Paternal Identity Among Urban Adolescent Males

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Research studies addressing the distinctions between adolescent fathers and non-fathers' paternal role perceptual development and performance are scarce. As a result, our understanding of the antecedents of early paternity among African-American adolescent males is unclear and intervention strategies remain virtually untapped. This gap in knowledge represents a challenge to both social science researchers and intervention practitioners. The rising tide of early parenthood has become a centerpiece of public policy discourse. Media depictions of adolescent parenting among inner city African-American adolescents contribute to the societal perception of all African-American adolescent males and females as 'children having children.'

In my recent study of urban, lower socioeconomic status African-American males, a number of the young men interviewed disclosed normative paternal role expectations. Their patterns of paternal role functioning as fathers, however, reflected inadequate normative paternal role performance (Johnson, 1993). It is conceivable that the disclosures about their paternal perceptual development may simply reflect their eagerness to provide expected responses in order to detract from their otherwise non-normative paternal perceptions and behavior. Previous research supports this contention given that adolescent fathers are typically characterized as " hit and run victimizers who father children without any commitment to paternal support" (Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, 1986; Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1982).

It is also possible that the disjuncture between role perceptions prior to paternity and their subsequent patterns of paternal role behavior might be explained in terms of the adolescent males' concepts of possible selves, a cognitive component within the domain of self-knowledge (Markus and Nurius, 1986). Possible selves, in this perspective, represent the young males' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming and thus provide a conceptual link between cognition and motivation. Possible selves are the cognitive components of hopes, fears, goals, and threats to idealized paternal role functioning. They give the specific self-relevant form, meaning, organization, and direction of these dynamics. Possible selves, as a theoretical construct, provide a framework for exploring the relationship between the self-concept and behavior (Markus and Nurius, 1986).

The concept of possible selves is derived from representations of the self in the past and they include representations of the self in the future (Markus and Nurius, 1986). They are different and separable from the current and now selves, yet are intimately connected to them. Possible future selves, for example, are not just any set of imagined roles or states of being. Instead they represent specific, individually significant hopes, fears and fantasies. These possible selves are individualized or personalized, but they are also distinctly social. Many of these possible selves are the direct result of previous social comparisons in which the individual' s own thoughts, feelings, characteristics, and behaviors have been contrasted to those of salient others (Markus and Nurius, 1986).

In this context, the influence of family of origin is particularly important in the construction of paternal role perception. It is, perhaps, via the family of origin that the first real models or images of parenting and family roles are conceived (Christmon, 1990a). Even the absence of the father within the family of origin contributes to the

construction of a parenting framework, albeit incomplete. As Markus and Nurius (1986) contend, other salient individuals with whom the young male might model or compare himself also contribute to framing a paternal construct. Peers, especially those who have fathered children as well as neighbors and other community residents become contextual models and images for a variety of internal and external social roles, not the least of which is the parenting role. These models and images may be observed and reviewed in contrast to models and images whose constructions lie outside their neighborhoods or ecological context.

An individual is free to create any variety of possible selves, yet the pool of possible selves derives from the individual' s particular sociocultural, historical context and from the models provided by the media. Poor, urban African-American adolescent fathers' possible selves largely mirror the paternal roles of their fathers. These roles may be limited and in conflict with the young fathers' idealized paternal selves. Possible selves have the potential to reveal the inventive and constructive nature of the self but they also reflect the extent to which the self is constrained (Markus and Nurius, 1986).

Possible paternal selves among poor, urban African-American males are largely socially determined. Their idealized paternal selves may be inventive; closely associated with normative paternal role expectations accompanied by affirmative beliefs about their potential and future. As such, idealized paternal selves may closely resemble the fathers they would very much like to become. The young males in the study cited earlier, perhaps, saw little distinction between their current statuses (as non-fathers) and the maturational and developmental processes they must undergo in order to succeed in actualizing their idealized paternal selves. However, several young fathers in the study continued to maintain idealized paternal selves. Limited employment opportunities forced many of these young males to continue marginal to non-participation in the labor force throughout adolescence and into adulthood (Wilson, 1991; Sullivan, 1989).

In the present study, the dissonance between adolescent fathers' paternal role perceptions prior to paternity (idealized selves) and their subsequent patterns of paternal role functioning (possible selves) is the focus. Whether currently fathers or not, the young men typically hoped to fulfill normative " breadwinner" roles or images of fatherhood at some later point, usually in their late 20s. Among the fathers in the study however, paternal role performance fell far short of their idealized paternal role expectations as evidenced in their disclosures (Johnson, 1993). Because their current fathering capacities fell far short of their hope for paternal" selves, these fathers struggled to define possible positive ways of being a father given the clear structural barriers of being a teen father. They drew on exemplars in their past and current social context in an effort to construct more plausible possible selves as fathers (Oyserman and Saltz, 1993).

The young men's descriptions of their idealized paternal selves were not based on models and images found within their families of origin, peer or community networks. In contrast, their idealized paternal constructions lie outside their ecological context. The absence of family influence in their idealized paternal role construction and development suggest that their families did not provide models or images for what the young fathers generally viewed as normative paternal functioning. Instead, their families, peers and communities served as exemplars for the construction of plausible or possible paternal identities. These findings are consistent with the work of Christmon (1990a,b) and Miller (1994). Christmon (1990a) found that adolescent fathers' parenting behaviors are influenced by their own expectations of performance and self-image which, in turn, are

largely constructed as a result of their families of origin, peer networks and/or neighborhood influence. Miller (1994), like Christmon (1990b), found the mothers of the adolescent fathers were critical in teaching them about fatherhood as well as assisting them with childrearing activities. More important, Miller's study suggests that many adolescent fathers are attempting to assume responsible roles. The findings of both Christmon (1990a,b) and Miller (1994) suggest a gap between the adolescent males' paternal expectations and the examples upon which they draw for modeling paternal role behavior.

Parenting examples set forth by the families of origin are often powerful in shaping the paternal role behavior among the young males. In my study (Johnson, 1993) several young males openly disclosed the adolescent maternity of their own mothers and the absence of their own fathers and espoused paternal role frameworks that built upon the strengths of the parenting experiences in their families of origin. They acknowledged, ostensibly as the result of misgivings about their own father-son relationships, the need to have both parents, particularly fathers, engaged and involved in parenting and childrearing activities (Johnson, 1993). These findings are consistent with Miller (1994).

The lack of synchrony between idealized and possible, paternal role perception is plausible given the structural barriers that are attendant to adolescent paternity. It is possible that the idealized paternal perceptions shared by the young fathers in this study reflect paternity assumption under more ideal interpersonal and ecological conditions (i.e. chronological and physical maturity, completion of adolescent developmental tasks, formal and occupational education and training, a sustaining intimate relationship between the young parents).

The " idealized" paternal roles are difficult to achieve under optimal circumstances. The young fathers may have recognized that in the absence of ideal conditions, fatherhood and paternity assumption are extremely difficult roles to undertake and perform toward one' s idealized satisfaction. As such, they may have found it necessary to forgo or reject idealized paternal perceptual expectations.

Future study aimed at examining paternal development among urban, poor African-American males and their self-efficacy in constructing paternal identities as adolescent parents is needed. Only then can effective public policies be shaped and implemented that support improved paternal role and family functioning.

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