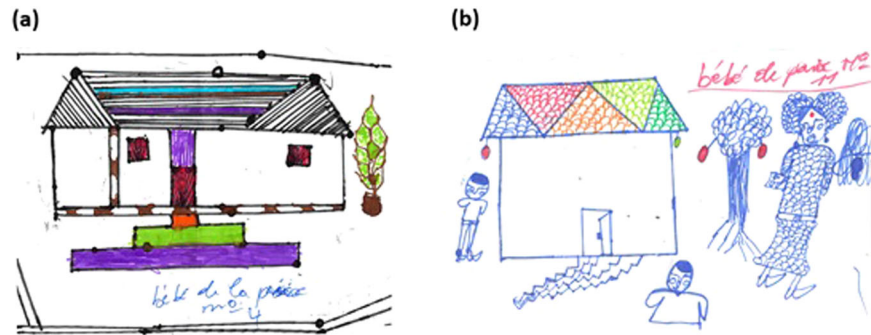
Although previous FDP studies showed the type of family portrayed to be associated with current household composition (Roe et al., 2006), the constellation of individuals in family drawings has also been considered to be a measure of child adjustment and coping regarding family transitions (Burns & Kaufman, 1972; Dunn et al., 2002; Payne, 1996). In the study of Carmela et al. (2019), children of separated parents were found to include absent fathers in 88% of the observed cases. Similarly, Dunn et al. (2002) found that children in a step- or single-parent family were more likely than children in nuclear families to alter their depicted family composition. Accordingly, adding absent characters might be an expression of aspirations about family forms that are not met in reality. Based on our analysis, the vast majority of PKFC created ideal-typical family drawings with a clear underlying structure that did not match their family’s actual situation. This might reflect poor coping regarding their father’s absence and discontent regarding their household structure and family relations. One child explained his drawing as follows, “When you told me to draw my family, I drew my father and my mother. My mother lives here but my father does not. He went to his country.” (Kisangani, 8).

The in-depth interviews confirmed that the drawings were not life-like representations of family. Instead, they

**Fig. 2** Examples of family drawings that illustrate affective distance



**Fig. 3** Examples of family drawings centred around homes



reflected PKFC's biological relatedness as much as their hopes for the future. Several PKFC were explicit about the drawing being an expression of their desire to be reunited with their fathers, clearly evidencing an idealised representation of family: "The drawing means that I want to have the father and mother in our house." (Bunia, 7). Many PKFC understood the drawing task as an opportunity to engage in wishful thinking and imagine a functional family or a better life. The verbal explanations that PKFC offered regarding their drawings combined with a thematic analysis by the first author led to three subcategories of wishful thinking, that will be described in the following sections.

### Desire for Affection

The most critical element in PKFC's decision to include absent family members in their drawings was an emotional connection to these individuals, which was evidently quite strong in some cases. In other words, physical distance did not determine the paternal emotional bond for PKFC; thinking about their fathers and having positive feelings towards them sufficed to include them in their family portrait as illustrated by this participant, "I have drawn my mother, father, younger brother and two younger sisters. It's because I love them. I am happy to see them. In the picture, we all live together." (Bukavu, 12).

PKFC primarily described their feelings towards their fathers as loving and affectionate. Some drawings reflect that sentiment and portray a close, albeit fictional, relationship with their fathers. Physical proximity and contact with family members, like holding hands (Fig. 1c), has previously been assessed as an indicator of emotional closeness (Arteche &

Murray, 2011; Fury et al., 1997). Conversely, no signs of interaction or open expression might reflect detachment and affective distance (Wagner et al., 2015). Despite PKFC reporting affection, few of their drawings actually showed physical contact or signs of interaction that convey a sense of family. One child separated the father from the rest of the family by drawing lines (Fig. 2b) which has previously been interpreted as unresolved issues or an obstacle in the relationship between the illustrator and an alienated individual (Fury et al., 1997; Tognazzo, 1999).

It became apparent in the interviews that love has a material component for participants who grow up with limited socio-economic means. Being deprived of essential resources for survival like food, the provision and sharing of goods was a way for PKFC to define love. One child explained, "I know that my grandparents love me because they give me food and buy me other things." (Bunia, 7). Thus, stretching the ideal of emotional closeness and affection might also be related to wishful thinking regarding material possessions.

### Desire for Safety

Analysis of the FDP also revealed that one out of every two PKFC chose to portray their family next to a house, often including a path, trees or a car (Fig. 3). PKFC mentioned that the house was something they desired for themselves and others in their family. Thus, it was at least partially imagined, as in this narrative "I have drawn the father, mother, children, house and car. I would like for my mother to raise us and for my father to come. The children in the drawing are me and my younger brother. The house is to

live in and the car to drive it.” (Bunia, 7). The house was predominantly mentioned in relation to necessity and especially dominant in drawings of PKFC deprived of housing security. Therefore, it might represent a space where they feel less exposed to their challenges and adverse living conditions. In that sense, the home is symbolic of safety beyond a physical structure and protects PKFC from both poverty and emotional struggles, as in the following example, “I have drawn a house because my mother is suffering. I would like her to be in it.” (Bunia, 12).

As shown in Fig. 3, one PKFC drew a house only, clearly pointing towards this element as the centre of their understanding of family. Scholars have argued that omitting oneself from the family drawing might illustrate an impaired sense of involvement in the family (Fury et al., 1997; Wagner et al., 2015). PKFC’s desire to share a physical space with their family seemed to play an essential role in overcoming their struggles and reuniting with absent family members. Thus, the house might stand for a decent living standard that guarantees family well-being.

### Desire for Happiness

Lastly, PKFC described the completion of the nuclear family as a route towards a better life and the end of suffering. Facilitated by their drawings, they explained that their current challenges were a consequence of their difficult familial situation. Conversely, PKFC were under the impression that having a nuclear family would eliminate at least some of their problems: “I wish I would see him. I wish I would live a good and happy life.” (Bukavu, 12). As outlined above, the deprivation of resources and opportunities was perceived to be rooted in paternal absence. This sentiment was most pronounced when PKFC described unknown fathers as the origin of hardship and imagined the fathers’ hypothetical return as the start of a better life, as illustrated here, “If I was with my father, such discrimination wouldn’t exist. I could be happy like other people.” (Kalemie, 19). These thoughts were often grounded in comparison to social peers, siblings, and others living in what they perceived to be a functional family. PKFC demonstrated a degree of jealousy towards other youth with parents who were more available and supportive. Moreover, they assumed that peers in nuclear families were facing less socio-economic hardship. One adolescent speculated, “Other children who are living with their parents must be living well I think.” (Bukavu, 13).

Many PKFC used the drawings to change their family’s narrative and reject the painful reality of absent peacekeeper fathers. Thus, the described representation of family was not only inclusive of absent fathers but centred around them. Participants of all ages discussed the possibility of searching for their fathers to make this imagined family a reality.

### Search for the Father

The majority of participants expressed an intense desire to locate and get in touch with their fathers, despite the low chance of success. During conversations with research assistants, PKFC asked for advice and information regarding their family reconciliation (e.g., “I am looking for ways to start talking to each other”; “I would like to ask you to find my father for me”). Searching for their fathers was driven by a three-fold motivation to resolve father-related challenges. Firstly, being reunited with their fathers was anticipated to enable PKFC to assimilate and integrate more easily into their local communities. Many PKFC mentioned that they faced stigma regarding their parents’ absence or needed answers to explain their situation to their peers:

Other children often ask me to tell them where my father is. I tell them I don’t know and then I really feel so sad. I think my father must be in Europe. It hurts. Other children’s parents are married, and their fathers are still living with their families. My comrades mock me saying that I have no father. They hurt my heart when they say that I have no shoes or clothes. When I reply that there is no one to support me, they ask me why I can’t follow my dad. (Bukavu, 9)

Secondly, learning about their paternal heritage and origin was important for constructing a positive identity or sense of self. This was based on curiosity about similarities and differences with their parents, as well as the desire to confirm that their fathers are good men and that they themselves are therefore worthy of love. It can be expected that issues around identity formation and self-acceptance are of greater concern to older youth who are more strongly influenced by their surroundings. PKFC saw the disclosure of their father’s identity as a way to make sense of their own experiences and biographies and to resolve issues around their orphan status: “I have never seen his face and he didn’t even leave me a picture. I would like to meet my father. I want to see him, to know him and his name.” (Kalemie, 19). Thus, fathers represented a conduit to ascertain their roots, explore their identity and achieve self-acceptance.

Thirdly, PKFC were interested in searching for their fathers as a response to monetary hardship and lack of material care. Research in absent-father homes in South Africa has shown that in contexts of poverty, the motivation to establish paternal identity is dominated mainly by the need for support (Nduna & Jewkes, 2011). Our study is consistent with this finding as almost all PKFC anticipated that financial contributions would result from reconciling with their fathers: “I would tell him to come rescue me from poverty.” (Bukavu, 13). PKFC in the age group 12–19 perceived education to be key in taking control of their

lives. They almost exclusively noted that their father's absence denied them access to schooling and, therefore, the chance of a better future. Existing literature states that only 33% of adolescents in DRC attend school; OVC significantly less so (UNICEF, 2018). Moreover, the economic well-being of families and the relationship of children to the head of household drives the investment in children's educational attainment (Shapiro & Oleko Tambashe, 2001). In line with that, adolescents in our study reported an overwhelming desire to attend school. The high rates of dropouts amongst them were not only caused by their inability to cover fees, but also by them taking up work to support other family members. One youth articulated his wishes regarding educational opportunities in the following narrative,

I would tell him to support my studies; that's my first claim. I am jobless. I wish I went on studying because I stopped in the 5<sup>th</sup> form secondary school. I know how to write and to read but that isn't good enough. I would like him to know that I am no longer a kid, I have become a grown person and I can't go to school or get my diploma because he doesn't support me (Kalemie, 19)

PKFC frequently described their fathers as saviours that would eventually come to end their "suffering". The attributes and abilities ascribed to fathers idealized them, showing parallels with youth's spiritual beliefs or hope placed in God. Despite the unlikely chances of finding absent peacekeeper fathers, the ongoing search for them was often discussed in practical terms and PKFC revealed they had thought in detail about meeting them. Their priorities for the first interaction were to demand an explanation for their abandonment ("I want to ask him why he left me this way"), get financial support ("I would tell him to send money so that I can pay my school fees, buy food, clothes and shoes") or be taken to fathers' countries of origin ("I want my father to come take me. I want to be taken where he is").

## Discussion

This is the first study to explore the life courses of PKFC through their direct consultation. Participants' level of reflection confirms that children as young as six-years-old are capable communicators of their mental models. We found that the ability to express emotions orally was limited for younger children. Therefore, engaging them through the FDP was an effective way to include them in this research. Many children asked questions during the drawing exercises, suggesting that the activity succeeded in redressing

more traditional power dynamics between researchers and participants. The significant amount of time children spent on the explanation of their drawing indicates that they were comfortable with the study setting.

Triangulating the data from the traditional interview format with results from the FDP proved essential in directing us towards a coherent analysis of participants' family situations since almost all children used the FDP to build a narrative about their father. This revealed a significant gap between participants' perceptions of family and their personal situations, i.e., participants almost exclusively produced drawings that showed them as part of a more extensive family network than was reality. Fictional elements in visual research with CBOW have previously been observed in the context of conflict-affected northern Uganda, where paternal orphans, born into captivity of rebels from the Lord's Resistance Army, drew detailed, yet fictional experiences when asked to illustrate a time of happiness in their lives (Stewart, 2015). Like Stewart, we found a tendency for CBOW to engage in wishful thinking and express an ideal-typical version of reality in their drawings.

Family drawings are an expression of internal working models and beliefs (Leon et al., 2007) that have been described as "fantasies that combine children's subjective life experiences and their meetings with the objective outside world" (Piperno et al., 2007, p. 390). The divergence between children's mental models and their lived experiences is related to their emotional development and social adjustment (Arteche & Murray, 2011). Children are used to drawing on schemes and scripts that they develop from infancy to make sense of their environment based on prior experience (Gordon, 2002). In early years, these are usually derived from family and domestic life, which include the roles and social identity of different family members. Research has shown that children react with cognitive discomfort when their mental models of parental roles and family are challenged (Palkovich, 2015). Cognitive dissonance theory can make several contributions to resolving this tension. Festinger's theory (Festinger, 1957) postulates that holding two contradictory cognitions (ideas, attitudes, beliefs, opinions) causes psychological discomfort that individuals try to reduce by changing an obverse cognition or, reconciling dissonant ideas, by adding new ones. Children, like everyone else, have an interest in initiating change to reduce dissonance, particularly if self-justification is important to them. PKFC might hold the following cognitions: 1. My father is good; 2. Good parents support their children; 3. My father does not support me. In order to resolve this contradiction, PKFC could make several alterations. Changing the original cognition about their fathers to 'my father is bad' might cause PKFC to self-attribute (I, as his child, must be bad) and therefore, be

costly to their self-esteem (Wicklund & Brehm, 2004). PKFC almost exclusively looked up to their fathers and were under the impression that they would be supportive if they were around. The assumption that their fathers are good people might further be encouraged by the image of UN peacekeepers as providing help and assistance. Thus, this cognition is resistant to change. Another way to reconcile dissonance is to alter the second cognition to: 'good parents support their children as best they can.' This inner attitude allows PKFC to escape the dissonant relation by explaining the lack of support as circumstantial; implying that something is hindering their fathers' provision of support. Believing that their fathers cannot get in touch with them allows PKFC to hold on to a positive representation of their fathers and thus, to maintain a positive self-image. As such, no dissonance is evoked and PKFC can think of their fathers as loving and themselves as love-worthy. Resistance to changing this cognition is relatively low since there is little experience-related test to the assumption in reality.

Many youth voiced a rationale according to which peacekeepers were not aware of their existence or had only temporarily turned their backs on them. Consequently, they wanted to search for their fathers to remind them of their paternal obligations. This determination in searching for absent fathers replicates the experiences of CBOW in other geopolitical and historical contexts (Denov & Piolanti, 2020; Ho et al., 2019; Mitreuter et al., 2019; Stelzl-Marx, 2009). Thus, the knowledge generated in this study might be relevant in explaining the urge to find absent fathers for CBOW in other conflict or post-conflict settings. Currently, most CBOW exist on the margins of their communities and their socio-economic situations severely limit their opportunities (Lee, 2017). The degree to which such challenges are attributable to fatherlessness is determined by social norms and the perceptions of fatherhood in the surrounding culture. While the outsider status of CBOW is influenced by a number of factors (e.g., mixed ethnicity, being born out of wedlock), fatherlessness is particularly relevant in settings with patrilineal family structures like DRC, where PKFC perceived themselves to be severely disadvantaged and deprived of their peers' privileges.

Although restricted access to economic and material resources reflects the situation of many children in DRC, PKFC clearly articulated that their circumstances amplified poverty (Wagner et al., 2022a). Not being able to draw on family ties led to financial concerns and hindered PKFC's educational attainment. Although increasingly reliant on their remaining families, maternal networks often provided PKFC with limited care and attention due to their illegitimate conception and the related stigma. The insufficient support on both sides caused PKFC to portray themselves as orphans whose lack of societal integration denied them sustainable livelihoods. Whilst participants were not aware

of the legal complexities behind their circumstances, PKFC of all ages discussed the injustice of being left fatherless and resourceless without any point of contact. Moreover, they had a clear sense of fathers, mothers, communities, and authorities abandoning their responsibility towards them.

We found that the knowledge of their unfavourable childhoods amplified the value ascribed to reuniting with fathers as a means of improving life circumstances. Altering the narrative about their family's situation might have emotional and materialistic value in healing their pain since believing in the feasibility of finding their fathers enables PKFC to hold out hope for a better future. In order to maintain that hope over time, PKFC wanted to assume an active role in overcoming their challenges by searching for their fathers. Future research should investigate coping mechanisms and adaptive responses to fatherlessness in order to encourage more fruitful ways to channel PKFC's desire for change into constructive actions. Moreover, further research should compare the experiences of PKFC in different contexts to explore whether wishful thinking is in fact less pervasive amongst PKFC who live in wealthier, more gender equal environments. Since the present study is explorative and qualitative in nature, we recommend for researchers to focus on more systematic and quantitative approaches in assessing complex concepts like identity cross-culturally in order to develop standardized assessment instruments and an international repository of knowledge on PKFC.

## Limitations

While the youth who participated in the current study endured significant rights violations and exacerbated hardship, no claims regarding the overall population of PKFC can be made since the study sample was not representative of PKFC in DRC or elsewhere. Due to its focus on family, the study does not account for PKFC who might live on the streets or in orphanages. Cultural specifications shape the image of family and will likely differ in other settings of UNPK. The interpretations of our results are therefore specific to patrilineal African societies in which fathers assume the discussed social role. It is likely that PKFC in other geopolitical contexts, experience fatherlessness differently. Although the FDP has been validated cross-culturally and in racially diverse contexts (e.g., Goldner & Scharf, 2012; Shiakou, 2012), few studies from SSA exist, and children in this context might respond differently to drawing exercises. Some children were willing to share their thoughts through pen and paper, yet hardly participated in answering questions unrelated to the drawing, leading to incomplete data. Additionally, interviews with children were relatively short in comparison to those of adolescents. Younger participants were occasionally supervised by their

mothers which might have distorted their responses. Almost all youth asked the research assistants for support to find their fathers. This has considerable ethical implications as it seemed that not all participants understood that the research was independent of the UN, or that research assistants had no way of contacting their fathers. Besides, PKFC emphasised their unstable conditions throughout the interview, indicating that they might have hoped to secure additional benefits from the research.

We acknowledge epistemological limitations related to our viewpoints as non-Congolese, adult researchers with inherent biases in interpreting the experiences of Congolese youth. The FDP succeeded in capturing the ideas of very young children, yet drawings can only offer a partial and socially situated representation of their perspectives. Although a diverse team of local experts, researchers and translators was engaged in the research process and consulted regarding data interpretation, nuances might not always have been appreciated fully. As researchers foreign to DRC, the authors might have modelled PKFC's narratives against the epistemic structures of social life in the Global North (Go, 2020). Thus, the present research provides a first account of PKFC's family relations and perceptions of fatherhood that should be explored further in order to claim precise connections between family structure and well-being.

### Practical Implications

This study contributes to our understanding of PKFC in DRC and globally. Semi-structured interviews with 35 youth provided novel insights into the life courses of this population. In addition, children's drawings illustrated their conceptualizations of family and facilitated conversations about family structure. Our research successfully explored how PKFC experience growing up in families with absent peacekeeper fathers and thus adds crucial insights to debates around CBOW and OVC in SSA.

Based on the views of PKFC shared in this study, we make several recommendations for positive change. First, participants reported that fatherlessness limited their ability to access economic resources and construct coherent identity narratives. Moreover, absent fathers and missing family links were perceived as negatively affecting their sense of security and denying PKFC cultural integration. While changes in social policy and local attitudes towards PKFC are needed in the long term, peer assistance is a low-cost approach that could provide emotional support for PKFC in the short-term. Most participants reported knowing others with similar procreation backgrounds, yet few were connecting with them regularly. Forming support networks with other PKFC and tackling issues of identity as a group might bring relief from some of the familial and social

burdens that exclude these youth from participating in society. Moreover, these networks could be used to introduce PKFC to transparent information regarding their possibilities of support.

Second, the article shed light on PKFC's relationships with their mothers and kin networks. The results evidenced that single mothers struggled to assume the role of provider and carer, and occasionally separated from their children. Thus, fatherlessness and poverty negatively impacted family interaction and quality of life. As traditional for SSA, PKFC often relied on the support of maternal families. However, the prejudice against families with PKFC and dire financial situations occasionally exhausted these support mechanisms. The population in DRC is facing enormous challenges, including poverty, food insecurity, gendered inequality, and social unrest. Youth who are denied stability in many spheres of life need family connections to cope with these stressors. However, due to sparse financial means, many mothers did not have the time to form loving relationships with their children. A dysfunctional mother-child relationship might be detrimental to PKFC becoming healthy and happy individuals. To prevent this, mothers must have access to financial resources or a level of education that allows them to pursue gainful employment and childcaring activities. The empowerment of their mothers with access to education, grants, and livelihood skills, will ultimately also help to support PKFC.

Lastly, we found that knowledge of one's father was essential for the development of identity, social contacts and resources. Although information about fathers was often limited or concealed, PKFC believed their fathers to be an essential part of their family. Illustrated through their drawings, PKFC exposed their desire for the social and economic security of an ideal-typical family network. Lack of opportunities for self-actualization and financial independence led PKFC to engage in wishful thinking and inflate the value of reuniting with their fathers. Despite PKFC having no starting point in searching for their fathers, they believed finding them to be the start of a better life. The UN could play a role in facilitating father communication, or at the very least informing PKFC regarding their rights and the limitations of national and international policies.

### Data availability

The datasets used during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

**Authors' contributions** Kirstin Wagner analysed the data and wrote the paper. Susan Bartels, Sabine Lee and Kirstin Wagner conceptualized and implemented the study. Susan Bartels was the lead investigator and oversaw data collection. All authors collaborated on editing the manuscript and approved the final version.

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## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare no competing interests.

**Ethics Approval** This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of University of Birmingham (ERN\_18-0083) and Queen's University (6019042). Local research clearance was requested in each city districts regional administrative centres.

**Consent to participate/publish** Verbal informed consent was obtained and recorded prior to the interview from all participants and children's legal guardians.

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