



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.

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

Some South African Findings:

1. Men's sexual debut is younger than women's.
2. Adolescent parenthood (both mothers and fathers) have been associated with:
 - (a) Low economic backgrounds;
 - (b) Lower educational attainment; and
 - (c) Fewer employment opportunities than their childless peers
3. 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:
 - (a) Sexual performance and the belief that men should be seen as sexually vigorous.
 - (b) Securing and maintaining sexual relationships are critical to self-evaluations of success and peer group positioning
 - (c) A choice between being a 'gangsta' and a 'pleya'. Goal is to have many possessions (i.e. money and/or women).
4. They embrace their children for various reasons of which some are:
 - (a) Knowledge of paternity;
 - (b) The role their own father played in their lives (whether absent or present it serves as motivation to be a good father);
 - (c) Fear of consequences of denying child.

Methodological challenges

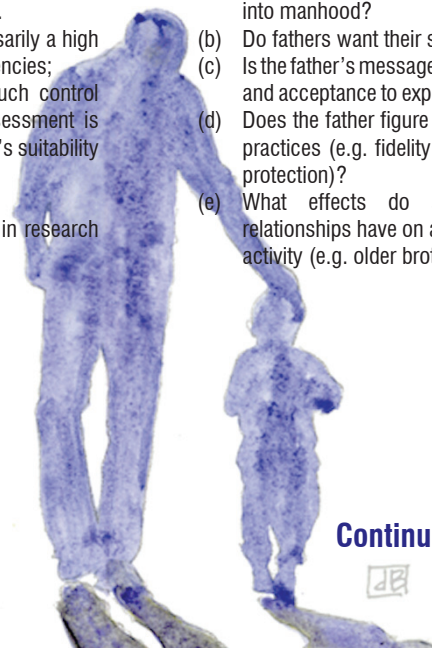
Sampling challenges:

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. Several studies in South Africa use adolescent female experiences as a proxy for all adolescent experiences (exclude male adolescents in samples).
4. When paternity is not always claimed or acknowledged, those who are recruited via snowballing methods are usually only representative of fathers who acknowledge paternity.
5. 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:
 - (a) Researcher is dependent on these gatekeepers' goodwill and their particular selection of young men to recruit.
 - (b) Facilitating research is not necessarily a high priority amongst staff in busy agencies;
 - (c) 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.
6. Attrition is also noted as a challenge in research with adolescent fathers.

Future Directions

Areas to research regarding the 'invisible' adolescent father:

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