



## *The 'Invisible' Father:* INVESTIGATING THE NEED TO UNDERSTAND ADOLESCENT FATHERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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### Overview

#### Overview of Research about Adolescent Fathers in SA:

There is a growing focus on teen fathers yet there is a dearth of research on adolescent fatherhood experience in South Africa.

- Where studies on adolescent fathers do exist they tend to:
  - Infrequently use male-only samples,
  - Formulate their focus around the "adolescence experience" but use female-only samples;
  - Generally be a-theoretical;
  - Investigate the links between early fatherhood and negative life outcomes/experiences, such as negative employment or delinquency outcomes
  - Reflect contemporary media stereotypes

#### Some South African Findings:

- Men's sexual debut is younger than women's.
- Adolescent parenthood (both mothers and fathers) have been associated with:
  - Low economic backgrounds;
  - Lower educational attainment; and
  - Fewer employment opportunities than their childless peers
- In a context of poverty and limited alternatives, young fathers' sense of responsibility is mostly tied to their sense of masculinity, which is defined and achieved as the following:
  - Sexual performance and the belief that men should be seen as sexually vigorous.
  - Securing and maintaining sexual relationships are critical to self-evaluations of success and peer group positioning
  - A choice between being a 'gangsta' and a 'pleya'. Goal is to have many possessions (i.e. money and/or women).
- They embrace their children for various reasons of which some are:
  - Knowledge of paternity;
  - The role their own father played in their lives (whether absent or present it serves as motivation to be a good father);
  - Fear of consequences of denying child.

### Methodological challenges

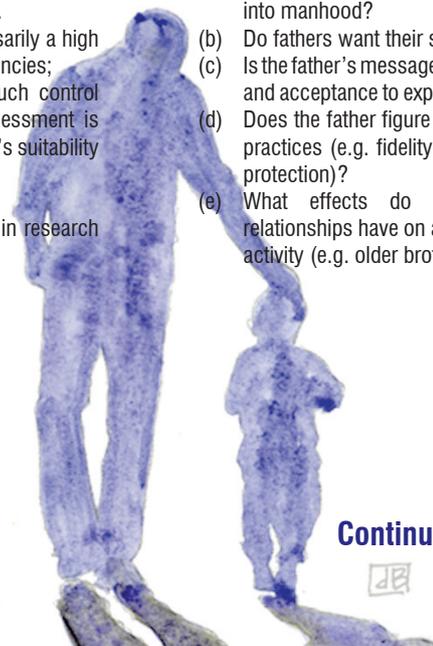
#### Sampling challenges:

- In the developing world, adolescent fathers are largely viewed as invisible. The lack of services for them makes teen dads inaccessible for the recruitment into sexual health and well-being programmes; and for research purposes – hence limiting the amount and type of studies done.
- As a result, researchers investigate the role of young fathers through the eyes of the mother – relying on her partiality regarding his role and involvement.
- Several studies in South Africa use adolescent female experiences as a proxy for all adolescent experiences (exclude male adolescents in samples).
- When paternity is not always claimed or acknowledged, those who are recruited via snowballing methods are usually only representative of fathers who acknowledge paternity.
- Covert influence of "gatekeepers" that protect, silence and/or exclude voices from research. Gatekeepers (i.e. members of institutions via which these fathers can be recruited) pose a challenge in the following ways:
  - Researcher is dependent on these gatekeepers' goodwill and their particular selection of young men to recruit.
  - Facilitating research is not necessarily a high priority amongst staff in busy agencies;
  - The researcher doesn't have much control since a 'hidden' process of assessment is used to determine the young man's suitability to be included.
- Attrition is also noted as a challenge in research with adolescent fathers.

### Future Directions

#### Areas to research regarding the 'invisible' adolescent father:

- More research is needed that focus on the perspectives of young fathers.
- Research is needed on fathers in the developing world that deny paternity.
- Need longitudinal studies that look at young men's involvement with their children over time.
- Longitudinal studies to investigate what the impact is of neighbourhood and community factors on adolescent male sexual activity.
- Investigate how adolescents can be helped to "tune in" to sex education discussions to optimise information about contraception, pregnancy and relationships.
- Investigate the need to balance peer education, support and adult knowledge as a way to:
  - Discontinue inaccurate information or unhelpful gender or cultural stereotypes;
  - Promote equal responsibility for contraception and saying no to sex;
  - Separate condom-use from trust and fidelity.
- Investigate the role of adolescent fathers in multi-partner fertility / pregnancy.
- There is also a need for a better understanding of paternal influences on adolescent male sexuality:
  - Do fathers/male figures encourage sons to engage in coitus as a transitional behaviour into manhood?
  - Do fathers want their sons to delay coitus?
  - Is the father's message one of encouragement and acceptance to experience sexual activity?
  - Does the father figure encourage safe sexual practices (e.g. fidelity and consistent use of protection)?
  - What effects do siblings and sibling relationships have on adolescent male sexual activity (e.g. older brothers)?



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## Overview

5. Reasons for having children at young age ranges from:
  - (a) Alcohol use
  - (b) Desire to have sex without a condom
  - (c) Ignorance about condoms, contraceptives and general reproductive biology
  - (d) Beliefs that condom use is associated with mistrust and infidelity/promiscuity.
  - (e) Lack of supervision and adult involvement in their lives
  - (f) Sense of invulnerability
  - (g) Wanting and actively seeking an opportunity to father a child (legacy/fear of premature death, desire for fatherhood, secure relationship with teen mother, peer pressure, pride and evidence of masculinity).
6. Hindrances/Barriers to young fathers' involvement with their children:
  - (a) Financial pressures associated with masculine role as 'provider'
  - (b) Family expectations and young fathers' inability to pay for 'damages'
  - (c) Cultural and religious practices, for example paying damages and the exclusion of young men in discussions/negotiations between families regarding child-care arrangements.
  - (d) Mother of the child as well as mother of the child's family act as "gatekeepers" to the child.
  - (e) Social stereotyping; unrealistic expectations of partners and family, and social discrimination
  - (f) Limited services available are perceived and experienced as negative and dismissive of their role as fathers.

## Methodological challenges

### Challenges regarding definitions and conceptualisations used:

How concepts are defined poses methodological challenges for *measurement*. For example:

1. Using co-residence as a proxy for father involvement and support of child.
  - (a) It examines neither the level of involvement and support provided by resident fathers.
  - (b) Overlooks the positive contributions made by non-resident fathers.
  - (c) Discounts the financial contributions that often from a cultural perspective are viewed as a father's primary obligation (especially in the context of migrant labour etc).
2. Narrowly defining sexual activity:
  - (a) Monolithic view of sexual activity (i.e. limited to coitus only);
  - (b) Fails to explore other forms of sex and related practices (e.g. group sex).

## Future Directions

9. Investigate the temporal ordering of peer intimacy. In other words:
  - (a) Is it the teenager who chooses friends who share similar sexual experiences?  
Or
  - (b) Is it the teenager that models the sexual activities of their friends?
10. There is also a need to investigate the contextual and situational circumstances that influence teenage friendships and dating behaviours. In other words:
  - (a) Under which circumstances and contexts does sex (particularly risky sex) take place?
  - (b) How do power, sexual self-efficacy and decision-making vary in relational contexts?
11. Research studies are also needed to investigate:
  - (a) The impact of various media messages on male adolescent sexual activity since their realities may differ from their female counterparts; and
  - (b) The role of more informal sources of sexual knowledge (e.g. media, peers, personal experience, observations) may have on adolescent male sexual behaviour.
  - (c) Teenage sexual health, e.g. adolescent reproductive health-seeking behaviour and access to reproductive health services.

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