

Becoming a Dad: Young Men's Transition to First-Time Fatherhood

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Abstract

Although feminist sociology of the past forty years has done much to illuminate the changing practices, experiences and expectations of motherhood, the phenomenon of fatherhood is acknowledged to be far less studied (Barclay and Lupton, 1999). Recent contributions have admired the effects of the changing social and emotional landscape in which men become fathers: the increasing participation of women in the workplace; an increasing expectation that men should be more involved in their children's lives (O'Brien and Shemilt, 2003). But few researchers have specifically addressed the period of transition as men adjust to and prepare for fatherhood for the first time; far less how this is experienced by young men. This study contributes to filling the gap by extending Tina Miller's examination (2005) of the narratives which new parents draw on as they go about creating sense and meaning in their lives.

The preliminary findings at the mid-point (October 2007) in this six month longitudinal study suggest that popular discourses of the feckless teenage father are misplaced and that the process of transition includes reconciliation to new responsibilities and styles of living, even excitement about entering a new phase of life. These responsibilities are invariably expressed as instrumental - earning enough money; providing financially; protecting - rather than relational or affective, which are seen to be the female partner's area of expertise. Despite these fairly normative attitudes, interactions with healthcare professionals tended to have been unequal and unsatisfying, with attention focused on the mother and an implicit expectation that the fathers would not be interested in the pregnancy. Educational initiatives and support from statutory agencies is also overwhelmingly directed at mothers.

These themes will be explored in the postnatal interviews to be conducted over the coming months and then written up as my undergraduate dissertation in sociology.

In keeping with the small scale of this research project, the design envisaged the recruitment of a group of five fathers-to-be from the Swindon and Oxford areas by snowball sampling. After numerous fruitless attempts to find at least one initial participant from publicity materials distributed physically as handbills and electronically on the internet, I approached the Teenage Pregnancy Advisor at Swindon Primary Care Trust for help and was referred to U-Too Training, a privately owned organiser of training programmes for teenage parents working under contract to local health and social services. Significantly their willingness to act as a 'gatekeeper' and represent the research to their clients resulted in successful recruitment.

Methodology

I met the participants for loosely structured qualitative interviews prior to the births of their children, and plan to repeat these postnatally. Expecting them to be somewhat reticent about discussing the intimate details of their lives and emotions, I was surprised that the interviews often overran the allocated time, and seemed to be used by the participants as a rare opportunity to talk and be listened to uncritically. Many questions about the nature of the research relationship and the epistemology of qualitative interviewing have arisen for me as a result of this, which I hope to explore more fully in the write up.

"I don't really see, like, obviously we're like so young but I don't see why we should be looked down on because... we're doing the right thing..."

James, 18

"So [being evicted from the flat] put a lot of weight on my shoulders, and my heart as well. But I thought: right, if we're gonna do this, we're gonna have to just buy somewhere. Get a mortgage. Get that guaranteed place to live, and then we can do what we want with it, and there's no one saying you can't have kids, you can't have pets, you can't do this, you can't do that, you can't paint the walls."

Dan, 24

"Well, it helps you... it makes you like a lot happier, and like, it's all gonna be a different experience for me and all that, and it helps you think a lot clearer as well cos I've only got two things to think about now and that's Nicki and the baby."

Jason, 16

References

- Barclay, L. and Lupton, D. (1999). The experiences of new fatherhood: a socio-cultural analysis. *Journal of advanced nursing*, 29 (4), pp. 1013-1020.
- Miller, T. (2005). *Making sense of motherhood: a narrative approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- O'Brien, M. and Shemilt, I. (2003). *Working fathers: earning and caring*. London: Equal Opportunities Commission.

Summary of preliminary findings

- Many of the participants' first experiences of attending antenatal healthcare appointments had been negative, leaving them feeling marginalised and judged by professionals. Cultural representations of absent or uninterested young fathers are difficult to dislodge.
- At the prenatal stage, young men tend to interpret fatherhood in instrumental rather than affective or relational terms, often mentioning a sense of responsibility for providing and protecting in a way that resonates with traditional modes of fathering. It will be interesting to see whether these attitudes persist after birth.
- For many the experience of becoming a father offers a chance to 'grow up' and 'become a man', with an often explicit rejection of former behaviour like poor diet, drug-taking or petty crime.

Next steps

- Complete the postnatal interviews.
- Write up research findings as undergraduate dissertation in Sociology.
- Present findings to a meeting of the research participants and U-Too Training.

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