

EXPERIENCES OF TEEN FATHERS' RELATIONSHIP WITH SIGNIFICANT OTHERS IN VAALBANK, MPUMALANGA PROVINCE, SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the phenomenon teen fatherhood in Vaalbank of Mpumalanga Province in South Africa. Teenage fatherhood is a global problem that receive less attention from scholars as teenage mothers are the ones who enjoys the benefits of being researched. As such, the experiences of teenage fatherhood remain unscrutinised and overlooked. This paper sought to explore the experiences of teen fathers' relationship with significant others in Vaalbank, Mpumalanga Province. The author used qualitative approach and exploratory-descriptive Afrocentric research design exploring the experiences of teen fathers from seven participants through semi-structured interviews. The study discovered that the participants received support from their parents and their peers when they told them that they are teenage fathers. Others highlighted that, through conversing with their peers, they had learnt that, as fathers, they needed to get jobs. However, the community was not as understanding as the teenage fathers' family and peers. Community members expect a grown-up man to be a father and not a teenager t. This article shows that teenage fathers receive stereotypical views from their community as they are seen as deviant and lacking societal norms.

Keywords: Teenage fathers, Teenage mothers, Parenthood, Afrocentric, Relationships

INTRODUCTION

Matlakala, Makhubele and Mashilo (2018) and Chideya and Williams (2013) aver that the phenomenon teenage fatherhood does not receive much attention from researchers and like their counterparts, teenage fathers have to work through developmental tasks while at the same time adjust to their roles as fathers. Strug and Wilmore-Schaeffer (2003) assert that globally there is gender imbalance on parenthood with mothers being favoured. While, Tuffin, Rouch and Frewin (2010:482) assert that "the neglect of young fathers may stem from the now displaced view that fathers were irrelevant to the child's psychosocial development or from Western beliefs about the prime importance of motherhood." In other words, researchers are of the view that teenage fathers do not want to be involved in their children's life. When researchers attempt to study teenage fatherhood, they incorporate it with teenagemotherhood and isolating the fact that they are different from their counterparts.

Lemay, Cashman, Elfenbein and Felice (2010) aver that teenage fathers are seen as a vulnerable population and share same challenges as their counterparts (teenage mothers). The readiness of the teenage father to fatherhood is determined by the way he views the role of fatherhood and it is also determined by societal values. In support, Monepya (2017:3) and Lemay et al (2010:222) aver that "transition from boyhood to manhood takes different forms in different societies; hence, an understanding of the complexities of boys becoming men must integrate their

needs, attitudes, and beliefs regarding fatherhood.” For instance, in other communities being a father means providing financial benefits to the child and the mother. However, these teenage fathers are unable to provide such benefits as they are still young themselves and rely on their parents for monetary purposes. Furthermore, Chideya and Williams (2013:209) aver that “adolescent fathers are expected by the society to become providers for their children.” However, they fail to fulfil their roles as Carlson et al. (2016) avow that teenage fathers are more likely to be unemployed, drop out of school and live in poverty. To that end this study sought to explore the experiences of teen fathers’ relationship with significant others in Vaalbank, Mpumalanga Province.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Raj, Rabi, Amudha, van Teijlingen and Glyn (2010:3) found teenage pregnancy to be a social challenge for both developing and developed countries. They further reported that on a global scale about 15 million teenage mothers give birth annually while Mangiaterra, Pendse, McClure and Rosen (2008) reported that 16 million teenagers give birth annually. The above statistics shows a decline of only 1 million from 2008 to 2010. However, the decline in teenage pregnancy does not reduce the challenges that comes with parenthood. Macleod and Tracey (2009) reported that teenage pregnancy is associated with psychological and educational consequences. To that end, Smith (2006) has reported that motherhood has been a subject of scholarly study in social sciences and alienating fatherhood. On the same wavelength, Barret and Robinson (1986) have reported that teenage fathers have been seen by policy makers, researchers and academics as being less important as compared to teenage mothers. This demonstrates that the experiences of teenage fatherhood remain unexplored and unscrutinised.

At the intersection of teenage fatherhood there is biological possibility and cultural expectations. It is very surprising in countries like South Africa for a 16-year-old boy to notify his parents that he is a father. In most instances teenage fathers tend to keep quiet about the issue of fathering to avoid being judged and disowned by their communities. According to Tuffin, Rouch and Frewin (2012:269), “literature on adolescent parenthood is skewed towards young mothers, with male counterparts often forgotten or invisible.” It is because teenage mothers are assumed to have been impregnated by elderly men (Matlakala, Makhubele & Mashilo, 2018). Woolston (2014:3) reported that 30 to 50% of children born from teenage mothers are also having teenage fathers.

Berger and Langton (2011:56) content that both conventional wisdom and existing research suggest that fathers’ involvement is beneficial for children’s development and well-being. This is supported Breiding-Buss, Guise, Scanlan and Voice (2003:21) postulated that many young fathers wish to share more fully in the lives of their children, both with a partner in a family context and on their own. On the other hand, Erikson, as cited in Eggebeen and Knoester (2001:382), states that it is a norm among developmentally oriented scholars that the parent-child relationship is a two-way street. Despite this theoretical orientation, however, most of the research through the years has focused on what parents do to children (for example, socialisation).

This is in direct contrast with some of the stereotypes about men, that teen fathers are irresponsible and do not care about their children. Dudley (2007:173) cited that many young fathers report that they genuinely want to be actively involved in their role as parents and that a

primary factor in the continued involvement of the father is ‘the existence of a continuous romantic relationship between the biological parents.’ In addition, Chili (2013:44) found that some teen fathers opted to maintain their relationships with their partners as well as their children in order to “rectify” their fathers’ past deeds. Respondents in Chili’s study stated that they observed how they lived in poor conditions with their single mothers. They mentioned that they did not want their own children to grow up like they did. As a result, they then wanted to take responsibilities for their children. These lead other teenagers to engage themselves in labour so that they could provide for their children and assume parental responsibilities. Glickman (2004) found that teen fathers would rather work two jobs, go to school and sleep only two hours a day, to ensure that they maintain their relationship with their children.

According to Barker (2003), certain teen fathers’ parents continued to support them materially and were also helping them take care of their children. This continued support had acted as a buffer against the harsh reality of the consequences of teen fatherhood. The finding reflects how some participants are not carrying the full weight of responsibilities that comes with fatherhood as a result of the support that they receive from their parents. This has given them an opportunity to gradually transit from being a teenager to fatherhood successfully. However, this research finding shows that the continued support by parents can also become a hindrance to participants’ involvement in their own child’s life. This overbearing parental response can also make teen fathers vulnerable to fathering other children as a teenager, as they would have not faced the full consequences of their past mistakes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study, the researcher used qualitative approach and exploratory Afrocentric research designs. The significance of choosing qualitative approach was that it is often used when a problem would have not been investigated before (Bless, Higson-Smith & Sithole 2013) and most studies have solely focused on teen mothers, thus putting little emphasis on teen fathers. On the other hand, exploratory Afrocentric research design was used because of its ability to use investigate “African people for the purpose of developing a culturally accurate understanding of them” (Mabvurira and Makhubele 2018:18). This warranted the researcher to use an African lens in understanding the experiences of teen fathers’ relationship with significant others in Vaalbank, Mpumalanga Province.

According to British Council Nigeria and Harvard School of Public Health (2010) and Population Reference Bureau (PRB) (2010), teenagers in developing countries makes up two-third of the world population. As such, this study sampled seven teenagers from developing communities as it was reported in the Social Workers office that there is a high number of teen fathers. The participants between the ages of 18-19 were purposively sampled from the large population to participate in this study. De Vos, Strydom, Fouché, and Delpont (2011) state that purposive sampling is based entirely on the judgement of the researchers, in that a sample is composed of elements that contain the most characteristics that are the representative of teen fathers. The author used semi-interviews to collect data and analysed it thematically with the aid of Nvivo Software. Content Thematic Analysis was used to analyse the data because of its ability and potential to further interpret and highlight emerging themes and aspects pertaining to relationship of teen fathers with the significant others in Vaalbank, Mpumalanga Province (Braun & Clarke 2006).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Experiences Of Teen Fatherhood On Relationships

The participants highlighted their experiences of being fathers on their relationships with their significant others. It must be noted that, according to Glickman (2004), teenagers are vulnerable to social pressures as they are at a developmental stage where they are dealing with self and identity issues.

i) Response from Parents

The marginal majority of the participants reported that their parents responded positively to their new role of fatherhood. This emerges with the observation that their parents attempt to help them cope with their responsibilities that come with fatherhood. The support that these teen fathers received from their parents gave them an opportunity to gradually transit from teenagers to fathers successfully. The statements made by teen fathers are as follows:

“My father accepted my daughter and our relationship is still fine as we speak and he supported me in terms of making me a good father. He inspires me.”

Another participant indicated that:

“My family has been supportive since I became a teen father. They even gave me money to buy things that my child might need.”

Although the majority of participants received encouragement from their parents, the researcher found it alarming that a minority of those who endured negative responses from their parents, or at least not at the beginning, were particularly judged. This was to be expected because parents think that their children are taught at their schools on ways to protect themselves from becoming fathers at a younger age. The following are the responses that they cited:

“It was different, because they started to treat me like an adult with more respect, more than they were before.”

The other participant outlined that:

“They judged me for doing grown up stuff while I was young. But now they give me more respect and they still see me as a child and nothing is complicated.”

ii) Relationship with the mother of the child

Substantial majority of the participants reported that they were still in relationships with those partners with whom they had children. This is not amazing because, at their age, they are both anxious about their new role and they want to provide support to each other. Some of the statements made by participants include:

“My relationship with the mother of my child at the time my child was born was very complicated. The mother of my child always suspected that I do not care about her anymore while I was busy preparing for my exams. She always accused me of cheating on her. But we are still together.”

iii) Relationship with peers

A slight majority of the participants reported that their relationships with peers have not changed since they became teen fathers. Others highlighted that, through conversing with their peers, they had learnt that, as fathers, they needed to get jobs. The following are some of the statements made by teen fathers:

“I cannot say much concerning it but only to point out that it has not changed as I still be with them and we still hang out together. Even when they find piece jobs during school holidays, they used to inform and call me to check if I am interested or not, so I could work with them and in the process get some money so that I could support my child”.

The other participant said:

“They were the ones who were supportive. I also shared my challenges with them especially when I was stressed.”

iv) Relationship with the community

The study depicts that a slight majority of the participants reported that they received changed attitudes from the community. This was to be expected because, mostly in rural areas, community members expect a grown-up man to be a father and not a teenager. Some of the statements made by teen fathers are as following:

“I felt that the community did not look at me positively because they saw me as being irresponsible. Even though it was just an honest mistake, they did not treat me well.”

Another participant indicated that:

“The community think that I got the influence from peers and they look down on me as they thought I am sending wrong message to other teenagers in the village.”

DISCUSSION

Asante (2009) defined Afrocentric approach as a mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values, and perspectives predominate. The Afrocentric approach therefore views the experiences of teen fatherhood using the lens of African ways of doing things. It is of the view that people’s viewpoints and behaviour are heavily influenced by their African culture (Asante 2009). In this case, the theory analyses social problems in an African way, whereby the society expects a man, not a boy, to take parental responsibilities and be acknowledged as a father. Therefore, conceptualising this framework, the society does not expect an unemployed teenager to assume parental responsibilities and be acknowledged as a father. In contrast, teen mothers are acknowledged as mothers and are also helped by their families in raising the child. There is a likelihood that, if a teenager becomes a father, he might distance himself from teen fatherhood because his culture dictates such. Moreover, if the teen mother’s family does not come and discuss the matter with the teen father’s, he will either be advised or decide not to come out and be acknowledged as the father.

The study found that teen fathers receive positive responses from their parents. This finding thus affirmed a study conducted by Forste, Bartkowski and Jackson (2009), which

postulated that fathers in general replicate the positive fathering they received and then try to rework the negative models of fathering with which they were raised. Corlyon (2011) indicated that the support of parents influenced how involved young fathers were in their children's lives. This suggested that the support that these teen fathers received later on, from their parents, ensured that they adjusted well into their role of being teen fathers. In support, Chideya (2010), avers that teen fathers attributed the role that their parents played in their lives as enabling them to become good fathers to their children. Fagan, Bernd and Whiteman (2007) also highlighted that the support teen fathers received from their parents acted as a buffer against stress.

Although teen fathers experience some impediments with regards to their relationship with the mothers of their children, in this study it was discovered that their romantic relationship was still intact. This contrasted the findings of Chili (2013) who discovered that, more often than not, teen fathers became separated with the mothers of their children time after their children were born. However, Chili recognised that some of the break ups were as a result of a clash of personalities between the teen father and the child's mother. Such a clash of personality might be, for instance, that the teen father is abusing substances and the partner cannot tolerate that.

In this study it was discovered that peers play an important role in the lives of teen fathers and one of the areas they are influential in is that of employment. Smith (2006:67) avers that "peer group effectively replaces the family as the source of support and identity conformation. Although an individual identity is the goal, peers conform to the group norms as they experiment with their new sense of self." Teen fathers learnt the kind of roles they needed to play in their children's lives from the advices and support they received from their peers. This affirmed the assertion of Chideya (2010) that during teen years, individuals tend to align themselves more with their peers. He further articulated that apart from the family, the peers provide the sort of support to the teen father due to the fact that peers provide a trustworthy environment for their fellow peers to voice out their challenges. Receiving support from significant others usually results in less stress.

Teen fathers in a patriarchal society are often judged, stigmatised and subjected to stereotypes by their communities. In support, Amoo (2012) reported that teen fathers have to deal with the stereotypical thinking and patriarchal system in Sub-Saharan region. Unlike teenage mothers, teen fathers often lack social support from their community and family. Dallas (2004) avers that teenage fathers lack resources to care for their children and as result they are more likely to drop out of school in pursuit of employment. In most cases, teen fathers are still in school and lack the capacity to work and whenever they get employment they are underpaid. This is a burden as teenage fathers have to transact from teenage years to adulthood while they are still in adolescent stage.

Monepya (2017:31) avows that "some of the community members showed their disapproval by pointing fingers at them, blaming them, as they believed that they had deviated from the local traditions and the fact that they were way too young to have children." This was to be expected as most African communities believe that it is a taboo to have a child out of wedlock or having a child while being a child. Maiden (2013:150) found that the inability to be mature, responsible father as well as the inability to meet the traditional norm contributes to the negative portrayals of teen fathers, and they were ultimately being labelled as irresponsible fathers by community members. The community sees teenage fathers as individuals who violated societal expectations such as continuity with education, have their dream job, marry their ideal woman and then have a family.

Culturally having a child out of wedlock also means that the teenage father has to pay what is known as damage in order to be involved in his child's life. In support, Swartz, Bhana, Ritcher and Versfeld (2013:03) discovered that "cultural expectations, especially in the case of an unmarried couple; a father is required to make 'damage payments' (fine paid by the man's family to the pregnant woman's family). If the family fails to pay the fine, the woman's family will most likely deny the father access to his child." This means that a teenage father has to deal with stress of paying for the damage and also deal with the community judging him to be irresponsible and deviant.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that teen fathers like their counterparts' experience array of socio-emotional and economic challenges that are understudied. This is because it is assumed that teen fathers avoid parental responsibilities and they are difficult to find. However, their challenges are portrayed using the teen mothers' lens as if they are from the same clan. This study showed that teen fathers, having to grow from patriarchal society, have to deal with the community which judged them for being deviant and not following their societal norms. This calls for policy markers to consider developing legislations that will recognise and make a fatherhood institution for teen fathers to have support groups. Currently, teen fathers in South Africa rely on the Children's Act 38 of 2005 which speaks of having children out of wedlock with no specific reference to teen fathers. Teen mothers have the luxury of even terminating the pregnancy without involving the father of the child and yet for a teen father to be involved in child's life there should be damages paid. The community does not take into cognisance the financial handicap that teen fathers face and as a result teen fathers are also excluded in the child upbringing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to acknowledge my editors, Ms Prudence Mafa and Ms Annelize Morgan for having taken their time to edit this manuscript. In addition, the participants from Vaalbank village for having taken their time to participate in this study.

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