An Exploratory Study of Young African-American Fathers in Lincoln, Nebraska[1]
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Abstract:

Both African-American fathers and teen fathers are socially stigmatized groups. Negative stereotypes are especially problematic for men in the intersection of these two categories. Misunderstandings of young Black fathers may lead to a lack of appropriate community services, which research indicates have the potential to mitigate the negative outcomes common to both adolescent fathers and their children. However, local parenting programs often neglect teen fathers. Interviews with a local sample of four young African-American fathers reveal that they have a desire to create and maintain ties with their children, but barriers often stand in the way of their intentions. Needs expressed by these fathers include strategies for communicating with the mothers of their children, connections to economic and educational resources, and opportunities for bonding with their children.

Introduction

The United States has the highest rate of adolescent parenthood among all Western countries, twice as high as that in the United Kingdom, which has the second highest rate (Barnett 1997). In the U.S. in the 1980s and 1990s, national surveys indicated that between two and seven percent of male adolescents had fathered children. Rates are even higher among inner-city and African-American adolescents (Pirog-Good 1995).

Both African-American fathers and teen fathers are socially stigmatized groups; negative images of both permeate popular culture. For young men in the intersection of these two categories, the abundance of negative stereotypes is especially problematic, as is the lack of social science literature addressing their experiences and perceived needs. Misunderstandings about young Black fathers may lead to a lack of appropriate community services for them.

The community of Lincoln, Nebraska, has a variety of outreach services targeting adolescent parents, but the majority are intended exclusively for, or attended exclusively by, adolescent mothers. Some community-service agencies currently serve teen fathers through non-specific programs (such as programs for high-risk adolescents or programs for fathers of all ages), and a few agencies have expressed interest in providing programs specifically for teen fathers and/or augmenting their existing programs to better meet the needs of this population. Research is needed both to spur these agencies' outreach efforts and to provide them with information about the experiences, needs, motivations, and perceptions of this group.

This paper will begin the process of illuminating the experiences and needs of young African-American fathers in Lincoln, Nebraska. These fathers are impacted by a variety of socioeconomic factors which are likely to inhibit the quality of their parenting, as well as the quality of their own lives and the lives of their offspring. Young fathers are currently underserved in the local community because programs have traditionally focused exclusively on young mothers and their children (Henderson 2003). Research has indicated that fathers of all ages can be great assets to their families in both direct and indirect ways. Young fathers are often motivated to take on this responsibility but find barriers to their involvement with their children. Because this population is underserved and under-researched, it is useful to utilize exploratory qualitative research to gain a greater understanding of young fathers' experiences with parenting. Through an in-depth exploration of a variety of topics within the young African-American father's experience, this paper will provide information useful to both researchers and service providers.

A Population at Risk

Research has shown teenage fatherhood to be correlated with negative outcomes for both the father (Pirog-Good 1996; Smith et al. 2002) and his offspring (Smith, Buzi, and Weinman 2002). For this population, the normal challenges of fatherhood are confounded by youthful inexperience and the tendency of adolescent fathers to come from impoverished and unstable households of origin (Pirog-Good 1995). Although the majority of teen fathers in the U.S. are White; Black and other non-White racial categories are significantly over-represented among this population (Pirog-Good 1995).

Many studies have found that, even when other variables are controlled, African-American males are more likely to be teen fathers than are males of other ethnic backgrounds (Thornberry et al. 1997).

Some researchers theorize that socioeconomic barriers for young, urban, minority males increase adolescent fathering by limiting other routes by which young men may achieve adult status (Ooms 1995). The limited vision of the future constructed by young Black males facing both socioeconomic barriers and historical restriction of opportunity in the major institutions of American society may make it appear that fatherhood is one of the few feasible and legal opportunities for achieving adulthood and gaining a sense of achievement (Anderson Smith 1988). Similarly, others have suggested that adolescent parenting may be used as a step toward higher self-value for disadvantaged youths (Pirog-Good 1995).

Once an adolescent African-American male has conceived a child, cultural factors may increase the likeliness that the pregnancy will result in childbearing. Allen and Doherty (1996) found that African-American adolescent males were more likely than European American adolescent males to discourage their partners from getting abortions, thus increasing their rate of fathering. At the same time, other cultural values may decrease the likeliness that the father will reside with the child and the child's mother. Marsiglio (1988) found that Black and White adolescent males had similar intentions to live with their child should a pregnancy occur – intentions that differ from actual living arrangement patterns. The same study found young Black males to be more likely than White males of the same age to believe that their parents would have negative attitudes toward the idea of them living with their child. This objection on the part of the paternal grandparents, along with the finding that young Black mothers and maternal grandparents are also less likely than Whites to endorse marriage or living together as a response to an unplanned pregnancy, may create an obstacle that inhibits the father from acting on his intentions to be involved with the child on a live-in basis (Marsiglio 1988). Some researchers posit cultural explanations which allege that less-traditional views of marriage and early childbearing are held by Blacks than Whites, while others contend that the African-American community has cultural mechanisms by which the adolescent father may informally establish paternity and be involved in informal, and hence widely unrecognized, child support arrangements (Gadsden and Smith 1994).

African-American fathers, regardless of age, have been identified as a high-risk population. As a group, they have a shorter life expectancy, less access to health care, less education, higher rates of unemployment, higher rates of imprisonment, and higher rates of poverty than White fathers (Cochran 1996). Young Black fathers are especially vulnerable to these stressful issues because they are subject to both the challenges faced by all African-American fathers and the challenges faced by all teen fathers. They are also doubly impacted by negative stereotypes. Billingsley (1992) noted that "media treatment of illegitimacy and teenage parenting often presents this problem as if it were confined exclusively to Blacks." The combined effects of low socioeconomic status, particular cultural beliefs and practices, and bombardment with negative images place young African-American males at risk for becoming young fathers unable to fulfill even their own goals for successful parenting.

Potential Strengths

Despite the challenges they face, it is important for young fathers to be involved with their children, because there are benefits to be realized by the entire family. Research has shown maternal-infant involvement, maternal role satisfaction, and maternal self-esteem to be positively related to the mother's support from a secondary parent; sharing the responsibilities of parenthood reduces her emotional demands and stress (Allen-Meares 1984; Rhein et al. 1997). Research has further shown the father's emotional support to be especially important for teenage mothers because of the high degree of prejudice and tension their families face (Allen-Meares 1984). Increased father involvement has also been shown to be associated with personal satisfaction and higher self-esteem for the father (Rhein et al. 1997).

Allen and Doherty (1996) found that African-American adolescent fathers contributed indirectly to the child's well-being by providing emotional and economic support to the child's mother, enabling her to better cope with the demands of child rearing. Young fathers were also found to provide direct benefits to the child by contributing material items such as food, clothing, and diapers. Providing childcare was a means of both direct and indirect support, a time when the father could attend to the needs of his child while allowing the mother needed respite (Allen and Doherty 1996). The majority of fathers interviewed for Allen and Doherty's research were not only already

contributing to their children in both direct and indirect ways, but were urging the mothers to give them even more time and responsibility then they already had.

Despite actual living patterns, Marsiglio (1988) found young Black males to have stronger beliefs than young White males that living with their children and partner would result in the best possible chance of the child being raised well, and that living with the child would give them the opportunity to be involved with the child's daily physical needs. This indicates that many of these fathers have the intent to be involved with their children on a daily basis and that a lack of involvement suggests that some barrier is in their way.

Kiselica and Sturmer (1993) hypothesize that young African-American fathers are actually driven out of their relationships and away from their offspring because of the conflict they feel between strong convictions about responsibility to their family and their virtual inability to fulfill those responsibilities. This hypothesis illuminates the paradox, explaining why data indicating that young Black fathers have a great desire to be involved with their offspring and contribute to their families coexist alongside statistics indicating that young Black fathers have a high degree of absenteeism in the lives of their children.

A Need for Qualitative Research

The absenteeism of some young African-American fathers is more commonly researched and more widely publicized in the popular media than are the potential benefits that involved fathers can bring to their young families. This bias in research may perpetuate misunderstandings of the group and contribute to the lack of public services targeting their needs, even as services for young mothers abound. For example, Kiselica et al. (1996) found that service agency personnel were more likely to refer teen mothers than teen fathers for 35 out of 48 potential services, including health and basic living services and assertiveness training. Biases such as these in referrals and service are likely due to misunderstandings of the adolescent fathers' intentions and experiences. Kiselica and Pfaller (1993) suggest that qualitative and ethnographic research strategies be utilized to better inform service providers about the needs of adolescent fathers of various ethnic backgrounds. Miller (1997) also cites the need for further understanding of adolescent fathers' attitudes, behaviors, social supports, and stressors, and states that a young father's parental involvement with his

child remains the most critical area in need of future research. Anderson Smith (1988) similarly argues the need for exploratory qualitative research to both produce research questions and suggest answers, believing it would be premature to conduct research to test formal theories concerning a population so poorly known. Allen and Doherty (1996) utilized in-depth conversational interviews to explore perceptions of fatherhood on the premise that these perceptions were developed through social interactions and should be examined in the same way. This type of interviewing was found to be valuable; it gave subjects more control over the ways in which they interpreted and presented the topics of teen fatherhood, and it allowed for the emergence of unexpected themes. Only by understanding teen parents' own perception of their parenting role can researchers and service providers develop interventions to foster competence and growth in this area (Barnett 1996).

A Review of the Literature

African-American Fathers

The majority of the literature on fathers has focused on White, middle-class participants. Generally, African-American fathers have been studied more in terms of deficits rather than strengths. Important recent research has gone beyond identifying correlations between deficits and ethnicity and seeks explanations for these deficits. Allen and Connor (1997) note that it is the social system within which African-American men parent that limits the amount of direct time spent with their children. Toth and Xu (2002) found that 90 percent of the African-American fathers sampled wished to spend a great deal of time with their children, and that a sense of responsibility about involvement was greater than actual time spent with their children. This is likely related to the finding that Black men in the U.S. are more likely than White men to voice support for the traditional family-provider role and that they are more likely to believe that women should remain in the household as the primary caregiver (Toth and Xu 2002; Gadsden and Smith 1994). However, when a lack of financial and social resources restrict the opportunity for Black men to be the sole providers for their families, they may feel a sense of failure as fathers (Toth and Xu 2002) and may choose negative roles or refuse to play some roles (Gadsden and Smith 1994).

In addition to finding resource barriers obstructing their desired fathering roles, African-American fathers' self-image may be negatively impacted by media

images and popular stereotypes that permeate U.S. culture. Blackwell (1991: 145) notes:

> The media image of the Black male is a conglomerate of 'week-end gladiator,' an athlete often described in animalistic terms by sports announcers, but not intimidating because he is in a controlled situation; a nonthreatening entertainer; an irresponsible unwed father measuring his masculinity by the number of children he has fathered while not caring about providing financial support for them because 'they can get welfare.'

The negative images Blackwell discusses reach all members of society and are detrimental because they are likely to impact both the fathers' self-image and the perceptions of the wider public, including policy-makers and service providers.

These negative media images and popular stereotypes are manifested in daily life experiences, U.S. public policy, and research, as evidenced by traditional theoretical models developed by academicians. The most prevalent model in the social science literature is the deficit model, which "devalues behaviors, values, and lifestyles that differ from White middle-class norms" (Cochran 1997: 341). Another traditional theoretical framework used to study the African-American family is the matriarchy model, which also describes a pathological family structure, contending "that African-American women serve as the head of household because of the inability of African-American men to fulfill their familial responsibilities" (Cochran 1997: 341).

The Afrocentric approach is a more recent, and more positively oriented, theoretical framework in which to examine African-American fatherhood. It:

> emphasizes the importance of the past and provides the groundwork for analysis of cultural values and patterns in African-American communities. . . . This model contends that African-American fathers should be examined in the light of the socio-cultural context in which they operate" (Cochran 1997:342).

Another recent, and very comprehensive, framework is the ecological model, which:

> emphasizes the importance of examining the parenting experience in its environmental context . . . allows researchers to explore the historical, political, and social influences on African-American

fathers . . . [and has] dramatically changed the picture of African-Americans' parenting behaviors by providing information that corrects stereotypes in their accommodating the two worlds in which African-Americans live – African-American communities and mainstream society" (Cochran 1997: 342).

These models highlight the strengths of African-American fathers and portray a more balanced fathering experience.

Adolescent Fathers

Adolescent fathers, regardless of race, face stereotypes and negative images similar to African-American fathers. Until recently, most of the research done on this population focused on the effects of fathers' absence on the economic status of adolescent mothers. Stereotypical images of adolescent fathers cited by Gadsden and Smith (1994) and Kiselica, Stroud, Stroud, and Rotzien (1992) include "Super Stud," "Don Juan," "Mr. Cool," and "the Phantom Father." These images portray young fathers as being interested only in sexual conquest, being highly knowledgeable about sex and exploiting unknowledgeable females, being dismissive of the consequences of their actions, and abandoning their sexual partners and offspring should pregnancy occur.

Recent research has reported that a majority of adolescent fathers indicate a strong desire to be responsible for their children and involved in their lives (Rhein et al. 1997; Allen and Doherty 1996; Jones Harris 1998). When they do not express a desire to be involved, it is often because some barrier is perceived to be in their way, rather than an utter disinterest or lack of willingness to be responsible. Rhein et al. (1997) discovered a significant correlation between stated paternal disinterest and lack of money, as well as a marginal association between stated paternal disinterest and lack of child-care knowledge. These findings indicate that an expressed disinterest may be a function of other variables over which the young father feels he has no control. Other research indicates that a father's willingness to take responsibility for the care of his children is influenced by his self-image and expectations of himself (Christmon 1990), an image that may be negatively impacted by the stereotypes previously noted.

Contrary to popular portrayals, research indicates that adolescent childbearing has more often been

found to be the product of an ongoing relationship than a one-time affair (Barrett and Robinson 1982), and teenage women and their male partners who have a child together "may be particularly likely to stay together for extended periods" (Hollander 1996: 85). Some researchers have found that a majority of teen fathers feel obligated to meet responsibilities to the mothers of their children as well as to the children themselves (Barrett and Robinson 1982).

However, research also shows that relationships between adolescent mothers and fathers have a high rate of failure. A study in which a majority of teen fathers claim to have been in love at the time of conception reported that less than half were still involved in a relationship with the baby's mother at the conclusion of the research one year later (Jones Harris 1998). Regardless of whether or not the adolescent parents maintain their romantic involvement, some sort of relationship is necessary if they are to share the responsibilities of parenthood. When the relationship between the adolescent mother and father is strained, the result is often that the adolescent father is less involved with his offspring than either himself or the child's mother wish him to be. When adolescent fathers were asked to rate their the quality of their relationship with their natal partners and their relationships with their children, Allen and Doherty (1996) found that the lowest ratings for spending time with the child were reported by the participants who rated their partner relationship as "1" (not very close), and that there was a positive correlation between paternal involvement and partner relationship. Partner relationship was discovered to be more predictive of paternal involvement than live-in status. Rhein et al. (1997) reported that teen fathers were twice as likely as teen mothers to attribute a lack of involvement with their children to resistance from the children's mothers and maternal grandmothers, while mothers were twice as likely as teen fathers to attribute lack of involvement to paternal disinterest.

The literature indicates that African-American fathers and adolescent fathers are not necessarily the "other" they are often portrayed to be in comparison to the married, White, middle-class, 30-something fathers most typically participating in fatherhood research. They often share similar desires and goals for their involvement with their children and families. African-American fathers differ from the "norm" in that they are often impacted by poor economic circumstances and stigmatized social status. Adolescent fathers are also affected by their own immaturity and the immaturity of

their co-parents, which often results in communication problems that create barriers to their involvement with their children.

The problems these young men faced are barriers to be examined and overcome, not innate characteristics to be defined and accepted. Research frameworks such as the ecological approach create inclusive portraits of the experiences of fathers whose lives are affected by a variety of circumstances external to their own desires and intentions. Such comprehensive research approaches will best illuminate both the desires and intentions of young Black fathers and the variety of obstacles they face. The goal of this study is to contribute to the existing literature by first identifying young African-American fathers' personal definitions of parenting success and then reporting any barriers they perceive as preventing them from achieving their goals. This information will aid the creation of effective outreach services for this population.

Method

Participants

A non-random convenience sample, consisting of four participants, was recruited to participate in this study. Participants are acquaintances of the researcher, who is a participant-observer within the community, having been a teenage mother of a child whose father is an African-American and also an adolescent when the child was born. This connection to the community was utilized in the recruitment of participants. At the time of the interviews, the participants lived in Lincoln, Nebraska, were between 18 and 23 years old, had at least one child, identified as Black males, and were available for an interview.

Biases in the selection and recruitment of participants are worth noting as they impact the representability of the sample. An obvious source of bias is that the participants were acquaintances of the researcher. Less-obvious are the other factors that contributed to the ability of interviewees to participate in the study. A list of young African-American fathers (ages 16-23) living in the local community and known to the researcher was generated before contacting potential participants; not all of the potential candidates were interviewed. There were important differences between the young men who participated in the study and those who did not. Biases may exist in the sample of young men who were interviewed because they differed from non-participants in that

they could be contacted, a variable affected by other conditions such as: 1) they were more likely to have steady places-of-residence or working phone numbers; 2) they were more likely to be employed, consistently or sporadically; and 3) they were not incarcerated at the time of the interview. An additional factor worth noting (which is perhaps related to the conditions listed above) is that the men who did participate have relatively high levels of education compared to others on the initial list of candidates. Participant data is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Participant Background Data						
Father	**Age**	**Child(ren)**	**Education/ Employment**	**Child Support**	**Living Arrangement**	**Relationship with mother of child(ren)**
Malik*	18	Daughter, 1 yr.	GED. Unemployed. Looking for work.	Not court ordered. Says he and mother support family from savings accounts.	Lives in his mother's residence with his child, her mother, and other family members.	Indicates that they are "together" but that relationship status changes frequently
Terrell*	20	Daughter, 3 mo.	High school graduate. Employed full-time. Additional part-time job.	Provides financial support as a live-in father. No court order in place.	Lives in his apartment with his child and her mother.	Living together, long-term plans
Jason*	22	Two 4-yr-old sons (different mothers)	High school graduate. Unemployed. Income from inheritance.	Court ordered to pay child support.	Lives in his apartment alone.	"Limited to non-existent"
Antonio*	23	Daughter, 3 yrs. Daughter, 9 mo.	School through 12th grade but no graduation. Completed apprenticeship program. Employed full time.	Provides all financial support for children, not court-ordered.	Lives in his apartment alone 50% of the time and with children 50% of the time.	"Off-and-on" currently "friends"
*Pseudonyms are used to protect individuals' identity.						

Procedures

Personal interviews lasted one to two hours and were guided by an interview protocol which is available upon request from the author. Interviews were conducted either at the participant's or the interviewer's home, based upon the participants' convenience, and took place in an area isolated from other people in the home. Interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed by the interviewer. Pseudonyms are used on the transcripts and throughout this paper to protect the identity of the individuals involved. Interview questions focused on a variety of topics in the young males' experience of

fatherhood including: 1) relationships with children; 2) relationships with mothers of children; 3) ideas about family: 4) ideas about responsibility: 5) images of young Black fathers; and 6) support systems. The qualitative data collected in the interviews was analyzed using *Ethnograph* software.

Findings

Relationships with Children

When asked about their current relationships with their children, Malik, Terrell, and Antonio indicate that they spend every day with their children. Jason says he

sees his younger son three or four times each week but has only seen his oldest son four times in the four years since his birth. The fathers who see their children on a daily basis all express satisfaction with their father/child relationships and state that their level of involvement matches the expectations they had before the children were born. Jason, who sees his youngest son several times each week and his oldest son on very rare occasions, expresses dissatisfaction with his relationships with both children. He indicates that his poor relationships with their mothers are the causes of his unsatisfactory relationships with his sons.

Relationships with Mothers of Children

All participants indicated that their relationship with their child's mother was less satisfactory than their relationship with their child. For participants who were still romantically involved (at least periodically) with the mothers of their children, the presence of the child was both expressed as a strain on the relationship and a reason for maintaining the relationship:

Malik: [The relationship] is hard with the kid and everything like that, it is harder. . . . Like, just out of nowhere, the arguing for no reason. When it's really just stress, sometimes from the child and things like that. Like before the kid you didn't have that stress.

Terrell: I know I can see as a mother, that doesn't work, she's cooped in the house a lot of the times and she gets stressed, you know, really stressful. . . And so in dealing with it all, or in spite of it all, you just have to make the best of it anyway.

Malik: Yeah, I would [stay in the relationship because of the child]. Truthfully I'd say I'm doing that now. . . . I ain't gonna just be out, just leave . . . I realize that things happen, so, it's not like playin' a role, it's being what I wanna be. . . . right now I'm living my ideal family life.

Terrell: A child's life is developing with a mother *and* a father. . . . So I try my hardest to make sure [the mother] and I have a good relationship because I think that will affect the way [the child] looks at us.

The two participants with the weakest relationships with their children's mothers were Jason, whose relationships with both mothers were virtually "non-existent," and Antonio, who was "off-again-on-again" and currently "friends" with his children's mother. Interestingly, these two men, not the two who were still involved in relationships with some level of commitment, who expressed a desire to be married:

Jason: I thought I'd be married by now. . . . I still wanna marry the girl. I would set everything aside right now and never talk to anyone else again just to be with her. . . The best for each child would be for me to be married to my oldest son's mother and have custody of my other son.

Antonio: The ideal relationship? . . . I guess the ideal marriage . . . For us to be able to get along, get married, and *be* a family.

When asked how their relationships with the children's mothers impacted their relationships with their children, Malik, Terrell, and Antonio all discussed a fear that arguments with the mothers would have negative impacts on their children:

Malik: When we have an argument that's about our relationship, just us, me and the mother, after that we like, "Well what is we gonna do with her," cause we done broke up. We like, "Well what is we gonna do about each of us seeing her, about the time with her." We gotta do all this and she's just there like sometimes her mom's there, sometimes her dad's there, sometimes we both there. The relationship with her mom, it has an effect on her, I know it does.

Terrell: I feel like whenever we might have an argument or dispute, that I feel like that's important because I don't want to have my child see us arguing or see us have bad times. Because a lot of times in my life I know my parents were always arguing and that was something that really scared me a lot. . . . I would hate to see her upset or hurt or made to look at mommy and daddy like we're scared or making her scared or her feel like her environment is not important.

Antonio: I think it affects the kids dramatically. A lot. Just for the fact of the things we go

through. I think it has a negative effect.

Jason said that his inability to get along with the mothers of his children was the biggest barrier to his involvement with his sons. He wishes for a time when his sons can have relationships with him that are less influenced by their mothers:

> Jason: Over time it's gonna come up to them because my relationships with their mothers are to the point now where things can never get back to where it was, so over time hopefully they'll come seek me out. I try to stay in contact with them the best I can.

This part of the interview spurred a greater amount of conversation from the participants than did any other portion. From the responses, it appears that the quality of their relationship with the mother of their children is the primary determinant of the quality of their relationship with their children. When the father-mother relationship is poor, it becomes the biggest barrier to the father's involvement with his child.

Ideas about Family

Definitions of "family" ranged from abstract to absolute. Terrell defined family as "100 things in one, you have love, you have bond, you have unity." Malik said:

> I ain't really got a definition of family 'cause to me a family could be anything. You ain't gotta have a kid to be family. . . . To me it ain't no certain definition of family . . . long as the love is there . . . long as you willing to go out for, do that for somebody you trust . . . Long as you got the trust and love there you could call that family.

Jason defined family as "someone who is related to you by blood and that cares for you as much as you care for them." Antonio said, "Immediate family would be just the typical marriage that you learn to get along, you learn to cope and deal with each other . . . And raise kids together." The participants who defined "family" in more abstract ways, Malik and Terrell, both come from households of origin in which their own fathers were not always present. Malik, who stated that there is no certain definition of family, came from the most unstable household of all the participants, one in which "family" members came and went and there was not always an adult caregiver residing in the household. Jason and Antonio, who gave more

absolute definitions of family, involving blood-ties and marriage, both come from households of origin in which their parents are still married and they spent a majority of time living in the nuclear family structure.

Malik, Terrell, and Antonio, all still involved to some degree in relationships with the mothers of their children, stated that they would consider the mother to be a member of their family regardless of the status of the relationship. Jason does not consider the mothers of his children to be part of his family, and states that he never really has. This is likely influenced by the strained relationships he has had with both women and by his definition of family as involving blood ties.

Each participant said, in some form, that his "ideal" family would consist of himself, his child, and the child's mother. Malik says, as noted, that he would maintain his relationship with the mother of his child in order to have his "ideal" family structure even if he no longer really wanted to be romantically involved with her. Terrell first says, "No matter how hard things get [with his child's mother], I'll make it work anyway," but later says "If I didn't feel I wanted to be with her, I wouldn't. . . . If my heart's telling me I must go, then I must go." Jason describes the ideal family structure as "[having] a mother and father in the home and both stable financially and both caring for the child," and expresses a desire to be married to the mother of his first child and to have both children living with them. As noted above, Antonio's idea of the ideal family is "for [the mother and I] to be able to get along, get married, and be a family."

When asked about the biggest difficulty their families face and what they would change about their family if they could, participants' answers revolve around financial problems and communication problems. Malik humorously asserts that "socks [are] the difficulty," indicating his family's inability to buy even the most basic necessities at this time. When asked what he would change about his family he says, "Just the relationship with me and her mom. Just understanding each other more and realizing that we do have a kid." Terrell says, "The only difficulty we're really having problems with is financial," but then continues on to discuss relationship problems with the child's mother as being part of the same issue:

> There's more focus [on financial things], without income coming in consistently like it should, then it creates more problems. When we divide money and make it not an issue, then it's more about us, it's

more about the good times we share, regardless of anything else.

Jason states that the greatest difficulty his family faces is "Just being around each other. Just having contact with my sons. That's something I haven't had much that I want more of." When asked what he would like to change about his family, he indicates that he would like a different family structure that would allow him a closer relationship with the mother of one of his sons and live-in arrangements with both of his children. Antonio says that "being able to get along and see eye-to-eye in situations" with his children's mother is the biggest difficulty faced by his family.

It is apparent that the participants have internalized the American ideal of family. They all strive for the mother-father-children nuclear household, despite the conflicts with the children's mothers that were mentioned earlier in the interviews. Barriers to the types of families they desire included conflict-filled relationships with the children's mothers and financial stressors that both contributed to the parental conflict and made it difficult for them to provide the material items that their family needed and wanted.

Ideas about Responsibility

When asked about the most important thing they could give their children, participants' responses were all in the affective and cognitive domains of father involvement, rather than involving material provisions. Malik said the most important thing is "help her learn to make a good decision, to help her learn from the bad ones." Terrell said the most important thing to give is daughter is "My heart. My love. A father. In spite of it all." Jason said, "The most important thing you could do is give them the knowledge of knowing right and wrong and have them be able to distinguish what needs to be done from what they want." Jason said the most important things to give his children were love, knowledge, and respect.

Participants' ideas of their responsibilities toward their children included provisions of material items and financial assistance, "being there," and raising the children. When asked if they perceived themselves as being responsible for their children's mothers, participants indicated a number of different domains in which they felt obligated to support their partners:

Malik: I make sure she goes to school, I tried to make sure she goes to work, but she wasn't

having that. And to make sure she speaks to her parents. . . . Basically I teach her to speak her mind.

Terrell: I'd probably say [my responsibilities include] respect, heart-to-heart, a good time, laughter. That's my responsibility, bein' a good shoulder, being a good figure in the home, fatherly, and what we are together. . . [Then] everything else in life falls into place.

Jason: Just wanting to do things for them to make their lives simpler and easier, for both of them actually. Because of the children.

Antonio: If she's not doing good, the kids aren't doing good. It's my responsibility to help her do good so the kids will do good. [During the pregnancy] it was to me basically all the responsibilities a man is supposed to take on as in marriage. So basically, making sure she was comfortable with the situation, letting her know I was going to be there.

In expressing feelings of obligation toward the mothers as well as their children, participants clearly have some comprehension of the way in which their support of the mothers impacts the well-being of their children.

Malik, Jason, and Antonio state that the level of responsibility they take for their children is less than they had anticipated during the pregnancy and that they wish they were able to do more. It is worth noting that these three participants have been less continuously involved in their children's lives than Terrell, because they have been incarcerated (Malik and Antonio) or estranged from children's mothers (Jason), and this has likely impacted their level of participation in their children's lives. Malik and Jason expressed the goal of being involved in their children's learning and development:

Malik: I wanna take more responsibility . . . and it's like her [the baby's] education, I wanna take more responsibility helping her. Because it's like I've been in jail for five months, and before I went, she wasn't walking, she wasn't talking, nothing like that. So I haven't really got to do none of those things with her. I just wanna be more responsible for her being a genius or

something like that. I wanna have more credit in that.

Jason: If I were able to see them a lot more, there are a lot more things I can do and teach them and show them. Because a woman can't teach a man to be a man. . . . It's my responsibility to teach them certain things, and if I can't do it then they'll never learn certain things that they need to learn.

Antonio indicated that he had expected to be even more financially responsible for his children, to provide them with more material luxuries:

Antonio: I expected to be able to do more, but with what I can do now, it's no different. The only thing different is financial, I don't have the funds to do everything I would like to do.

Jason differed from the others in that he indicated complete satisfaction in the level of responsibility he demonstrates toward his daughter:

Jason: I really feel like I am doing an excellent job being there, financially, physically, mentally. And I'm challenged every day, outside in the world, and doing so much. But I know that this is my family, I know that I'm really tackling things the way that a man is supposed to be tackling them.

Responses differed when participants were asked, "What is the most important thing you can give your children?" and "What are your responsibilities toward your children?" Questions about the most important thing to give received the non-material responses mentioned in the first paragraph of this section (love, knowledge, etc.). Questions regarding "responsibility" elicited more materialistic responses in addition to various aspects of "being there" (non-financial involvement). The fathers' differing responses to these two types of questions may be an indication of the way in which society has equated paternal "responsibility" with financial and material provision for the child. Note that this idea of being responsible for material provision does not extend to the children's mothers, as the fathers only mention financial obligations to the children specifically. They feel that their responsibilities to the mothers of their children involve "being there" – emotional support, caretaking, etc.

Images

All participant identified society's images of young Black fathers (as a group, not necessarily themselves specifically) as being negative. Malik relays a personal experience about how the images impacted him when others heard that he was a father:

Malik: Before my daughter was born, everybody asked me, they said, "Malik, I heard that your girlfriend was pregnant," I was like "Yeah" and they was like "You gonna take care of the kid?" I thought to myself – what is you talking about 'am I gonna take care of the kid,' ain't it mines? Of course I am. And basically it's prejudice, I feel it's too much prejudice. . . . Everybody [asked me that], my friends' friends, my aunts and uncles, stuff like that. I just feel that it's a lot of prejudice and a lot of ignorance too.

When asked why they thought these negative stereotypes exist, participants indicated that they felt there was some degree of truth in them. They endorsed the stereotypes to the extent that they felt that the majority of young Black fathers were really like the negative images, rather than like themselves. Each of the young men viewed himself as an exception to the norm, rather than an exemplar of the group.

Terrell: [The majority of young Black fathers], no, they're not like me! 'Cause they're not taking care of their business. I'm RARE!

Malik: It's true that more fathers run out on kids, but I feel that happens a lot, but that doesn't mean it happens all the time. . . . Mothers run out on kids, fathers run out on kids . . .

Antonio: I'd have to say that the majority of Black fathers, or fathers period, regardless of what race [are fitting the stereotype]. *Young* fathers anyway.

Jason: It's kind of true that a lot of Black fathers don't have anything to do with their children, and that's wrong, because their fathers didn't have that much to do with them. . . if you actually look at the numbers, a lot of times that's the case .. . actually because Black males don't do enough for their children . . . that's just a fact, I guess.

The belief that the stigmatized group had brought the negative images upon themselves was reiterated by the participants when they were asked what should be done to change the stereotypes. Rather than saying that the media images (discussed below) should be changed or that the public should be educated about young fathers who are involved, participants indicated that it was the responsibility of all the fathers to "do what they're supposed to do," and "settle down, actually marry the girls that they get pregnant." Malik also notes that the stereotypes will not change unless young Black males are given "a chance to speak their mind on a situation . . . and don't listen to *how* they're saying it, just listen!"

Malik says that the negative stereotypes in the media "biased my opinion on some of the things I think about teen fathers, Black fathers, having a kid." The negative images he absorbed from popular culture, his family, and his peers slanted his expectations of his own ability to parent his child:

Malik: I went into being a father with the thought of failure off tops. Like 'I ain't gonna be able to do this, I ain't gonna be able to do it.' But I ain't never said that I'm not gonna do it.

The other three fathers did not feel that the widespread stereotypes impacted their personal experiences because they believed themselves as exceptions from the "majority" of young fathers or Black fathers portrayed by the images.

Support Systems

The fathers in this study believe that they themselves are their main (or only) "support network," indicating a lack of such a "network" that is known to them. They mentioned others such as family members, friends, or God only when specifically directed to identify someone beyond themselves as a support person. They claim that most of their ideas about what it means to be a father came from themselves rather than from role models. The majority of support, from the fathers who feel they receive any, comes from the children's mothers, whom they admit are also stressed. Family of origin was only mentioned as an ideal support system by one of the participants, and another mentioned it as an afterthought. The majority of the young men felt as if they had no back-up if they were to have difficulties, especially in the area of financial support and also in the area of disputes with their children's mothers. Only one participant was aware of a formal "support group" for young dads. He found that it was helpful to have other people in his same situation to talk to, as the friend who provided him with his primary source of emotional support did not have a child and could not understand everything he was going through. Other participants indicated that they may have found support from formalized programs to be helpful in deepening their bond with their children (through recreational activities) and adding to their knowledge about raising children.

Common Themes

Participants shared a great similarity in many areas even though they had differing types of relationships with their children and their children's mothers, lived in different types of family units, were of differing ages, and were at different stages of education and employment. Six main themes emerged throughout the interviews. A "theme" was identified when a particular conversation topic was initiated by two or more of the participants, usually in more than one area of the interview. The themes include: 1) similar notions of the ideal family; 2) similar feelings that the relationships with the children's mothers impacted the quality of their relationship with their children; 3) the prevalence of communication problems in their relationships with their co-parent; 4) responsibility being expressed in terms of traditional gender roles; 5) anger at uninvolved dads; and 6) a lack of comprehensive support systems.

The Ideal Family

One of the recurring themes throughout the interviews is that these young men have the desire to create and maintain stable families for their children, and they define "stable" families in similar ways. Although they indicated feeling as though a two-parent family was not a requirement for successful childhood development (based upon their own experiences or people they knew), they all appeared to favor the "nuclear family" ideal, expressing intents and desires to remain involved with the mothers of their children and indicating that these intentions were based at least in part on the desire to provide the best family structure for their children. The participants who were involved in romantic relationships expressed more satisfaction with both their overall family life and their relationships with their children.

Two of the participants valued the nuclear family

ideal to the extent that they indicated they would stay in a romantic relationship with the child's mother even if they were no longer interested, just to maintain the family structure. The two participants who were not currently involved in romantic relationships with the mothers of their children both expressed interest in marrying the women, this being either reflective of their feelings toward the women or a desire they feel to overcome what they may perceive as their lack of control of their family situation by becoming the traditional head of a household.

Poor Relationships with Mothers Inhibit Relationships with Children

All four participants associated their relationships with their children to their relationships with the mothers and vice versa. The participant who has minimal involvement with his children sees his relationships with their mothers as the only obstacle to his involvement. Even participants currently involved in romantic relationships with the mothers of their children indicated that strain within these relationships would result in poorer interactions with their children. This prompts one father to say that he will stay with the mother against his true desires because it's necessary for his involvement with his daughter. Another participant stresses that he will do "whatever it takes" to "make it work" with his child's mother because of the negative impact it would have if the relationship were to end.

Communication Problems

The biggest difficulties involving interaction with mothers have to do with communication. This ranges from the problem of not communicating at all, to miscommunication, to a lack of skills to express the true reason for anger. One participant says that references to his daughter cloud the communication during arguments because, regardless of the topic over which it started, the argument becomes about the child and what will happen if they break up. Another participant says that misunderstandings and pre-judging cause the most conflict with his child's mother. A participant uninvolved with his child's mother just wishes that they "could actually sit down and have a conversation without her trying to throw objects at me."

Notions of Responsibility Tied to Traditional Gender Role Ideology

The participants feel that they have responsibilities

specific to their roles as fathers. Their definitions of manhood appear closely tied to their sense of duty:

Terrell: I wish I could be [with my daughter] more. I mean I know I have to work, and I'm supporting. That's a father's role. . . . I'm really tackling things the way that a man is supposed to be tackling them

Malik: Being a male, and I got a daughter, so I'm a *male* and I got the baby's mother and that's a girl, so [the responsibility is] basically everything . . . it's like people look at you like, well you the *male* in the relationship so you carrying the weight right now, so if you fall off, the whole family's gonna fall off.

Jason: There are certain things that only a *man* can teach a boy that women can't teach . . . a woman can't teach a man to be a man. A woman can raise a child, but she cannot teach a man to be a man. It takes either the boy to find out on his own how to be an actual man, or it takes another male to show the child.

Antonio: [The responsibilities are] to me basically all the responsibilities a *man* is supposed to take on.

The emphasis indicated in italics in the quotations was actual verbal emphasis placed on the words "male" and "man" as the participants spoke about the topics in the interviews. They believe that they have specific roles as men and were emphatic about the importance of these roles and their abilities to fulfill them.

Anger at Uninvolved Dads

As previously indicated, all participants endorsed the negative stereotypes of young Black fathers as containing some element of truth. For some, this appeared to be tied to the absence of their own fathers. Participants expressed anger toward fathers who were not involved with their children:

Malik: I didn't have a dad. How am I supposed to know how to be a dad if I didn't have a dad? Didn't nobody teach me how to be a dad, except my brother, and he was four years older than me, so how he gonna teach me to be a dad if he don't got no kids yet?

Antonio: Each individual father [needs to be] doing what they're supposed to do. There's nothing that one man can do to correct another man's mistake. It's each individual that has to correct their own mistakes. There's nothing really that society as a whole could do to change what millions of men are doing every day.

Terrell: There's too many Black men out here that ain't taking care of responsibilities and I don't wanna be one of em. . . . At my job, where I work, I'm always in contact with families, so I see a lot of the developments that happen in people's homes and I know a lot of times what hurts a child and makes a child get out there and run the streets is the fact that there's nobody that cares enough for their security and what they're doing. . . . if [your father] wasn't there for your ass, then you should say "Damn it, then I'm gonna be there for *mine*!" and if he was there for you, he should be hittin' you upside your head for actually wantin' to leave something that he never left.

Jason: Society as a whole has a right to be mad at certain young Black males.

Despite the feeling that stereotypes are at least partly founded in truth and applicable to many members of the population, the participants feel the media exacerbates negative images because of the way that both young fathers and Black fathers are portrayed. However, they place the responsibility for changing the negative images on young Black fathers themselves, and they do not expect this to happen. Each believes himself to be quite exceptional in his role as an interested, involved, and responsible young Black father, believing that the vast majority of men in their age group are accurately depicted by the stereotypes.

Lack of Comprehensive Support Systems

Formal support systems, which may help these fathers fulfill their responsibilities, are not prevalent in the local community. The youngest participant, being most recently in the school system, was the only person able to identify a support group for young fathers. He reports enjoying the fathers' group he attended at school, especially valuing socializing with other young fathers and their children and discussing fathering issues with others in similar situations. Other participants feel that they may have benefitted from such groups in their youth, mostly if the groups offered bonding activities for themselves and their children.

The fathers in this study believe that they themselves are their main (or only) "support network," indicating a lack of such a "network" that is known to them. They claim that most of their ideas about what it means to be a father came from themselves, rather than from role models. The majority of support, from the fathers who feel they receive any, comes from the children's mothers, whom they admit are also stressed. Family of origin was only mentioned as an ideal support system by one of the participants, and another mentioned it as an afterthought. The majority of the young men felt as though they had no back-up if they were to have difficulties, especially in the area of financial support, and also in disputes with their children's mothers. In general conversation, these fathers seem less aware than their partners of the procedures to obtain financial or other support from community resources. If such services geared toward fathers do exist in the local community, members of this sample are unaware of the programs or of what benefits they can attain from them.

Conclusion

Participants in this study express interest in their young families and a desire to take responsibility for their children. Overall, they feel that they are successful in their roles as young dads. Their biggest difficulties are maintaining good communication with the mothers of their children, obtaining their desired level of income, and spending a desirable amount of time with their children. Outreach programs addressing these barriers have the potential to greatly enhance these fathers' parenting successes.

If local community outreach agencies are to begin providing programs for this population, they may best begin by creating interventions targeting the aspects of the fathers' parenthood with which they express the most dissatisfaction. It is likely that there are other agendas to which these programs would be bound (such as preventing repeat teen pregnancies, educating about appropriate discipline, promoting sexual health, etc.), but in order to recruit and retain participants, it is important that the programs focus on topics that the young men themselves perceive to be relevant. This would include designing programs to address financial barriers and relationship barriers, and include activities which would allow the fathers to bond with their

children and each other. It may also be useful to provide these young men with positive role models to help counter then negative images they are exposed to every day, such as through mentoring programs.

Notes

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2. The Gottfried and Martha Lang Award is an annual, competitive award for which the student awardee receives recognition at the annual meeting of the High Plains Society for Applied Anthropology, a cash prize of $100.00, and publication in the *High Plains Applied Anthropologist.* Students are encouraged to submit papers by January of each year to the Editor's Office, *High Plains Applied Anthropologist.* See "Guidelines for Authors" at the end of this issue for further information on submission requirements.

3. Christina Dorsey graduated from the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, in May 2004 with B.A. degrees in Anthropology, Psychology, and Ethnic Studies. She can be contacted at christina_j_dorsey@hotmail.com.

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