The Talk of Unwed Adolescent Fathers of Mexican Origin: A Discourse Analysis

The aim of this study was to apply Gee’s theory and method for discourse analysis to arrive at a theory of how unwed, adolescent fathers of Mexican origin talk about fatherhood and how fatherhood discourses reveal aims to attain self-defined social goods, including power, status, and recognition. Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven participants who were unwed biological fathers of one or more children, 18 or 19 years old, identified as being of Mexican origin and spoke either English or Spanish. Interview data were analyzed using Gee’s 42 questions for discourse analysis. Findings contribute to the literature on biological father absence, fragile families and child wellbeing, and teenage pregnancy from the adolescent father’s perspective.

Keywords: teenage pregnancy, unwed adolescent fathers, biological father absence, Mexican teen fathers

From 1991 to 2010, in nearly two decades, the teen birth rate in the United States declined by 44 percent across all teenage groups, racial and ethnic groups, and in nearly all states (Hamilton & Ventura, 2012). In 2009, there were approximately 410,000 births to teen mothers aged 15-19, representing 39.1 births per 1,000 females, the lowest rate ever recorded (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2011). While these statistics sound promising, the CDC cautions that the teen birth rate for that period was still higher than in other developed countries and that the highest teen births per 1,000 females were for Hispanic teens at 70.1, followed by Black teens at 59.0 and White teens at 25.6.

The assumption that teen pregnancy is a health issue which propels teens into a cycle of poverty, low educational attainment, risky behaviors, and child welfare (Akella & Jordan, 2015) is being reframed by recent findings. Furstenberg (2007) conducted a 30-year longitudinal study of more than 300 teen mothers and concluded that economically-depressed
neighborhoods, not teen motherhood, perpetuate poverty. Another study attributes the occurrence of teenage pregnancies across generations to social learning in economically depressed environments, which occurs when teens observe and imitate the behavior of parents, peers, and the society around them (Akella & Jordan, 2015). Discourse analysis has been used in other studies to elucidate how dominant discourses are used to shape social attitudes and to design policies which treat teenage pregnancy as an individual health or behavioral problem, while ignoring the impact of social factors (Bute & Russell, 2012; Cherrington & Breheny, 2005; Kelly, 1998).

It is particularly important to understand the perspective of teen parents. Herrman and Waterhouse (2011) found more positive teen perceptions about the effect of a teen birth on their lives, for teens with a parent or sibling who was a teen parent. This effect was more positive for African-American and Hispanic teens than for White and Asian youth, more so for teens living with one parent or adult relative than for those living with two parents, more so for males than for females, and more so for urban youth than for non-urban youth.

Adolescent pregnancy can be paramount to a developmental crisis which tasks teenagers with adult roles and responsibilities during an already challenging period of significant physical, psychological, cognitive and social developmental growth (Frewin, Tuffin & Rouch, 2007). In a study by Larson (2004), clinically high levels of stress, as measured by the Parenting Stress Index (PSI), were reported in approximately thirty percent of the adolescent mothers who participated. Frewin, Tuffin, and Rouch (2007) examined how adolescent fathers manage the simultaneous production of two identities, one as an adolescent and another as a father. Their analysis identified a discourse of dual, sometimes conflicting identities, which juxtaposes the teen fathers’ developmentally appropriate desire for independence and their willing engagement in the duties of fatherhood.

Families play an important role in addressing teen pregnancy for Hispanic youth. The birth of an unwed teen’s child may cause increased family stress and conflict associated with a lack of a clear primary parental figure for the newborn, but may also lead to greater cohesion and commitment within the family (East, Slonim, Horn, & Reyes, 2011). A participant-informed model for preventing teen pregnancy in a rural Hispanic community highlighted a culturally relevant and empowerment-based approach which engaged faith-based and community stakeholders, incorporated family-oriented activities, and paid special attention to involving fathers. Mexican-origin teens who participated in a teen father program said the program helped them with their feelings of isolation and embarrassment, to redirect their lives, and with wanting to be a good father (Parra-Cardona, Wampler & Sharp, 2006). These young men expressed gratitude for the group being “especially designed to meet their needs as teen fathers because they felt the community offered no similar resource” (p. 223).

**Present Study**

The aim of the present study is to arrive at a theory of how unwed, adolescent fathers of Mexican origin discursively talk about fatherhood and how this discursive talk relates to attaining self-defined social goods and goals. The research questions to be answered are: What and how are meanings, interpretations and cultural models utilized by unwed, adolescent fathers of Mexican origin to discursively construct “fatherhood”, “father-identity,” and “father involvement”? What purposes, goals, and social goods are unwed, adolescent fathers of Mexican origin trying to attain with their talk about fatherhood?
BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Since the 1990s, the fatherhood responsibility movement has gained bipartisan support resulting in funding for prevention and research programs to understand the societal impact of fatherlessness (Gavanas, 2004). Paternal politics which underlie contemporary welfare reform in the United States have advanced a political definition of fatherhood which prioritizes “men’s biological, institutional, or financial connection to their children” over their “identification with and participation in paternal activities” (Haney & March, 2003, p. 462). These definitions have led to policies which focus on the promotion of marriage and on men’s financial obligations but negate critical paternal roles and approaches more sensitive to the realities of parenting in low-income communities.

As fathering research has expanded, measurement and conceptualization of fatherhood and father-involvement continue to be refined (Hawkins & Palkovitz, 1999; Lamb, 2000; Pleck, 2012; Schoppe-Sullivan, McBride, & Moon-Ho Ringo, 2004; Stykes, 2015). The defining motif for fatherhood has gone through shifts, “from moral guidance to breadwinning to sex-role modeling to marital support and finally to nurturance” (Lamb, 2000, p. 24). Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, and Levine’s (1985; Pleck, 2012) construct of paternal involvement is widely cited in the literature and proposes three dimensions: (1) engagement, (2) accessibility, and (3) responsibility. Yet, as studies are extended to diverse samples and utilize an increasing variety of methodological approaches, new and more refined dimensions are emerging (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Lamb, Boller, 1999).

Gavanas (2004) claims that “gender, race, and sexuality, as social and historical constructions, are strategically challenged and reproduced by those who have a stake in American family politics” (p. 7) in order to promote a certain agenda. Proponents for client-driven welfare reform and social services advocate that the voice of fathers, particularly adolescent fathers, have been blatantly left out of this discourse, which affects and marginalizes them (Barret & Robinson, 1982; Coakley, 2013; Danziger, Wiederspan, & Douglas-Siegel, 2013; Maxwell, Scourfield, Holland, Featherstone, & Lee, 2012).

The exclusion is evident at many levels. The child welfare system may exclude fathers for several reasons: “because of a pejorative practitioner culture, because mothers fail to identify them or are unwilling to include them, or because workers focus child welfare interventions upon the mother, possibly because of traditional assumptions about gender roles” (Maxwell, Scourfield, Featherstone, Holland, & Tolman, 2012, p. 167). Social workers may minimize the importance of the father and exclude him as they attempt to empower single mothers and build their parenting skills (Sieber, 2008).

These systemic practices of focusing on the mother can make a father feel disconnected from his role. Kiselica (2008) explains that the disconnection can be greater for adolescent males desiring assistance with transitioning to fatherhood but finding few if any services, or finding services that are irrelevant to their needs, underfunded, or understaffed. Furthermore, the author states that internal barriers to accessing services may include a fear of prosecution for statutory rape, an absence of the desire to meet paternal responsibilities, a belief that asking for help is a sign of weakness or of feeling overwhelmed by the situation. Younger teen fathers are less likely to become and remain involved with the child (Robbers, 2011).

In 2009, when the national teen birth rate fell to a record low of 39.1 per 1,000 females, Hispanics had the highest teen birth rates at 70.1 births per 1,000 females (CDC, 2011). The following year, in 2010, 65% of all Hispanics were Mexicans (Motel & Eileen, 2012). In 2014, 5.7 million, or nearly one in three, Hispanic children in the United States lived in
biological-father-absent homes (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). In order to address the phenomenon of father absence, it is important to elucidate how adolescent fathers of Mexican origin define fatherhood. This definition needs to be an important component of the renegotiation of national and politically based discourses on fatherhood, responsible fatherhood and father absence.

**Research Design and Methods**

**Gee’s Method for Discourse Analysis**

Gee’s (2011) theory and method for discourse analysis were used for this study. Applying Gee’s design, the domain under investigation is *language-in-use*. Gee’s theory states that “language-in-use is about saying-doing-being and gains its meaning from the game or practice it is part of and enacts” (2011, p. 11). *Understanding*, according to Gee, is a combination of knowing what is being said, who is saying it and what they are trying to be or do, and a *Discourse* (with the “D” intentionally capitalized) is a type of “identity kit [that] comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize” (p. 2). The term *discourse* with a little “d” is used “for connected stretches of language that make sense, like conversations, stories, reports, arguments, essays; discourse is part of Discourse—Discourse is always more than just language” (Gee, 1990, p. 142).

Gee’s method also states that people use speech and writing to create seven areas of reality or building tasks: significance, practices, identities, relationships, politics, connections, and sign systems and knowledge. This method provides six tools of inquiry or questions about the use of situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, Discourses and Conversations in any discourse (Gee, 2011). The tools of inquiry that operationalize the theory are designed to describe and explain what the researcher takes to exist and to be important in a given domain.

In this study, the focus was on what was being said about fatherhood, how language was being used to create a “father identity,” and how language was being used to do fatherly things (or “father involvement”). The method, therefore, “provides 42 questions (seven building tasks multiplied by six tools of inquiry) that can be asked of any text and the full use of these would constitute a full or ideal discourse analysis” (Gee, 2011, p. 121). For example, for “identities” (one of the seven building tasks), the discourse analyst would ask six questions: (1) How are situated meanings being used to build identities for people?, (2) How are social languages being used to build identities for people?, (3) How are figured worlds being used to build identities for people?, (4) How is intertextuality being used to build identities for people?, (5) How are Discourses being used to build identities for people?, and (6) How are Conversations being used to build identities for people? Researchers can select from these tools when analyzing their specific discourse in order to address their research questions. Table 1 provides Gee’s (2011) full set of building tasks and the corresponding discourse analysis questions that are available to the researcher when analyzing specific quotes or discourse (pp. 121-122).

Gee’s method for discourse analysis is both descriptive and critical in that it not only focuses on the grammar (discourse) to understand how language is being used, but also to identify Discourses being constructed that provide important insight into the meanings, interpretations and cultural models used by unwed, adolescent fathers of Mexican origin to discursively construct definitions for *fatherhood, father-identity*, and *father-involvement* and to elucidate what social goods are desired by these fathers.
**Table 1**  
*Gee’s Seven Building Tasks and Corresponding DA Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seven Building Task</th>
<th>Corresponding Discourse Analytic Questions</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Significance</strong></td>
<td>How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, Discourses and Conversations being used to build relevance or significance for things and people in context?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Practices (Activities)</strong></td>
<td>How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, Discourses and Conversations being used to enact a practice (activity) or practices (activities) in context?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Identities</strong></td>
<td>How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, Discourses and Conversations being used to enact and depict identities (socially significant kinds of people)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationships</strong></td>
<td>How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, Discourses, and Conversations being used to build and sustain (or change or destroy) social relationships?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Politics</strong></td>
<td>How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, Discourses and Conversations being used to create, distribute, or withhold social goods or to construe particular distributions of social goods as “good” or “acceptable” or not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Connections</strong></td>
<td>How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, Discourses and Conversations being used to make things and people connected or relevant to each other or irrelevant to or disconnected from each other?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sign Systems and Knowledge</strong></td>
<td>How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, Discourses and Conversations being used to privilege or disprivilege different sign systems (language, social languages, other sorts of symbol systems) and ways of knowing?</td>
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**Data Collection**

The information in this study was collected using semi-structured, face-to-face, individual interviews conducted in either English or Spanish. Participants were also asked to complete a demographic questionnaire. Information about the teen mothers was not collected. The semi-structured interview utilized Gee’s interview methods, which included two parts. The “Life” part of the interview asked participants to talk about fatherhood in the context of their life, home and community and the “Society” part asked them to talk about fatherhood in the context of societal interactions (Gee, 2011, p. 149). Sub-questions were used as needed to explore the meanings, interpretations and cultural models that participants used to talk about fatherhood, father-identity, and father-involvement. For example, when participants said that they wanted to be “good fathers,” the interviewer asked, “Would you explain what it means to be a good father?”

**Data Analysis**

The analysis method provided by Gee includes steps for a broad approach to Discourse analysis; encouraging modifications by investigators to better address their study’s particular research aims. Gee’s steps include:
(1) picking a piece of data, in this case, the study interviews, (2) transcribing the data while looking for sections that address the research questions, (3) analyzing data after each interview and collecting more data until sufficient evidence supporting the theory has been collected, (4) picking some key words and phrases in the data and using the six tools of inquiry questions about the seven building blocks to analyze the data, (5) taking notes and reflecting and looking for themes that may emerge, (6) paying attention to where there may be convergence of themes, (7) organizing the analysis so that it provides evidence for the themes highlighted and finally, (8) achieving a degree of validity by addressing a variety of linguistic details, convergence, coverage and agreement. (Gee, 2011, p. 125)

In this study, each transcript was read and analyzed five times. In the first analysis, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and served to acquaint the researcher with the information while identifying general words or phrases for each interview. Analysis 2 focused on identifying how grammar was being used to say things about fatherhood (discourse) and to identify general words or phrases for the term “fatherhood”. Analysis 3 identified how language was being used to “be someone,” i.e., to form a “father-identity.” Likewise, words or phrases were identified for father-identity. Analysis 4 identified how language was being used to do fatherly things (father involvement) and again, descriptive words or phrases were identified. Analysis 3 and 4 focused on the Discourses being constructed to gain insight on meanings (what was being conveyed or understood), interpretations (elucidations, explanations or deeper explanations of meanings) and cultural models (frameworks used to make sense of the world). For each interview, Gee’s tools of inquiry were used to analyze the words or phrases selected after each analysis. The results were compared across interviews and converging themes were identified. Finally, Analysis 5 focused on what participants were trying to attain with their discourse on fatherhood.

Participants

IRB approval was obtained prior to the study commencing. A criterion purposeful sample was used in this study. The inclusion criteria required that all participants were: unwed or never married, age 18 or 19, biological fathers of at least one child, of Mexican origin regardless of citizenship or documentation status and able to have meaningful communication in either English or Spanish. The only exclusion criterion was self-reported mental illness, such as depression or anxiety, which could be exacerbated by the study.

Participants were recruited in a U.S.-Mexico border city. Snowball sampling technique was used to accesses social networks which allowed us to reach this hidden and hard-to-reach population (Noy, 2008). Key informants (including community leaders, school staff, social service professionals) with access to adolescents were informed of the study through calls, emails, in-person visits and presentations. Another way of recruitment was through the use of flyers, which were posted in city recreation centers, public libraries, youth-serving nonprofits and teen parent medical centers across the city. Additionally, ads were placed in a community college student paper and another community publication.

Seven participants fitting the inclusion criteria responded and were selected for the study. A young man who was expecting his first child, and already identified as a father, was included in this social constructivist study because he provided a contrasting discourse of father identity in its earliest stages. Two 17-year-old adolescent fathers responded to the recruitment efforts but were not included in the study because they did not meet inclusion criteria. Table 2 provides demographic information about the participants.
All participants had only had children with one woman and all reported having had some form of sexual education before the first pregnancy. Four participants said their parents were married; the parents of the other three were never married. Five were raised by both their father and mother; two were mainly raised by their mother. All but one of the participants described experiencing some level of father absence in their lives. Participants were in various stages of identifying as a father. Four participants did not know what their parent’s household income was, one reported an annual income of $8,400 and two reported their household income in the $26,000 to $45,000 bracket. One teen father estimated he would earn $1,000 to $5,000 through part-time jobs after school and another estimated he
would earn $7,200. Six stated they provided some financial support for their child(ren), most with the help of their parents. At the time of the participants’ birth, their fathers’ ages ranged from 18 to 35 and their mothers’ ages ranged from 17 to 34.

**FINDINGS**

Three major themes and subthemes for each theme were identified, which demonstrated how participants used language to talk (discourse) about *fatherhood*, *father-identity*, and *father-involvement*. The theme for fatherhood was titled *Repairing Fatherhood* and its subthemes were: The Participants’ Fathers, The Participants as Fathers and Being Teen Dads in Society. The theme for father-identities was titled *Transformed Teens*, with the following subthemes: The Vulnerable Son, The Risk-Taking Adolescents, and The Loving Father. The theme for father-involvement was titled *The Good Fathers*, with the following subthemes: Being Present, Providing, and Sacrificing. The social goods desired were “recognition as good fathers” and “legitimacy as fathers” (Table 3). Quotations from the transcripts were used to support the findings and demonstrate how participants used language. Participants’ names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Table 3  
*Major Themes and Subthemes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fatherhood: Repairing Fatherhood</th>
<th>Father Identities: Transformed Teens</th>
<th>Father Involvement: The Good Fathers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Participants’ Fathers</td>
<td>The Vulnerable Son</td>
<td>Being Present</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Participants as Fathers</td>
<td>The Risk-Taking Adolescents</td>
<td>Providing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teen Fathers in Society</td>
<td>The Loving Father</td>
<td>Sacrificing</td>
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Social Goods Desired: Recognition as Good Fathers & Legitimacy

**Fatherhood: Repairing Fatherhood**

Participants talked about fatherhood in their lives by comparing themselves to their fathers. For six of the participants, they talked of making amends or reparations to fatherhood, that is, wanting to be different and better fathers than their own. When they talked about being an adolescent father in society, they talked about feeling supported by certain individuals but stigmatized by strangers.

**The Participants’ Fathers.** Six of seven participants highlighted certain types of father absence in their lives, such as emotional absence; abandonment; and separation by divorce, death or incarceration. Their discourse was highly descriptive, implicitly emotive, and mediated their positioning in their relationships to their father. There were hints of anger, grief and detachment from their fathers. Mark described the most striking account of father absence:

> Honestly, I don’t know his name. I don’t have his last name, I have my mother’s father’s last name, and I guess (because my mom has court problems) I was reading … she told me to read it…. I read it and, I don’t think she knows it yet, but I read….
So, I was, essentially a rape baby. And my girlfriend tells me, “If you knew how he looked, and if you’d see him in the street, what would you do?” I’m like, “Just pass him like he’s anybody else because I don’t know if it was true.” What actually happened? I don’t know. I don’t know him. I don’t know his name and honestly, I could care less.

This statement illustrates some of the discourse on illegitimacy that was found in the interviews. Mark does not know his father’s name, does not have his father’s last name, and could not recognize him if he saw him on the street. Mark says he “could care less” about his father; however, he questions what happened or if the rape even occurred. Mark’s indifference is undermined by the many questions he has about his father. Similar discourses appear in the transcripts of all the teens with absent fathers. Mario, for example, expressed indifference towards and detachment from his father who abandoned him as a child; yet, he said that he loved him because he was his parent. Four other participants highlighted lesser levels of detachment, citing reasons for their fathers’ absences (e.g., death, divorce, incarceration). Only one participant, Jerry, described a strong relationship with a father who was very involved in his life.

The Participants as Fathers. All of the participants of this study expressed a desire to be good fathers to their own children. For participants with absent fathers, this meant that they wanted to be different from their own fathers. They wanted to insulate their children from the painful experience of being fatherless. As a child, Pablo’s father left his mother, remarried and moved to another city. He references this experience when he describes the type of father that he wants to be:

Well, I want them (my children) to feel proud of me, that they see that, that I truly was a good father. That I wasn’t only someone who engendered them and left them there, scattered, abandoned. I want them to think the best [of me] and I’m going to do everything possible to help them succeed.

For Pablo, being a good father means not being like his own father, who was “only someone who engendered” him and then abandoned him. All of the participants used these types of comparisons to talk about themselves as fathers, with the exception of Jerry who wanted to imitate his father, a man who was always there for him.

The Teen Father in Society. When participants talked about fatherhood in society, they talked about being supported and stigmatized. They talked about receiving support from individuals, such as counselors, teachers or religious leaders, but also said that they were not aware of any programs that specifically provided support for adolescent fathers and would attend if they learned of any. Four of the participants included accounts of feeling stigmatized by strangers. Randy talked about going to Wal-Mart with his girlfriend and his child:

Well, like the older, older people, they give us an ugly look sometimes because of how young we are with the kid. And well, there’s nothing really much that we can really do about it, just, turn the other cheek.

Throughout the interview, Randy referred to his child by name or as “my son.” In this instance, he refers to him as “the kid,” a term that judgmental strangers might use to refer to
his son while giving the “ugly look.” He follows this with the phrase “just turn the other cheek,” which portrays him as a teenager who is choosing to do the right thing.

**Father-Identity: Transformed Teens**

As these young men participated in the interviews, they were using language to create adolescent “father-identities.” They all presented themselves as fathers who were “transformed teenagers” and referred to three identity positions, or stages of being, to explain what that transformation meant. The transformation account began with participants presenting themselves as vulnerable sons, then as risk-taking adolescents and finally as loving fathers. Each identity/stage was driven by a desire for relationship and connection: as vulnerable sons to their fathers, as risk-taking adolescents to their girlfriends and friends, and as loving fathers to their children. For each identity, they also talked about the different positions of power they held in relation to others in their lives.

**The Vulnerable Son.** When the participants talked about their childhood, they used language to present themselves as sons, vulnerable to and affected by their fathers’ actions and decisions. Participants with absent fathers described themselves as powerless children unable to affect their fathers’ actions, which impacted their sense of self. Pablo stated:

> He found someone else, made his own family and well, he moved to another city, and well, he left us aside.... We could say yes (he was a good father), like yes, but no. I wonder how he could have left us; when we were so little, he left us. And now that we got older, well, when we needed a father, there wasn’t anyone to speak to, with whom we could talk.

Pablo uses very emotive language when he talks about his father. He does not understand how his father could have “left [him] aside” and created “his own family.” The phrase, “he left us,” is recited three different times—demonstrating how significant this event was to Pablo. The first three sentences are about Pablo’s father’s actions. The last sentence summarizes the impact of those actions, which Pablo still feels, even as he has gotten older. The identity that is being created is one of an abandoned son, one that is not valued by his father. This same identity positioning was encountered in the transcripts of other participants with absent fathers when they talk about their childhood.

On the other hand, Jerry, who said he had a “great father,” presents a very different identity of himself as a vulnerable son:

> I have a great father. He has been with me through thick and thin, in situations of school fights, everything. He has always been there to give me advice. He never judges me for things that I do and he always asks me prior to, you know, getting a punishment for any reason … my side of the story, before deciding what to do and if I have the choice, I wish I can definitely be like my dad. Like I said, he’s always been there for me, and I also want to be there for my child.

Jerry was the outlier in the group and provided insight into the impact that an involved father can have on his child’s sense of self-worth. Jerry’s discourse creates an identity of a vulnerable son who feels included, valued and attached to his father.
The Risk-Taking Adolescent. In addition to describing themselves as vulnerable sons, the participants also described themselves as risk-taking adolescents. One teenager talked about being a gang member, five talked about “partying” or using drugs or alcohol, and all of them talked about having unprotected sex. Four of the seven participants said that this was their first romantic relationship and their sexual debut. While all of them said they had received some type of sexual education, knew about contraception, and had one or more pregnancy scares, they all admitted to making a decision to have a baby. For some it was a passive decision, for others it was a deliberate one. Joe explains how he made that decision:

After that [pregnancy scare], she started talking and she would [say] like, “Why can’t we have a baby?” Things like that. It got me thinking, you know, and honestly at the time I was naïve. I think I was, not only did I think, I was in love with her but just, you know, having sex and things like that, I had, things that I liked. We did make the choice to have a baby, you know we tried just to, you know, no condom, nothing. We tried to have a baby. It was a conscious choice; I made a decision.

Joe gradually expresses personal responsibility for the pregnancy. He starts by placing responsibility on his girlfriend’s influence on him, then on the circumstances, then shares responsibility with his girlfriend and finally places the full weight of his actions on himself. In this short quote, Joe is construing a transition of identity, from a naïve adolescent to a responsible young adult. This theme is embedded in all analyzed transcripts.

The Loving Father. Finally, participants used language to create an identity of themselves as loving fathers. All of the participants talked about a specific moment when they connected emotionally with their children and with fatherhood. For some, it was the sonogram moment—when they first heard their baby’s heartbeat. For others, it was being present at their child’s birth. Joe stated:

I say that it was the day he was born. I mean, the second he was born. I thought it was so incredible how you can love a person you don’t know at all. He didn’t have to say anything. He didn’t, he didn’t even look at me, just, the first second I heard him cry, I felt something. I cried too, you know. I just thought it was an amazing thing that he, he doesn’t have to speak, he doesn’t have to say anything, I just…. I love him. I just have that love for him, and I don’t know how to explain it.

Joe is talking about being a loving father, full of wonder for his child. His loving father identity involves cognitive characteristics in the following phrases: “I thought it was so incredible,” “I heard him cry” and “I don’t know how to explain it.” In addition, it is expressed emotively through his amazement at his own feelings of unconditional love and his tears of joy. The loving father identity was identified in each of the participant’s discourse about fatherhood.

The transition from vulnerable sons to risk-taking adolescents and finally to loving fathers creates a new identity of transformed teenagers who have matured and are proud of their accomplishments, as Pablo and Randy stated:

I’ve changed, I’ve matured a lot, in my way of thinking, I don’t have the same mind of an adolescent. I know I’m young but, well, now I do think twice about things before doing them.
I know that my girlfriend always gets mad cause I would want to tell someone my story. Cause, I started off as a bad kid and look at me now. I’m here at vocation, in a vocational trade, learning a trade, getting A+ Certification. I already have a safety certification, and a forklift certification. This year, I should get the A+ Certification and then, I’m getting certified in Microsoft and another computer certification… Cause if it wasn’t for him [my son], I would probably still be smoking pot or something. Yeah, getting in trouble.

The participants’ transformed teenager identity reveals an increased sense of control over their lives. As sons, the locus of power was externalized, and participants felt little control over their father’s decisions. As teenagers, they gained some control through emancipating acts, e.g., decision-making and taking risks through relationships, sex, and fatherhood. Finally, as loving fathers, the locus of control is internalized and now these adolescent fathers feel more control over decisions that not only affect them but also their children and their families.

**Father-Involvement: The Good Fathers**

Participants also use language to do fatherly things, which demonstrate that they are involved fathers. For these participants, “father-involvement” meant being present and providing for their children.

**Being Present.** Throughout the interviews, participants illustrated a variety of ways in which they were being present fathers, which included: attending prenatal appointments; being present during the delivery of their children; caring, playing and spending time with their children; sharing household duties with their girlfriends; working odd jobs; and fighting to be included in their children’s lives. In the following quote, Joe, who at 18 had already fought a legal battle to get joint custody of his child, talks about “believing,” “doing” and “wanting” things that illustrate how he is present:

> I’ve always believed that just because I’m his father doesn’t mean that I have any less of a right to see him or any less of input over him. I don’t believe that mothers own their children. Yes, she did carry him nine months in her womb, but it took two of us to make him. She couldn’t have made him by herself and I couldn’t do the same, so I believe that he is both of ours. He’s not just her responsibility; he is both of ours and I don’t believe, “Oh! It’s my responsibility to be in his life” or “it’s something I should do,” but it’s something I want to do! I want to be in his life! I want him to remember, I want to be the one teaching him things, showing him. Just, I want to be in his life.

Joe is being a present father by fighting for the right to be in his child’s life and wanting his share of the responsibility. Joe emphatically wants the things that a present father would want: to be responsible, to be in his child’s life, to be remembered, to be the one teaching and showing and “just to be in his life.” All of the participants used similar language to present themselves as being present in their children’s lives. In a content analysis of research articles on fatherhood, Allen and Daly’s (2007) found that father involvement was measured as time spent together, as the quality of the father-child relationship and as the investment in the paternal role.
Providing. These fathers used language in certain ways to demonstrate how they were providing for their children and families. They were “providing” when they talked about finishing high school, working odd jobs, buying food and pampers, supporting their girlfriends and enlisting in the military or going to college. Jerry summarized how participants equated “father-involvement” to being a present provider:

I want to provide shelter you know, food, just provide in general, but mostly and I hope it doesn’t sound too cliché, I really, really want to give him love. That’s what matters the most in a father-son, father-daughter relationship, I think.

Again, all participants echoed this type of talk about being present providers in very broad terms that involved providing not only for the physical needs but also for the emotional needs of their children and families.

Sacrificing. Finally, all of these adolescents used language to show how they made sacrifices for their children. They all confronted situations that presented psychosocial and economic demands that few teenagers are prepared for. Joe speaks of fatherhood sacrifices and Mark illustrates the frustration that can come from those sacrifices.

Being a father, it’s just sacrifices. That’s one thing I’ve learned, its sacrifices. It’s all about whatever’s best for your son, your child. It’s what has to be best [for him]. (Joe)

I had two jobs. I would wake up at three in the morning, go to work, then I would come back. Actually, I wouldn’t come back. I would go straight to the other job and then come back, around nine. So I had two jobs and then her mom would get mad at me because I wouldn’t take care of her [my girlfriend]. I wouldn’t talk to her. Well, because it’s kind of hard to talk when I’m asleep! (Mark)

These quotes show traces of the stressors that commonly impact fragile families and frequently lead to poverty and broken relationships. All of these teen fathers were struggling financially. Mark said that his relationship was “already broken” but that they still lived together. Joe’s relationship had dissolved after his girlfriend found another boyfriend, even though his baby was not yet born. The three interviewed in Spanish—Mario, Pablo, and Sergio—all said they had stable relationships with their girlfriends. Mario and Sergio were expecting a second child.

Social Goods

These major themes and subthemes provide insight into what these young fathers were trying to accomplish through their discourse on fatherhood. Gee (2011) defines social goods as “anything a person or group in society wants and value, things like: status, money, love, respect, and friendship” (p. 210). The thing that these young fathers sought in these interviews was to be recognized as being “good” fathers. They spoke like responsible teenagers who have been transformed by their love and commitment to their children, and they wanted to be recognized as legitimate fathers, regardless of their age.
DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are similar to what Haney and March (2003) found in their discourse analysis of African-American women’s conceptions of fatherhood. In both studies, participants place their emphasis on fathers being present and providing financial, emotional and psychological support to their children. This contrasts with political definitions which emphasize the biological, financial and institutional connections of fathers to their children.

Several studies have documented the phenomenon of fatherlessness and its characteristics, which are referenced by six of the present study’s participants. The terms “dad deficit” (Fatherhood Institute, 2008), “father hunger” (Borduin & Klietz, 2003; Capps, 2000; Perrin, Baker, Romelus, Jones, & Heesacker, 2009; Wineburgh, 2000) and “father wound” (Miller, 2013) are frequently encountered throughout the literature on biological father absence. The sense of being wounded, described by Miller (2013) as a “sense of loss or grief” (p. 194) felt by sons regarding their fathers’ absence, informs the way these participants talked about their fathers. Miller theorizes that the fact of these wounded sons becoming fathers themselves may aid in their healing. The transformed teen identity, which teens revealed in the interviews, may be evidence of this healing taking place.

One participant differed from the others in the following ways: he was just forming his father identity because his child had not been born, he had a father who was present and supportive, and he was eager to emulate his father’s involvement. All others had more developed father identities and wanted to be different, and better, fathers than their own fathers had been to them.

The young men in this study all reported having received some type of sexual education prior to the pregnancy. They also reported making either passive or deliberate decisions not to use birth control. Sexual education has been proven to increase knowledge about sexuality and birth control (Visser & van Bilsen, 1994) and encourage contraception use during later sexual debuts (Bourke, Boduszek, Kelleher, McBride, & Morgan, 2014), however, one study found that comprehensive sexual education has been found to have no impact on lowering teen pregnancy rates (Hedman, Larsen & Bohenblust, 2008). For the teen fathers in this study, the pregnancies were not the result of a lack of information but were possibly motivated by a desire for relational connection. Along with education, pregnancy prevention efforts must also address psychosocial factors.

The cultural model that was used by participants to talk about fatherhood has previously been described by Milkie and Denny (2014) as a three-category “moral schema” of father involvement which (1) covers ideal roles fathers should play, (2) provides evaluations of those roles, and (3) describes the benefits or effects of their fathers’ interactions. In the present study, the roles of “good fathers” were described as “being present”, “providing,” and “sacrificing” for their children (Father-Involvement: The Good Fathers). Participants evaluated fatherhood in their lives as something that needed reparations (Fatherhood: Repairing Fatherhood). The young men evaluated their own fathers mostly as being absent, they evaluated themselves as wanting to be good fathers to their own children, and fatherhood in society as being both supported and stigmatized (Fatherhood: Repairing Fatherhood). Finally, they talked about the effects they experienced while being vulnerable sons of absent fathers and about the benefits of being transformed by fatherhood, from a risk-taking adolescent to a loving father (Father-Identity: Transformed Teens).

“Discourse analysts often look at two contrasting groups, not to set up a binary contrast, but in order to get ideas about what the poles of a continuum may look like. We can get ideas
that can then inform the collection of new data out of which emerges a much more nuanced
and complex picture” (Gee, 2011, p. 150). The present study included participants repre-
sented contrasting economic backgrounds, geographic residence, immigration status and
language. The three participants who chose to be interviewed in Spanish were older, had
lived less time in the United States, reported less conflict with their girlfriends, had less
parental support and had more financial struggles than those interviewed in English. These
differences may be due to their unique levels of acculturation and sociocultural factors such
as language, family, and religious influences, and culturally defined gender roles which
may influence teen parents’ attitudes about birth control, abortion, and access to health care
(Sterling & Sadler, 2009). Further research is needed to understand the effects of accultur-
ation and sociocultural factors for Mexican-origin adolescent fathers’ views of fatherhood,
father-identity, and father-involvement.

Participants in this study said that informal social groups—where they could meet other
teen dads, and bring their children and girlfriends—would be helpful in building support.
These groups could also provide access to community resources and assistance with school,
work, finding employment, childcare and financial assistance. Another strategy that might
be helpful is a hybrid of the mentoring model, which is an evidence-based intervention used
to support at-risk youth. Ideally, this modified model would connect fragile teenage fami-
lies with stable and supportive couples that also experienced teen pregnancy. Additionally,
a traditional adult male mentor could provide a present father figure in the teen’s lives and
serve as a motivating factor to be involved with their children.

Limitations

Our criterion-based purposeful sample is limited in that it is not generalizable to all fathers.
Only young men who self-identified as “willing fathers” responded to this study and there-
fore, further research is needed to better understand unwed adolescent males who may have
fathered children but have never identified with fatherhood, or are unwilling to take on the
associated responsibilities. Yet, for fathers like the ones in the present study, there is much
that can be done to support them in their time of simultaneous transitions into young adult-
hood and fatherhood.

Conclusion

Policy makers and social service providers must allow client-driven discourses on father-
hood, such as those discussed in the present study, to help shape policy and services. Rob-
ers (2011) recommends that parenting programs for young Hispanic fathers should “focus
on increasing interaction opportunities between fathers and children, rather than focusing
on support” (p. 169). Robbers also states that since many young Hispanic fathers grew up
without fathers, programs should “focus on the role of father absence and use the effects of
this as a motivator to get young fathers involved with their own children” (p. 169).

Participants in the present study challenge stigmatizing, punitive and exclusionary as-
sumptions that have commonly been the guide for how we as a society respond to unwed
adolescent fathers. The phenomenon of absent fathers is concerning because of the nega-
tive, broad-reaching and lasting impact it can have on our society. While much research is
needed to understand why some fathers refuse to be involved with their children, we can
begin by listening to the discourses of all types of fathers and by building the social scaf-
dolding needed to support those who want to be involved in their children’s lives.
REFERENCES


