

“CHANGING FOR MY KID”: FATHERHOOD EXPERIENCES OF MEXICAN-ORIGIN TEEN FATHERS INVOLVED IN THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

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A descriptive phenomenological study was conducted with six adolescent fathers of Mexican origin on juvenile probation for a variety of serious offenses. All participants successfully completed a parenting program designed especially for teen fathers. In a series of consecutive in-depth interviews, teen fathers were asked to discuss their experiences as fathers. Four phenomena were identified from the data: (a) not giving up and deciding to be a dad, (b) figuring out my relationships after becoming a father, (c) wanting to be a good father, and (d) wanting to be Brown and a father. Findings challenge negative stereotypes associated with Mexican-origin teen fathers engaged in delinquent behaviors and describe the ways in which fatherhood became an important positive motivator in the lives of participants.

Adolescent fathers are often stereotyped as negligent and irresponsible (Winstanley, Meyers, & Florsheim, 2002). Adolescent fathers of Mexican origin, in particular, have even been described as violently criminal and oversexed (Hernandez, 2002). To counter such negative stereotypes, research should be informed by an awareness of negative stereotypes and attitudes that obscure the strengths of ethnic minority groups, particularly those associated with ethnic minorities who have been exposed to challenging life circumstances such as poverty, economic hardship, and involvement in the justice system (Turner, Wieling, & Allen, 2004).

The purpose of this investigation was to describe the experiences of a group of Mexican-origin adolescent fathers who were on probation for diverse offenses and who successfully completed a parenting program. Specifically, this study focused on learning from participants about the experience of being a teen father.

The U.S. Latino culture is comprised of multiple cultures (e.g., Mexican origin, Cuban, Puerto Rican); however, the literature, focused solely on Mexican-origin adolescent fathers, is extremely limited (Hernandez, 2002; Parra-Cardona, Wampler, & Sharp, 2006). Thus, the term

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Latino will be used whenever we refer to research conducted with Latino youth in general, and the term *Mexican origin* whenever reference is made to studies involving participants whose ethnic origins can be traced to Mexico.

LATINO AND MEXICAN-ORIGIN ADOLESCENT FATHERS

Although extensive research and a variety of intervention programs have been implemented with teen mothers (Rozie-Battle, 2003), research and public policies focused on teenage fatherhood continue to be limited (Dallas, Wilson, & Salgado, 2000; Lesser, Tello, Koniak-Griffin, Kappos, & Rhys, 2001; Marsiglio & Cohan, 1997). Studies focused on Latino and, particularly, Mexican-origin adolescent fathers are scarce (Hernandez, 2002). In addition, although Mexican-origin youth continue to be the ethnic group with the highest rate of teen pregnancy in the U.S. (Martin et al., 2004), there continues to be a dearth of research focused on describing the resilient ways in which Mexican-origin teen fathers can embrace fatherhood as a key precursor of change in their lives (Hernandez, 2002).

Researchers have documented the commitment of Latino teen fathers to remain involved in the lives of their children despite intense contextual challenges such as poverty, violence, or educational barriers (Hernandez, 2002; Lesser et al., 2001). These findings were called to question the negative stereotypes associated with Latino teen fathers and highlight the importance of informing research according to strength-based perspectives, particularly, because the strengths of ethnic minorities continue to be overlooked in research (Parke et al., 2004).

For example, Latino masculinity is often associated with negative stereotypes of *machismo* that depict Latino males as domineering and wanting to control women (Neff, 2001). However, an exclusive focus on this type of machismo overlooks notions of *positive machismo* and *nobleza* (i.e., nobility), which refer to the importance of being a compassionate family man, a nurturing father, and a responsible provider (Neff, 2001; Tello, 1998; Torres, Solberg, & Carlstrom, 2002). These masculine attributes have been identified in research with Mexican-origin fathers who “exhibit high levels of commitment to family and spend considerable time interacting with their children in nurturing and emotional ways” (Coltrane, Parke, & Adams, 2004, p. 185).

In addition to the need to explore the ways in which notions of positive machismo and masculinity promote a commitment to fatherhood, it is also relevant to investigate the ways in which fatherhood constitutes an important motivator for change among Latino teen fathers. For instance, Lesser et al. (2001) documented the ways in which fatherhood can become a key motivator for change among Latino teen fathers with a history of involvement in delinquent behaviors:

Findings illustrate the profound changes that some young men make as a consequence of taking on the father role. . . . They are changing their relationships to their families, to their communities, and to their society by gaining honest employment, returning to school to finish their education, and developing empathic relationships, all for the sake of their child. (p. 341)

Although these findings are encouraging, more research is needed that is focused on investigating the gradual processes that lead teen fathers to develop a fatherhood identity and a commitment to fathering (Coley, 2001; Lesser et al., 2001). In addition, because fatherhood research has been informed by a strong Eurocentric bias (Coley, 2001), qualitative approaches represent a unique approach to study the experiences that are most relevant in the lives of ethnic minority teen fathers (Lamb, 2000). Finally, studies focused on specific Latino subgroups (e.g., Mexican origin) allow for a deeper understanding of the experiences of teen fathers that may be difficult to capture in research designs that target participants from diverse Latino subgroups (Coltrane et al., 2004; Hernandez, 2002).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this investigation was threefold: (a) to obtain in-depth descriptions of the fathering experiences of a small group of Mexican-origin adolescent fathers involved in the juvenile justice system, (b) to learn from participants about the role of fathering in their lives as well as the gradual process of adaptation to fatherhood, and (c) to identify key areas of research relevant to design future and more complex studies focused on strengthening the fathering efforts of Mexican-origin and Latino adolescents.

METHODS

Qualitative research is useful for obtaining in-depth descriptions of diverse life experiences, especially in areas that have been minimally studied. This is the case for Latino adolescent fatherhood (Jarret, Roy, & Burton, 2002; Parke et al., 2004). In addition, qualitative methods are particularly useful when conducting research with marginalized groups because this method of inquiry is associated with the promotion of trust with participants, and participants receive the message that their voices are important (Umaña-Taylor & Bámaca, 2004).

Because the purpose of descriptive phenomenology is to generate detailed descriptions of experience as it is lived and understood by people (Husserl, 1970; Porter, 1998), we considered that this qualitative tradition was particularly useful to investigate the ways in which adolescent participants came to embrace their commitment to fatherhood.

The Descriptive Phenomenological Approach

Phenomenology has its roots in the philosophical work of Husserl (1962, 1970). He advocated uncovering the life experience of persons, rather than focusing exclusively on the study of scientific constructs. Husserl also considered context as a source of meaning rather than as a source of contamination (Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992). The present research followed the guidelines provided by Porter (1994, 1995, 1998), who created a methodology that combines methodological rigor with philosophical inspiration based on Husserl's phenomenological principles. Thus, each participant was interviewed three times over a period of 2 months. Multiple interviews promoted a process of reflexivity and allowed participants to process and expand on issues that they considered relevant. That is, each successive interview was an opportunity for the teen father to reflect on his process of embracing fatherhood and to review what he had thought and said about this process previously.

Sampling and Participants

Phenomenologists argue that the essential structures of a particular phenomenon can be obtained as a result of having conversations with individuals who had similar life experiences (Porter, 1998). Therefore, the sample size in descriptive phenomenological studies is kept small to ensure that participants share common individual characteristics and have been exposed to similar life events (Baker et al., 1992). In the present study, all participants were Mexican-origin teen fathers who were on probation in the juvenile justice system.

Participants in this study were six adolescents who had completed a series of parenting classes especially designed for teen fathers involved in the juvenile justice system in a community in the Southwest U.S. (Parra-Cardona et al., 2006). Participants were on probation at the time of the interviews for offenses ranging from possession and use of illegal substances to aggravated assault. Successful completion of the parenting course was an inclusion criterion because we were particularly interested in learning about the participants' experiences as they developed a commitment to fatherhood before, during, and after the classes.

Participants were selected from three different parenting groups led by the first author and one of two female parent educators of Mexican origin. Participants were 15 to 17 years old at the time of the interviews. At the time of the interviews, four participants were enrolled in eleventh grade, one in tenth grade, and one teen father had obtained his General Educational Development degree (GED). Four participants had one child whose ages ranged between 9 and 18 months. Two teen fathers had two children each, whose ages ranged between 3 months and 3 years. None of the participants was married to their child's/children's mother. Four teen fathers were interested in maintaining a romantic relationship with their child's/children's mother and, although two participants were not interested in maintaining a romantic relationship with their partners, they had been able to establish a co-parental relationship.

All activities related to the recruitment of participants, implementation of parenting groups, and qualitative interviews were implemented after receiving full approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), which assessed and ensured the protection of participants in this study.

Procedure

Intervention. Details of the teen fathers program related to the course structure, implementation, treatment outcomes, and suggestions for duplication have been presented elsewhere (Parra-Cardona et al., 2006). All participants were informed about this specific intervention because they were required to complete parenting training as a condition of their probation. Thus, although teen fathers chose to attend this intervention over other parenting courses offered in the community, they continued to be supervised by their probation officers to ensure regular attendance to the intervention. Because of the mandatory requirement to complete parenting training, it was common for participants, particularly at the beginning of the course, to be reluctant to assume their responsibility as fathers as well as to examine their parenting commitment in their everyday lives (e.g., blaming the partner for getting pregnant, allowing their own mothers to take primary responsibility for childcare). Participants were paid \$10 for attending each of the six parenting sessions.

Interviews. After completing the parenting intervention, each of the six teen fathers was interviewed three times for a total of 18 interviews, and each interview lasted between 60 and 90 min. By allowing participants to reflect for a period of time on the experience of the first interview and their responses, subsequent interviews offered an opportunity for participants to achieve deeper reflections and to confirm or modify their initial input, resulting in increased data reliability (Porter, 1994). Second and third interviews were conducted within 2–6 weeks of the first interview.

The first interview began with a question related to their experiences as fathers: "If you had to describe to someone what it is like being a father at your age, what would you say?" Special emphasis was given to using participants' own responses as probes to minimize data collection bias associated with researchers' preconceived ideas. Thus, although specific probes were included in the interview guide, these were reserved until the end of the interview to privilege the reports of the participants.

Bracketing

Bracketing consists of identifying and setting aside preconceived notions and biases related to the topic of study to approach the process of research with a fresh perspective (Porter, 1995). The major bracketing activities for this study were undertaken by the first author because he carried out data collection and primary analysis of the data. The process of bracketing consisted of two sequential steps. First, the lead author identified major themes associated with teen fathers following a comprehensive literature review on fatherhood and teen fatherhood. In addition, and because the primary investigator co-facilitated all teen parenting groups that participants of this study attended, he reviewed videotapes of parenting

sessions and annotated diverse reactions and emotions as he recollected experiences associated with the implementation of these groups. Finally, he integrated all this information and wrote a narrative in which he clearly described the ways in which conducting teen parenting groups impacted his life, the diverse feelings and reactions that he experienced during the implementation of the teen parenting groups, as well as his motivations for doing the present study.

The second step of bracketing consisted of several conversations with co-investigators who reviewed the narrative written by the primary investigator. These conversations were extremely important to ensure appropriate data collection and data analysis, particularly because co-investigators assisted the lead author by helping him to avoid a “tunnel vision” by which he could have privileged information that he wanted to hear from participants (e.g., “I want to change for my kid”), while overlooking information that he did not want to hear (e.g., “I could care less, I just wanted to do my own thing and get high”).

Data Analysis

NVIVO[®] qualitative data management software was used to facilitate data analysis (Bazeley & Richards, 2000). For analytical purposes, each idea was a unit of analysis, and ideas were considered as separate thoughts (Porter, 1994). Data related to fatherhood experiences were understood as the ways in which “the informant makes sense of his [her] experiences” (Bordere, 2003, p. 27).

Porter (1994) suggests analyzing lived experience by grouping data into three levels: intentions, component phenomena, and phenomena of the experience. Thus, ideas were identified either as actions or perceptions. Actions were defined as behaviors that participants engaged in relation to their experiences. For example, when describing the changes in his behavior as a result of becoming a father, a participant said, “I quit on a lot of things I used to do like going out with my friends.” Perceptions refer to the thoughts participants had regarding “their actions and the intentions of those actions” (Porter, 1994, p. 20). For instance, when describing spending time with his daughter, a teen father said, “I feel my daughter deserves everything that I didn’t have. . . . So, I need to be there for her so she can feel better.”

After identifying actions and perceptions, the lead investigator followed an intuitive process (Porter, 1998) to identify participants’ intentions. Thus, he repeatedly asked himself, “What are they trying to do with their experience?” For instance, a teen father expressed, “I want to show every day to my daughter that I love her.” Such an intention was named “*loving my child.*” Similar intentions were grouped across participants into component phenomena. For example, *loving my child*, *doing what I have to do*, *teaching by example*, and *holding my pride as a man* constituted the component phenomenon “*being there for my child.*” Finally, relationships were identified among similar component phenomena to create the phenomenon of the experience. For instance, the component phenomena of *changing for my child* and *being there for my child* comprised the phenomenon “*wanting to be a good father.*” Table 1 summarizes phenomena, component phenomena, and intentions.

Trustworthiness of the Findings

Trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to the standards that should be met to ensure the quality and accuracy of the interpretation of the findings (Morrow, 2005). In this study, trustworthiness was strengthened by conducting multiple interviews with participants to obtain richer descriptions of the teen fathers’ fatherhood experiences. Multiple interviews enhanced the process of validation of analyses by offering opportunities to confirm preliminary results in subsequent interviews. Participants were asked specifically to review the researchers’ findings from the first and second interviews in the third interview. There was agreement among participants related to the accuracy of identified life-world context and lived-experience data.

Table 1
Phenomena, Component Phenomena, and Intentions

Not giving up and deciding to be a dad

Struggling

- Having to face the fact that I am a father
- Choosing to be a father (Thinking about abortion)
- Getting used to it

Finding new meaning in life

- Questioning my role in this life
- Giving life (He/She is my child!)
- Experiencing a unique type of love (Nothing like I love my child)

Figuring out my relationships after becoming a father

Keeping the relationship with my baby's mother

- Wanting to be with her
- Struggling
- Finding a way of remaining close to my child

Trying to connect with my family

- Not telling the deal
- Going to my mom
- Wanting the father-son bond

Wanting to be a good father

Changing for my child

- Knowing I was heading in the wrong direction
- Letting drugs and alcohol get a hold of me/being transparent about it
- Slowing down
- Planning my future

Being there for my child

- Loving my child
- Doing what I have to do
- Teaching by example
- Holding my pride up as a man

Wanting to be Brown and a father

Wanting to have my family

- Valuing family
- Valuing respect

Wanting to be Brown

- Being Brown
- Being with Brown folks

The first author led coding and analytical procedures. Transcripts were reviewed and discussed among the three researchers. The first author kept an audit trail (Rodgers & Cowles, 1993) with methodological and analytical notes, and he engaged in frequent conversations with co-investigators to ensure appropriate data analysis. Finally, capturing the participants' experiences was enhanced by the cultural experiences of the authors. The first author is a Mexican native with extensive experience working with high-risk Mexican and Mexican-origin youth. The second author, trained by Porter in descriptive phenomenology, ensured that the research process was conducive to the capture and transmittal of the experiences of participants as described by them. The third author has 15 years of experience implementing community

programs with Mexican American juveniles and their families involved in the justice system. He was clinical supervisor and mentor of the primary investigator at the time of the investigation. His feedback was critical to help the lead author reflect about the various ways in which participants struggled with several risk factors in their lives. Exploring these issues increased trustworthiness of the data, particularly because it was important to learn about the considerable challenges that blocked the teen fathers' intentions to be good fathers as well as to explore their successes in becoming committed fathers.

RESULTS

Participants provided detailed descriptions of their most relevant fathering experiences as well as the gradual process of adaptation to fatherhood. These experiences can be summarized as (a) *not giving up and deciding to be a dad*, (b) *figuring out my relationships after becoming a father*, (c) *wanting to be a good father*, and (d) *wanting to be Brown and a father*. Rather than assuming that the names of these categories simply "emerged" from the data, the labeling of categories was determined by the researchers' perceptions about what they considered constituted the best descriptions of the participants' experiences. As Conostas (1992) has expressed, "Categories are created and meanings are attributed by researchers who, wittingly or unwittingly, embrace a particular configuration of analytical preferences" (p. 254).

We will present findings common to all participants, and will also indicate whenever specific themes were not reported by all teen fathers. These themes were included in the final analyses because of the nature and importance of their content.

Not Giving Up and Deciding to Be a Dad

Participants experienced intense challenges after realizing that they were going to be fathers at a young age. After they were notified about the pregnancy, they reported a tendency to avoid talking or thinking about the pregnancy. However, despite the challenges, they decided not to give up and found a new meaning in life by accepting their role as a father.

Struggling

Having to face the fact that I am a father. Either by personal choice or because they were pressured by family members, participants reported challenges of accepting their future fatherhood. Denial and disbelief were accompanied by a number of distressing emotions. Teen fathers found themselves depressed, angry, anxious, and/or fearful about becoming fathers. Raymundo, a 15-year-old father on probation for drug abuse charges, described this dilemma:

You just get that scary feeling. . . You just felt like. . . since I was so young, I just had this fear that I had to get away. . . You get asked all these questions and you know deep inside that you are scared and that you can't face the problems and stuff.

Anger was usually associated with being challenged by people who emphasized to teen fathers that they were going to be fathers and told them repeatedly what they were supposed to do as fathers. Andres, a 16-year-old father on probation for assault charges, expressed a reaction that was common among participants, "You get tired of everybody telling you how to do things, telling you how to be a father, whatever, and you start getting mad and you get angry. . . It made me angry at the world."

Facing fatherhood represented a unique challenge for Juan and George because each of them had two children. A critical challenge for them was to recognize the struggles associated with becoming committed fathers as well as deciding not to engage in risky behaviors such as binge drinking, selling and using drugs, or casual sex. Juan described the struggles that he experienced at the time the second pregnancy was announced:

I wanted to change. . . I knew I did not want more drugs in my life, honestly. . . but it was hard to know that I was a father. . . it was also my mentality. . . a part of me didn't give a damn and another did. . . I was not thinking right and I got another kid. . . . Now I want to be a good father. . . Because if I don't change, my children can be shot at age 15. . . If I don't change I have a lot to lose.

Choosing to be a father (thinking about abortion). Participants came from a community generally opposed to abortion. However, the possibility of ending the pregnancy was explicitly raised and rejected in four cases. Raymundo shared his experience: "I thought real hard on abortion. . . I talked to my girlfriend and I'd tell her, 'I think we really need to do something about this. . . I ain't ready to raise no kid, I'm only 14.'" However, despite initial struggles in accepting that they were going to be fathers, the participants ruled out the possibility of abortion. George, a 17-year-old father on probation for illegal possession and use of controlled substances, said:

How are you going to do that to a human being? . . . No, it's wrong. . . I couldn't do that. . . We never thought about abortion. . . . We just went through it. . . . She [child's mother] knew it and I knew it. . . We have to live with it. . . We have to take care of our responsibilities.

Jorge, a 17-year-old father on probation for burglary, responded strongly to his girlfriend's suggestion to consider abortion as an alternative: "I said, 'No,' because abortion is the same thing like killing a child. . . . The baby did not plan it, and why does a child have to die?" Juan, a 17-year-old father on probation for aggravated assault charges, said in this regard:

Just the thought of killing your own kid. . . just because you are not ready. . . . Going to fix your problems before anybody finds out or something, I don't think that's the way to go. . . If you are man enough to do what you do, why aren't you man enough to take care of your kid?

Getting used to it. Accepting fatherhood took time for all participants. Teen fathers reported being forced initially to be with their babies by their families and, as a result, they had to confront aspects of their lifestyles. Andres talked about his experience of getting used to being a father: "The frustrating part was about getting up in the middle of the night. . . I went crazy but then I got used to it." Lorenzo, a 16-year-old father on probation for drug charges, talked about the factors that helped him get used to being a father: "I just spent time with her [baby] and I just learned a lot. . . I understand what she wants. . . when she wants it. . . . A lot of time spent with her."

Finding New Meaning in Life

Questioning my role in this life. Seeing their children brought into the world led teen fathers to question their role in life. Andres described his experience as his child was delivered: "I just had this feeling. . . like my heart was real warm. . . I was just happy, it was like nothing I've ever felt before. . . I was like, 'Thank you, God, for letting me have a healthy son' and I was crying and crying."

Many participants faced a number of potentially life-threatening situations in the past, such as shootings or street fights, and they set great value on seeing their children alive. At the same time, teen fathers reflected on the realization that they themselves were still alive. Jorge recounted the thoughts that he had the day his child was born: "You're just happy, you're excited. . . . It's like the fear is over and like you are just glad to be at the stage you are in life. . . I feel happy you know? . . . It's this thing of joy that I'm alive. . . and I'm still here."

Giving life (He/She is my child!). A crucial experience for teen fathers was realizing their capacity for giving life and, in a way, transcending through their children. This experience was described in highly emotional accounts of the teen fathers realizing that they participated in the creation of a life. Raymundo described this experience:

She's something that I created. . . I have a daughter. . . . All that happens for a reason, having me creating something. . . . I guess it's more a spiritual thing to me. . . . I can hold her, hugging her. . . and the biggest thing is that she came from me. . . . I mean, my creation.

Experiencing a unique type of love. Teen fathers also described the unique love that they feel for their children. Juan expressed how important his son is for him: "My son, he's my life. . . . You got your kid with you, and that is all that matters to me. . . . I don't care about going out anymore as long as I am with my little boy. . . . It's all I need." George said, "There's nothing like I love my son. . . . That is something I don't want to lose. . . . creating a bond with my son. . . . We are going to be in each other's lives for the rest of our lives."

Finally, a common experience shared by teen fathers referred to the importance of keeping a relationship with their children to have a sense of completion in their lives, as Lorenzo commented, "My daughter is way part of me. . . . Even if you have God in your life, your life doesn't become whole until you got your kid."

Figuring Out My Relationships After Becoming a Father

As a result of becoming fathers, participants reported that they had to face a number of challenges in their relationships with those close to them.

Keeping the Relationship With My Baby's Mother

Wanting to be with her. Four of the six teen fathers explicitly associated the desire to be with their child's/children's mother with a sense of remorse about the way they had behaved in the past. George elaborated on this issue:

I feel bad because [girlfriend]. . . she's never been with anyone besides me, . . . and we took each other's virginity when we were fifteen and after that, that's when she got pregnant and I started getting into drugs and started being with other females. . . . And I feel guilty about that. . . because I've been with other females and I've been unfaithful while she's always been there. . . . So, that's something else I have a lot of guilt for.

Struggling. Whether teen fathers wanted to maintain an emotional relationship with their partners ($n = 4$) or just reach an agreement for collaborative parenting ($n = 2$), all participants reported challenges as they tried to relate to their partners. As Jorge commented on this issue, "We just argue a lot. . . . I wish she would understand that I have grown up a little and ain't going to be playing like little kids."

Finding a way of remaining close to my child. One other challenge that three of the participants reported was trying to find a way to stay close to their children because they were afraid that their child's/children's mother would take their child/children away from them. Andres expressed his feelings about this:

I just feel like I cannot do anything about it [being in touch with his baby]. . . . I can't go out there and do what I used to do, like go and see my kid. . . . go and drop by some money, something like that. . . . Not being able to see my kid because her mom is holding him back.

Trying to Connect With My Family

Becoming a father involved being more vulnerable to family members, particularly parents. Specifically, participants described the struggles associated with being honest about their feelings with their parents, being willing to go to their mothers for help, and wanting a relationship with their own fathers.

Not telling the deal. “Telling the deal” refers to sharing feelings or problems that the teen fathers considered to be highly personal. Teen fathers said that although they felt supported by their families, they were initially unable to go “deep” and talk about their feelings. George described the experience of not telling the deal when interacting with his parents:

I'd tell what's in my mind, but I can't speak it. . . . I'd tell them like “I'm going to do this or I'm not going to do this” but I won't tell them like the deal, like “Things have been going on”. . . . I'm not going to tell them anything like that because we are not like that.

Teen fathers also held themselves accountable for not facilitating emotional communication with family members. Juan reflected on not being emotionally vulnerable to his mother, who repeatedly attempted to establish a closer relationship with him, “My mom was trying to help me out but I wasn't accepting the help from her, I would get pissed off. . . and I would take off. . . and I was cursing, yelling and arguing.”

Going to my mom. Knowing that they could rely on their mothers was an experience explicitly noted by five of the teen fathers. They did not report similar experiences with their fathers because their fathers had been physically absent or emotionally unavailable. When asked to identify people who he could always rely on, Raymundo responded, “My mom is the first person I ever talk to every time I get in trouble. . . . My dad was to get me out of the situation and my mom was the person who was really going to help me.”

Wanting the father-son bond. Teen fathers also reported a sense of longing regarding the relationship with their biological fathers. Participants expressed a desire to have a father-son bond. When asked about people who he wished would be able to support him, Andres said, “My dad. . . because me and my dad were the ones that were having problems.”

Beyond the need for emotional intimacy, teen fathers reported the need for experiencing a closer connection with their fathers based on same-sex identification. When talking about the differences between having a relationship with his mother and his father, Juan described what he considered unique about having a connection with his father:

The bond on being a real man. . . cause fathers teach you how to be a real man. . . It's about a man to go and play baseball and fishing. . . . My mom would teach me how to be soft and tender, and caring and loving, she taught me all those things, but I cannot see my mom going to the park and throwing a football at me. . . . She's more feminine. . . . My dad taught me how to be rough.

Despite the apparent rigidity of gender roles, teen fathers also expressed the possibility of modifying gender scripts, especially if their fathers were to tell them that it is acceptable to be emotionally vulnerable. Raymundo commented about the possibility for modifying his gender expectations if his father were to communicate to him the appropriateness of emotional vulnerability:

I don't have anything against women, but my mom, she wouldn't know how to feel like a dude. . . know how it feels to feel disrespected if you cry. . . I don't know. . . like if he would've told me that it's all right for dudes to cry, that dudes can have feelings. . . If my dad said it, that it is ok to cry, that we have some rough times. . . I'd probably have cried a long time ago.

Wanting to Be a Good Father

Participants expressed the desire of wanting to be good fathers for their children. According to teen fathers in our sample, being a good father involved avoiding their past risky lifestyles (e.g., delinquent behaviors, substance abuse), as well as demonstrating their commitment towards their children by remaining actively involved in their lives.

Changing for My Child

Knowing I was heading in the wrong direction. Participants expressed that fatherhood was a life event that facilitated a process of self-examination regarding behaviors such as drug use, delinquent behavior, avoidance of personal responsibility, etc. Teen fathers reported going through a process in which they started to own responsibility for their actions as well as being less self-centered. For example, Jorge expressed, "I'm learning to be more giving. . . . learning not to be selfish and showing empathy for others. . . . I used to worry just about myself and I wasn't showing empathy for my kids."

Letting drugs and alcohol get a hold of me. Teen fathers commented on the way in which drugs and alcohol abuse played a major role in their lives. Lorenzo shared his fear of losing the battle against drugs, which might take him away from his daughter:

The only thing that could take me away from my daughter is my addiction. . . . cause I'm in my right mind whenever I'm not using. . . . But when I'm using, I'm ready to get more money or more drugs, and every charge I got against me it's about drugs. . . . I liked having money and drugs because I thought I was powerful when I had that.

Regarding the reasons for abusing substances, all but one of the participants indicated that drugs and alcohol were a way of escaping reality and forgetting problems. As a result of feeling emotionally overwhelmed, George described the way in which he turned to drugs to forget about his feelings:

I was really hurt, me and my dad getting into arguments. . . . my mom caught in the middle. . . . my girlfriend pregnant. . . . I just put them off. . . . I was on the influence of something so I wouldn't think about it. . . . I was always trying to please myself, so I wouldn't have time to think about those feelings.

The teen fathers realized that becoming good fathers required abstinence from drugs and alcohol. Juan talked about his motivation for recovering from substance abuse: "And I was like, 'I got a kid. . . . I need to change!'. . . . I want to see how it is like to be on the other side. . . . Instead of continuing on this same road. . . . I want to go up. . . . I want to be real to myself."

Slowing down. In addition to recovering from drug and alcohol addiction, fathers reported engaging in a conscious effort to modify previous behavior. These efforts ranged from changes in attitude to stopping gang and illegal activity. Teen fathers described this as an experience of slowing down. Raymundo shared his change in attitude: "I gained my mentality. . . . changed my attitude. . . . Because my attitude changes everybody. . . . My attitude could affect you. . . . That's what I learned."

Planning my future. Among the most salient changes reported by the teen fathers as stemming from fatherhood was an active desire to plan their future. Participants reported thinking about new life goals such as moving away from their neighborhood, joining the armed forces, having their own place, and achieving an education. Andres stated, "What I do today makes tomorrow a life full of choices. . . . What I try to do is to graduate and have a good education for the baby. . . . I know I want to graduate." Regarding achieving an education, Lorenzo said, "Getting my GED—it's a short-term accomplishment because I want to get my high school diploma, because not that many people in my family had it."

Being There for My Child

Loving my child. Loving their children is a unique experience reported by teen fathers and it refers to letting their children know in a variety of ways that they are loved. George described this type of love: "My child. . . he's my life. . . I'm going about what I wanted from my dad, that's what I wanted from my dad. . . That's the way I want to be with him."

Participants also expressed that a way of showing love to their children was by sharing with them a variety of experiences such as going out to places or playing. Lorenzo commented on wanting to show his love for his daughter by spending time with her, "I want to show her my love by being a better father and taking her where she wants me to take her. . . take her to wrestling, concerts, comedy, monster truck. . . . Let her have fun."

Teen fathers also mentioned that a special way of loving their children was by showing them unconditional acceptance and support. Juan elaborated on this form of love, "I don't want my kid to feel that he is nobody 'cause he is somebody, he will be somebody, regardless if he is gay, goes gang bang, he is my son. Regardless of the fact, he is my son."

Doing what I have to do. Teen fathers considered that, as a result of becoming fathers, they had the responsibility to cover the material and emotional needs of their children. Lorenzo, who worked in construction, shared his sense of pride about the way he finds satisfaction in fulfilling his role as provider: "I'm working hard for what my daughter got. . . for what my girl got. . . for what I got. . . I'm doing it. . . I'm living a hard job for real life. . . I'm doing what I gotta do. . . I'm handling my responsibilities. . . I'm changing for my kid."

Andres commented that covering his son's needs became his most urgent concern: "What runs in my mind is the check I'm going to get. . . I don't get me nothing no more. . . That check goes to my son. . . Swear to God, I don't spend nothing on myself. . . All my check goes on him." Fulfilling responsibilities as fathers is also associated with a feeling of satisfaction. When reflecting on this experience, George shared:

I feel good when I buy him stuff. . . When I get him some things, I feel good about it. . . It's not about me no more or what I want. . . I remember I used to say, "When I start working, I'm going to buy me all this". . . But now, I look at him and I'm like, "I don't need it."

Teaching by example. Being a teacher for their children was another way in which teen fathers felt that they could be there for their children. Jorge shared how important it is for him to become a role model in his children's lives:

I have to live by example and if I want my kids not to be drinking and smoking weed, I have to be doing the same thing. . . I want to see myself clean and sober. . . My life depends on it. . . I really want my kids to stay healthy and I have to give all that up. . . to give up my night style life. . . Because they need dad to be sober and really be there. . . They don't need a guy who is drunk all the time or high.

Holding my pride up as a man. Teen fathers expressed the way in which, by "holding their pride up" as men, they would access personal strength to overcome any adversity they might face when trying to be there for their children. Four of the teen fathers openly shared adhering to "that macho thing," which prevented them from showing vulnerability or engaging in activities considered as "things that women do." However, they also shared a different way in which they were informed by their identity as men. This expression of masculinity referred to the importance of being there for their children by "being a man about it" and "holding my pride up." For these fathers, being a man is being responsible for your actions and not running away from them. As Juan put it, "Being a man is about taking care of your responsibility and not

making cowardly moves. . . . Like I know my kids need me just as I need them. . . . We need each other.” In other words, being a man reflected their commitment to facing their problems and challenges: “By being a man I’ll be able to take care of the situation, rather than going out and being on drugs and drinking.”

If faced with situations in which he was forced to take a one-down position with authority figures, the teen father holding up his pride would comply with what was demanded, but without feeling that he had lost his dignity. A clear example of this is the account given by Lorenzo, who reflects on the way in which he was yelled at by staff while he was incarcerated. His thoughts at that moment were that he was going to comply in order to gain his freedom in the long run and be reunited with his daughter:

As a man, it is really important to hold your pride, even if you are facing situations in which people are trying to put you down. . . . That’s part of being a man. . . . It takes a lot more courage than to give up. . . . If I get locked up and if the sergeants are mouthing up to me, for me not to strike back at them. . . . I need to hold my pride. . . . A man handles everything correctly. . . . Because it’s like a challenge, like everything else. . . .going to school. . . . taking my daughter to the doctor. . . . You have to take care of it in the right way.

Wanting to Be Brown and a Father

Participants reported diverse descriptions of their perceived cultural identity. Specifically, two participants described themselves as Hispanic, two as Mexican American, and two as Mexican American *and* Brown. When prompted about the ways in which such cultural identifications influenced their experiences as fathers, participants elaborated on cultural values that they consider characterize the Hispanic/Mexican American culture as well as the ways in which they would like to inform their lives according to such values.

Wanting to have my family. Four teen fathers expressed that having a strong sense of family as well as having respect for older people are important values in the Mexican American culture. For instance, Jorge commented on how he perceives that having a strong sense of family life is highly valued in the Mexican American culture. He also expressed his desire to inform his life as a father according to this cultural value:

Family is very important for Mexican Americans. . . . I know that one day I am going to get married because I want to have my family. . . . Having my family would mean a lot to me. . . . Knowing that every day I can wake up to my wife and children, that means a lot. . . . That is the way I want to feel when I wake up in the morning . . . and I will take care of my family and not take them for granted.

Regarding the importance of children showing respect to their parents, Juan affirmed, “I am Mexican American. . . . and I think that Mexican Americans tend to teach their children more respect for their parents. . . . showing respect to your parents is very important.”

Wanting to be Brown. Two participants described themselves as Mexican American *and* Brown. They reflected about the sense of pride associated with their ethnic background, which was increased during the time they belonged to gangs composed of Mexican-origin youth. They also expressed that they decided to stop being gang members because participating in gangs continuously put them at risk for engaging in illegal behaviors. However, they affirmed that it was through close interaction with other Mexican-origin gang members that they learned to be proud of their ethnic heritage. Raymundo identified other gang members as “Brown folks.” He also reflected about the influence they had on his own process of cultural identification:

I'm Mexican American, so I'm Brown. . . and other Brown folks helped me to be proud for being Brown. . . . I don't gang bang anymore because it could take me away from my kid. . . but Brown folks gave me a lot of love. . . and I want my kid to know that he is Mexican American. . . . I don't want my kid to be in gangs, but I want him to know that he is Brown.

DISCUSSION

This study provided detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences of being young fathers. The participants' accounts describe the ways in which their transition to fatherhood occurred in the face of developmental and family of origin challenges, as well as challenges from wider contexts.

Not Giving Up and Deciding to Be a Dad

Participants struggled when they first learned that they were to become fathers, and as a result, they experienced challenging emotions such as denial, disbelief, anger, frustration, and sadness. These reports are consistent with previous research describing typical emotional reactions of teen fathers (Achatz & MacAllum, 1994). However, the teen fathers in the present study also reported experiencing a turning point in their process of adaptation that resulted from witnessing the delivery of their babies. Such a finding confirms research indicating that birth is a critical time for intervention because teen fathers are more likely to express a desire to be involved with their children as a result of witnessing their birth. However, such desires tend to decrease dramatically over time if fathers do not become involved with their children early on (Nelson, Clampet-Lundquist, & Edin, 2002). As the groups began, none of the participants expressed a strong desire to be more involved with his child or children. Apparently, the group experiences offered a way to rekindle this commitment to responsible fatherhood.

An additional point for consideration refers to the importance of promoting responsible involvement as teen fathers adapt to fatherhood (Lamb, 2002). According to participants, even though they felt frustrated when reminded by different people (e.g., relatives, probation officers, counselors) about their responsibility as fathers, they also reported that the consistent pressure from such people throughout the different stages they experienced (e.g., denial, getting used to being a father) had a positive impact on them because it forced them to reflect on their personal responsibility as fathers. The positive influence of these adults also helped participants to reflect on ways in which their involvement with their children was related to their children's physical and emotional well-being. Such a finding is relevant because researchers have expressed the need to study not only the behaviors that reflect father involvement, but also the processes that promote such involvement (Palkovitz, 2002). Thus, further research is needed to clarify the precursors of such involvement among Mexican-origin and Latino teen fathers (Hernandez, 2002).

Further, it is important to remain cognizant of the ways in which multiple risk factors may impede the teen fathers' intentions to become committed fathers. Experiencing family violence or abuse, abusing substances, and engaging in casual sex are examples of factors that deterred teen fathers from becoming responsible fathers. Although all teen fathers in this study were exposed to risk factors, the two teen fathers who had two children each represented clear examples of the ways in which accumulated risk factors are particularly detrimental when attempting to promote responsible fatherhood. Therefore, even if teen fathers gain insight about their role as fathers and express a willingness to embrace fatherhood, if issues such as substance abuse or the desire to remain active in gangs are left unaddressed,

the teen fathers' desires to become committed fathers may never be translated into concrete life changes.

Figuring Out My Relationships After Becoming a Father

The relationship with the mothers of their babies is often a problematic area in the lives of teen fathers (Futris & Dean, 2003), especially because the couple relationship directly impacts the quality of fathering that adolescents are able to provide to their children (Fagan, Barnett, Bernd, & Whiteman, 2003). For participants, the frustration of not being able to see the child or the anticipation of such a circumstance was a serious impediment to committing to fatherhood.

Regarding other family relationships, a common experience reported by teen fathers was their desire to have "the father-son bond." According to stories shared by the teen fathers, they keep hope of finding or reuniting with their physically or psychologically absent biological father. For teen fathers in this study, the lack of a positive role model for fathering added to the complicated process of becoming a real father.

Wanting to Be a Good Father

Wanting to be a good father and being there for their children were the phenomena that appeared consistently in the interviews. The desire to commit to their children provides additional support for previous reports indicating the strong motivation of teen fathers to remain involved in the lives of their children (Achatz & MacAllum, 1994; Dallas et al., 2000), despite adverse contextual factors (Lesser et al., 2001; Winstanley et al., 2002), rejection or abandonment by their own fathers, and previous experiences of being discriminated against, condemned, judged, or ignored by adults (Beymer, 1995).

The participants' resilience is evidenced by the way in which they have interpreted hardship as instructive and as a potential source of growth (Walsh, 1998). For example, fathers reported that a way of being there for their children was by protecting them from having a life similar to the one they had as they were growing up and providing the love and support denied to them by their own fathers.

Wanting to Be Brown and a Father

Findings related to cultural identity issues and cultural values should be considered exploratory, particularly, because our inquiry about these issues was limited. Participants did not refer to issues of cultural identity or culture when asked grand tour questions about their experiences as fathers. However, after probing on these issues, four participants elaborated on the role of cultural values on their experiences as fathers and two fathers identified their perceived cultural identity as having an important influence on their identity as fathers.

Having a strong sense of family life as well as recognizing the importance of respect towards older people resembles the Latino cultural values of *familismo* and *respeto*. Specifically, familismo is a Latino cultural value that emphasizes the value of family and cohesion whereas respeto is a cultural value that indicates that interactions with others, particularly elders, should be characterized by politeness and deference (Falicov, 1998). Studies with adult Latino and Mexican-origin fathers have also identified these values as having an important influence on their experiences as fathers (Parke et al., 2004). Thus, present findings indicate the need to further explore the influence of cultural values in the lives of Latino and Mexican-origin teen fathers and, particularly, the ways in which cultural values may act as protective factors in the lives of adolescent fathers.

The importance of culture was also reflected in the self-descriptions of cultural identity provided by participants. The fact that teen fathers provided diverse descriptions of cultural identity, including two teen fathers identifying themselves as Mexican American *and* Brown, indicates that cultural identity issues should be explored through multiple methods. Specifically,

it should be standard practice to utilize bicultural measures of cultural identity at the outset of future studies to refine the selection of probes aimed at investigating these issues. We emphasize the need to use bicultural measures rather than unidimensional acculturation measures because unidimensional measures convey the risk of categorizing individuals along a continuum ranging from “low” to “high” acculturation, which may fail to capture the cultural identity of participants as well as the complexity of their cultural experiences (Coastworth, Maldonado-Molina, Pantin, & Szapocznik, 2005; Parra-Cardona, Busby, & Wampler, 2004), particularly, because unidimensional acculturation measures tend to heavily rely on language usage as an indicator of level of acculturation (Berry, 2002).

Thus, although all the participants in this study expressed in the interviews that English was their primary language, the descriptions of cultural experiences provided by them appear to indicate that biculturalism, rather than a high level of Eurocentric acculturation, informs their experiences as fathers.

Masculinity and Gender Considerations

Participants reflected about the way in which gender role messages influenced their intentions to be good fathers. For instance, teen fathers expressed the importance of “doing what I need to do,” “holding my pride up,” and “being a man about it.” These intentions contain elements of socially constructed masculinity that are constraining as well as potentially beneficial. The constraining elements of such male identity are illustrated by the teen fathers’ belief that they need to show that they are acting as “men” by showing their “toughness.” Showing emotional softness can be and often is interpreted as a sign of weakness by peers and adults. These findings confirm concerns expressed by researchers warning about the deleterious consequences of rigid gender role socialization in which manifestations of tenderness are seen as weakness and linked to an inability to be successfully ruthless (Spielberg, 1999). However, it is also important to emphasize that such cultural mandate is not unique to Mexican-origin teen fathers, and it also applies to men in cultures where masculinity is valued based on attainment of power (Galambos, Almeida, & Petersen, 1999).

In contrast, adolescent fathers also described their capacity to modify such gender roles. Several participants reported that they were able to question and modify their rigid gender role beliefs if they had older males in their lives who indicated to them that it was acceptable and desirable to show emotions. This capacity for change is critical, especially if it can be coupled within the scripts in the Mexican culture that highlight the virtues of masculinity oriented towards commitment to others (Taylor, 1998). In fact, “being a man about it” and “holding up my pride” is consistent with research indicating that a masculine identity can strengthen the commitment of Latino men to be emotionally involved with their children, as well as building the resolve to face and overcome adversity to protect their families from hardship (Baca Zinn, 1982; Neff, 2001; Torres et al., 2002).

Study Limitations

The clearest limitation of this study referred to the limited exploration of issues related to cultural identity. Particularly because participants provided diverse descriptions of their perceived cultural identity (e.g., Hispanic, Brown, Mexican American), we consider that the inclusion of a bicultural measure during the collection of demographic data would have facilitated the refinement of probes aimed at exploring multiple forms of cultural identity among participants. Therefore, we strongly recommend the inclusion of more sophisticated measures of cultural identity in future studies with Latino teen fathers (see Coastworth et al., 2005). Such initial data should facilitate the design of qualitative research aimed at exploring the ways in which diverse expressions of cultural identity are associated with fathering experiences among Mexican-origin and Latino teen fathers.

CONCLUSION

We expect the present findings to be useful for family therapists working with Mexican-origin teen fathers. In addition, key life events in the lives of participants, such as witnessing their child's birth, suggest that certain life experiences are particularly salient in the lives of teen fathers from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Nelson et al., 2002). Furthermore, this study confirms the great need for family therapists to serve teen fathers from disadvantaged backgrounds based on a thorough understanding of their life experiences, particularly because research and service delivery focused on this population continue to be extremely limited (Winstanley et al., 2002).

Finally, although the participants' present commitment to remain involved in the lives of their children cannot be guaranteed over time, their experiences represent an invitation to examine the ways in which society continues to undervalue the strengths of individuals labeled as "defective" (Kozol, 1992). All participants in this study had faced intense challenges in their lives—physical and emotional abuse, father abandonment, extreme financial difficulties, and early exposure to violence, drug abuse, and racial/ethnic discrimination. In spite of these challenges, their stories are a testimony to their resilience as well as the critical motivation that fatherhood can provide for their lives.

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