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# Perceived Fatherhood Roles and Parenting Behaviors Among African American Teen Fathers

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## Abstract

Despite the growing body of research on the topic of adolescent parenthood, few studies have examined the perceptions and lived experiences of African American teen fathers. The primary aim of this study was to examine how this group defines and performs the father role. In-depth interviews were conducted with 30 African American fathers aged 14 to 19 years old. Three themes emerged from the data: provider role, nurturer role, and autonomous fathers. The study results generate important questions that require further research. Information from African American teens in particular could be used to develop and evaluate interventions.

## Keywords

African American, adolescent, teen, fathers, fatherhood, parenting, roles

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The study of African American teen fathers is an important and timely topic. African Americans remain among the poorest groups in the U.S. (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2009) and have the highest proportion of children residing in homes without biological fathers (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004; Kreider, 2008). African American children are more likely than other racial groups to experience dismal economic (McLoyd, 1990), educational (Hale, 1986; Ogbu, 1987), and health (Mayberry, Mili, & Ofili, 2000; Smedley, Stith, & Nelson, 2003) outcomes. The significance of this topic and the potential for research to impact policy call on scholars to give the utmost attention and care to this subject matter.

Over the past several decades, both teen pregnancy and parenthood have received increased attention in research and popular forums. After seeing a substantial decline during the 1990s and early 2000s, adolescent pregnancy and birth rates in the U.S. began to rise in the latter half of the decade (Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura, 2009). Among African Americans aged 15 to 19 years, the birth rate decreased by 48% from 1991 to 2005, but rose unexpectedly by 5% between 2005 and 2007 (Hamilton et al., 2009). With the exception of Hispanics, African Americans experienced higher birth rates than that of other racial/ethnic groups, accounting for more than a fourth of all teenage mothers in 2007 (Hamilton et al., 2009). This proportion is significant considering that African Americans represent just 12.4% of the general population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Prior research has shown that African American male adolescents are more likely to become fathers than White or Hispanic male teens (Furstenberg & Harris, 1993; Lerman, 1993; Martinez, Chandra, Jones, & Mosher, 2006; Thornberry, Smith, & Howard, 1997). Among non-Hispanic African American fathers, 25% fathered their first child before they were 20 years old, compared to 19% and 11% for Hispanic and non-Hispanic White fathers, respectively (Martinez et al., 2006).

## **Teen Parenthood**

A number of studies on teen parenthood have focused on teens' adjustment to their parent roles and the strategies they employ to adapt to the changes that come with young parenthood. Many research findings emphasize the negative outcomes of adolescent parenthood such as high rates of school drop-outs, increased poverty, a cycle of teen and/or single parenthood, and low-income jobs (e.g., Harris, 1998; Pirog-Good, 1995). On the other hand, other studies suggest that such negative outcomes and consequences are not

inevitable for adolescent parents (Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Morgan, 1987; Luker, 1996).

Teen parenthood is primarily conceptualized from a deficit perspective; adolescent parents are characterized by the extent to which they do not meet the ideal conditions for pregnancy and parenthood. Moreover, like the poor, teen parents are blamed not only for creating the difficult conditions and circumstances in which they must live, but also for contributing to broader societal problems associated with their parental status. Despite such pervasive beliefs, it is important to explore the topic from different perspectives. Previous research on adolescent parenthood has largely focused on mothers, and as a result a great deal less attention has been given to the topic of teen fatherhood. This study developed out of particular concern that the voices of young African American fathers, speaking about their own experiences, are not heard or are not well-represented in the mainstream discourse on teen parenthood.

## Teen Fatherhood

The risk factors associated with teen fatherhood are similar to those associated with teen motherhood. Among the extant literature, adolescent fatherhood has been linked with low socioeconomic status (Gasden, Wortham, & Turner, 2003; Xie, Cairns, & Cairns, 2001), reduced income potential (Castiglia, 1990; Marsiglio, 1987); poor academic performance and higher school drop-out rates (Castiglia, 1990; Fagot, Pears, Capaldi, Crosby, & Leve, 1998; Marsiglio, 1987; Xie et al., 2001); the desire to achieve symbolic adult status (Anderson, 1989, 1990) and/or peer admiration/approval (Anderson, 1989, 1990); and careless sexual practices or infrequent use of contraceptives (Dawsey, 1996; DiClemente et al., 1992; Sullivan, 1989). Compared to white adolescents, young African American men are less likely to use contraceptives (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004) and are more likely to oppose abortion as an option to unplanned pregnancies (Sullivan, 1989).

Several studies have examined the developmental aspects of teen fatherhood (Applegate, 1988; Cohler & Musick, 1996; Ketterlinus, Lamb, & Nitz, 1991). Teenage males who become parents experience "developmental double-jeopardy" as they try to cope with the normative biological, social, and psychological changes and challenges of adolescence, as well as those associated with normative father development (Applegate, 1988). These young men, like all adolescents, are attempting to navigate their way through the stresses

and challenges brought on by the transition from adolescence to adulthood. But unlike their nonparent peers, they must simultaneously attempt (or not) to manage the difficult tasks associated with their “premature” transition to fatherhood. One result of these conditions is that adolescents are less prepared to deal with the role conflict and strain that is experienced during first-time parenthood (Applegate, 1988; Cohler & Musick, 1996; Ketterlinus et al., 1991). “The cognitive and emotional capacities most essential to empathic, mature parenting are likely to be those least available to adolescent boys still engaged in struggles around separation from their own parents” (Applegate, 1988, p. 201).

### **African American Teen Fatherhood**

Researchers have tried to account for the large number of African American adolescent fathers using structural explanations (Anderson, 1989, 1990; Wilson, 1987) and cultural accounts (Anderson 1989, 1990; Sullivan, 1989). In his ethnographic research, Anderson (1989, 1990) documented the social and structural barriers which limit their ability to demonstrate status, masculinity, and the transition into adulthood through mainstream avenues (i.e., gainful employment), these young men express these attributes in other ways (i.e., becoming a father). There is a lack of social pressure placed on these adolescents to not have children, as children born outside of marriage do not present a strong stigma in the African American community (Wilson, 1987). Importantly, African American youths become pregnant in part because of cultural expectations; there is an underlying social expectation that they—more so than their White counterparts—will become teen parents (Wilson, 1987).

### **Perceptions of Fatherhood**

Despite such research, few studies have focused on African American teen fathers’ own perspectives about their fatherhood experiences, beliefs, and practices. While the average level of paternal engagement has increased in the United States during the last several decades (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004), both in absolute and relative terms, such information specific to African American adolescent fathers is yet to be adequately examined in the literature.

Studies that have explored the conceptualization of fatherhood by African American adolescents have found that these youths primarily perceive this

role in terms of functioning as a nurturer or financial provider (Allen & Doherty, 1998; Dallas, Wilson, & Salgado, 2000). "Being there," or being physically and emotionally present in the lives of their children, has been a prominent theme (Allen & Doherty, 1998; Dallas et al., 2000) in such research. Similar findings conducted with African American adult men have produced similar results, with fathers placing more emphasis on the amount of time spent with their child and less on the economic support and legal endowment of their children (Martin, 2001). Previous research has also indicated that socioeconomic status may be associated with these conceptualizations (Allen & Doherty, 1998; Anderson, 1993). According to these accounts, low-income fathers are more likely to emphasize the nurturing role because of their economic challenges (Allen & Doherty, 1998; Anderson, 1993).

## **Fatherhood Behaviors**

Similar to the gap in the literature examining African American teens' conceptualizations of fatherhood, little is known about how this group behaves in fathering roles. Most available information has been gathered from the accounts of teen fathers' partners, the mothers of their children (Danziger & Radin, 1990; Kaplan, 1997). Some research suggests that African American adolescent fathers are not very involved or economically supportive of their children (Davies et al., 2004; Dawsey, 1996; Kaplan, 1997). However, other studies have found that these young fathers tend to be involved in their children's lives (Danziger & Radin, 1990; Gasden et al., 2003; Gavin et al., 2002; Rhein et al., 1997; Sullivan, 1989).

Taken together, research is needed that captures African American teen fathers' perceptions and lived experiences through their firsthand accounts. Greater knowledge about how these youths understand and behave in their father roles could help efforts to develop effective interventions and policies. As suggested by Christmon (1990), African American adolescent fathers' sense of parental responsibility is influenced more by their own role expectations and self-image than by external expectations. The extent to which a young man is ready for fatherhood and paternally involved tends to be influenced by how he views the father role. Yet, important questions remain about how this group perceives and behaves in their father roles. In addition, identifying specific predictive factors may help researchers develop interventions to prevent or improve fatherhood roles. The primary purpose of this study was to examine perceptions of fatherhood among African American teen fathers.

## **Method**

### *Participants and Setting*

The primary criteria used to select participants were race/ethnicity (self-identified African American), sex (male), age (13-19 years old), fatherhood status, and residency in Wichita, the most populous city in the state of Kansas (approximately 351,000) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Participants were recruited primarily from low-income neighborhoods that were part of Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA)-designated medically underserved communities (Ricketts et al., 2007). About 27.2% of families residing in this area live below the poverty level compared to just 9.2% of the general population in Sedgwick County (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). African Americans represent 9% of the county's total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

### *Recruitment*

Fathers were recruited from urban-based programs and personal referrals between 2001 and 2002. First, school and community-based programs that offered services to adolescent fathers were used as a base for recruitment. In this scenario, the program director or coordinator obtained permission from teen fathers to allow the researcher to contact them about the study. In addition, a snowball technique was used to recruit participants, in which fathers were not involved in programs but were rather referred to the study by personal acquaintances, church contacts, middle and high school counselors, and other adolescent fathers. Individuals were provided a stipend of US\$25.00 for their participation in the current study.

### *Sample*

Recruitment efforts resulted in a sample of 30 fathers, with nine recruited from a school-based ( $n = 4$ ) or community-based ( $n = 5$ ) program that offered services to adolescent fathers, and the remaining fathers ( $n = 21$ ) identified and recruited through other sources. The fathers ranged from 14 to 19 years of age. The majority of the teen fathers ( $n = 25$ ) were in high school at the time of the interview and one participant was in college. Most of the fathers resided with one parent or another family member (e.g., grandmother) at the time they were interviewed. Six of the 30, or one fifth of the sample, were living in two-parent families, and one participant lived in a father-only home. Education level ranged from 8th grade to college, with

12th grade representing the modal category. Most of the teens ( $n = 21$ ) were from families of low socioeconomic status, having a combined family income of less than US\$25,000. Only six of the 30 fathers (20%) were employed part-time, with one individual employed full-time. Three of the young fathers had two children, and the rest had one child each. The participants' children ( $n = 33$ ) ranged in age from 2 months to 3 years with the majority of the children ( $n = 22$ ) less than 1 year of age. All of the teen fathers' children resided with their mothers, all of whom also lived with other caregivers. The mean age of the mothers of the children was 17 years.

### *Interview Guide and Interviews With Fathers*

An interview guide was developed and administered by an African American female researcher (the first author). Three pilot interviews were conducted to test the preliminary interview guide, to explore what additional questions were needed, and to determine what fathers believed were important for others to know. Although the final interview guide covered a range of topics, the scope of the current study was limited to addressing demographic questions, definitions, and perceptions of fatherhood, fatherhood involvement and parental support.

Because interview schedules may be used as guides, not scripts, during the interview process (Holstein & Gubruim, 1995), this approach was considered the most suitable for the current study. Questions were structured so as to allow participants' responses to determine whether particular questions were necessary or appropriate as leading frames of reference during the interview process (Holstein & Gubruim, 1995). Almost all questions were open-ended and efforts were made to ensure that the central topics were covered in each interview; the manner in which these questions unfolded varied from participant to participant. Interviews varied in content and length, ranging from 45 to 90 min, and were conducted face-to-face at the home of the respondent or interviewer, or in community-based facilities and churches. Notes were also taken during each of the taped interview sessions to provide additional context and information to the findings. Sample interview questions are provided in the appendix.

### *Data Analysis*

Qualitative data analysis is based on an inductive process of organizing the information or data collected into categories or themes and identifying relationships among the categories that emerge from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In the current study, this process involved sorting the data into broad

categories, then utilizing the transcripts and notes taken during interviews to revise and refine the categories. At this point, “irrelevant” data (i.e., data not needed for analysis) was eliminated or disregarded. After repeatedly reviewing the transcribed interviews and coding individual sentences and paragraphs, three major themes emerged from the interview data. These findings are presented below. The Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing, Searching and Theorizing (NUD\*IST) computer software program was used to help sort and organize the data to identify these themes.

## Results

### Themes

Data analysis resulted in three major themes regarding fatherhood: provider, nurturer, and autonomous behavior. These categories were not mutually exclusive and were grouped according to what participants indicated was the most important or primary role of fathers. The themes are discussed below.

*The provider.* The majority of the sample (53%,  $n = 16$ ) defined fatherhood primarily in economic and provider terms. Most teen fathers expressed a desire to provide financially for their children and were willing to become “good” fathers (defined as “good providers”) if they did not already fulfill this role.

Actual fathering behavior varied among adolescents of this category. For instance, most fathers provided some kind of tangible good (e.g., diapers, clothes, baby food) for their children’s benefit and sporadically provided economic support to the mothers of their children. In almost all cases, the ability to financially assist their children was largely afforded by the young fathers’ parents. However, several participants said they made substantial contributions to support their children and their children’s mothers. These six fathers were older and worked part-time jobs to supplement their children’s care expenses. Another father was preparing to begin a new job in order to earn money for his child. For instance, 15-year-old Jarrod discussed that being a provider meant being a “real man”:

Jarrod: Being a father means being a real man. A real man will do what he has to do. He takes care of his own . . . He gets a job. He goes to work. He provides for his kids . . . He does what he has to do.

Although less common, some teen fathers (together with their parents) made no monetary contributions ( $n = 3$ ). Seventeen-year-old James discussed how not being able to provide made him feel as a father:

James: A lot of people think we're [*teen fathers*] just running from our responsibilities because we don't want to take care of our children. There might be some like that, but I know that I'm not one of them. I want to be a good father, but there's only so much I can do. I know I need to be able to buy Kenis what he needs, but I'm just 15. I know I need to get a job, but I'm in school. Should I drop out? I know they don't want me to drop out. . . . I almost feel like I'm an uncle or something—you know someone that just drops by or gives you something every now and then. I don't feel like a good father, or a real father for that matter.

There were no differences with respect to providing financial assistance between fathers who were enrolled in a parenting program and those who were not. Perceptions of fatherhood and parenting behaviors among teens enrolled in parenting programs also varied. Interestingly, "provider" fathers were more likely to work or make financial provisions if their relationship with the child's mother was romantic and loving. Teen fathers who were romantically involved with the other parent tended to characterize child and mother as "family," although most participants described this relationship as no more than friendly and amicable.

Among those fathers who provided substantially, several were even determined to carry out the role of provider through illegal means. In these cases, they pointed to inadequate transportation for legal jobs, lack of legal jobs for people their age, and parents' inability to assist them in providing for their children. Such was the situation for 17-year-old Darius, who was raised by his grandmother. Neither of Darius's parents assisted him in supporting his 2-year-old son, Alex. Darius was proud of his ability to provide for his child, although he earned money by selling drugs.

It was the intention of these teens to assume the role of father by providing financial support in a parental partnership, rather than functioning as the sole provider for their child. Providing, according to the fathers, primarily meant (partially) supporting their children's economic welfare or "helping out" the mothers. For example, 16-year-old Tevin provided some financial assistance to the mother of his child. His source of income was money given occasionally to him by family members. Tevin explained that the financial burden of raising children ultimately belonged to mothers, and that women were lucky if the fathers assisted at all.

Tevin: Take me for example, my father basically doesn't have anything to do with me or my brothers. He helps out zero. My mom doesn't

receive any money or anything from him. But me, one day I'll be able to help out Charlene by myself, but even then, she's the one that's going to really have to take care of Tracie.

Tevin's views on financial responsibility were shared by several participants who also saw themselves as "helping out" the mothers.

*The nurturer.* Being emotionally involved, physically present, and/or nurturing were the principle attributes that made good fathers, according to some teen fathers (27%,  $n = 8$ ). "Being there" was defined as providing emotional support to children, spending "quality time" with them, and being involved in care-giving activities (e.g., feeding, dressing, putting to sleep). Some adolescent fathers who primarily defined fathering as being involved and nurturing also cited "being a provider" as an important aspect of fatherhood. As previously stated, these categories (provider and nurturer) were not mutually exclusive, as themes were identified according to the primary or most important fatherhood roles as described by the participating fathers.

The concept of being an involved and nurturing father is illustrated in 16-year-old Sean's description of what it means to "be there" for his 6-month old daughter, Tracie.

Sean: I mean spending quality time with my girl. Being a key part of her life. When she gets older, I want her to know that she can count on her daddy. I don't want her to think that I'm just there to give her money whenever Carlissa can't, I want her to know that I'm there for her when she needs someone to talk to. I want to her to know that I'll be there.

Older fathers ( $n = 4$ ) tended to perceive the primary role of a father as "being there" (Table 1). Within the two younger age groups (14-15 years and 16-17 years), very few teens equated being a father with being involved and nurturing. Fathers who were older were more likely to display involved, nurturing, and caregiving behaviors. Although some teen fathers kept their children overnight, in most such cases the child was cared for primarily by the paternal grandmother. The perception of nurturer as an ideal role was no more consistent among fathers enrolled in parenting classes than it was among fathers who were not enrolled. Among the "nurturer" group, fathers were more likely "be there" and spend quality time with their children if they were romantically involved with the child's mother.

An interesting perspective on the nurturer role was captured in an interview with Roman, an 18-year-old father and gang member. Roman discussed

**Table 1.** Primary Conceptualizations of Fatherhood by Age Group

Category	14-15 years	16-17 years	18-19 years	Total
Providers	n = 4 (57%)	n = 8 (57%)	n = 4 (44%)	n = 16 (53%)
Nurturers	n = 1 (14%)	n = 3 (21.5%)	n = 4 (44%)	n = 8 (27%)
Autonomous fathers	n = 2 (29%)	n = 3 (21.5%)	n = 1 (11%)	n = 6 (20%)

the importance of spending time with his 3-year-old son and providing him with guidance and life lessons. He expressed regret that his own mother neglected him in this regard, as did his father who had been incarcerated since Roman’s earliest childhood memories. Roman had no siblings and despite living with his mother, considered himself to be financially and emotionally independent since he was given no direct support. The following is an excerpt from the transcribed interview:

Roman: Everything that I had to learn from gang-banging is something she [*his mother*] should have tried to teach me. She should have spent time with me, taught me something about being a man. Something. She should have tried to take care of me a little instead of leaving me at 8 or 9 years old to find my own way, [to] feed myself . . . All she was concerned about was that pipe [*crack cocaine addiction*] and anything else she could get her hands on. She just should have been there, you know.

Roman’s notion of a father’s responsibility (i.e., nurturing) was partially constructed in contrast to and as a result of his own mother’s parenting behaviors, and was also related to the sense of “family” he experienced as a gang member. In his description of “being there” for his son, Roman indicated that the most important task of a father was to “teach him what he needs to know to survive,” which could be accomplished by “being there.”

*Autonomous father.* Another theme that emerged from the data contrasted significantly with the above themes. In these cases, fathers did not identify a role, but rather expressed opposition to the idea of fatherhood altogether. These youths indicated that neither they nor other fathers had any real obligation to provide for or be involved in the lives of their children. While these autonomous fathers (20%, n = 6) were in the minority, they deliberately detached themselves from the father role—both conceptually and in practice. As one father stated, “I’m simply a donor and that’s what I want to be . . . at

least right now.” The teen fathers absolved themselves from fathering responsibilities for various reasons and identified with their parental status in terms of biology and paternity only.

While some teens perceived the “provider” or “nurturer” aspects of fatherhood without actually performing those roles, the “autonomous” fathers were distinct in their beliefs about having no parental obligations. The reasons for their detachment from fatherhood were complex. One pattern that emerged from the interviews was that all except for one of the “autonomous” fathers characterized their relationship with the mother of their child as unfriendly and negative. When asked how he felt about his child’s mother, 15-year-old Carl said, “I’ve gotten to the point where I don’t care nothing about her. I can’t stand her. She’s trying to pay me back because I won’t go with her. So she’s making it her mission to make my life miserable.” A recurring theme was the belief that the mothers had “trapped” them by intentionally becoming pregnant or acted irresponsibly by not taking the necessary steps to prevent pregnancy. Because the pregnancies were seen as the fault of the mother, these adolescent fathers believed they were released from all parental responsibilities. This group spent the least amount of time with their children and made minimal financial contributions to support their children. None of the “autonomous” teen fathers were enrolled in a parenting program.

In some cases, children represented a threat to teens’ sense of freedom. Being a father conflicted with their identities as teenagers, and children represented potential obstacles to their personal goals and dreams. As they perceived “father” and “teenager” as mutually exclusive concepts, the reality of fatherhood could not coexist with their teenage lives. For instance, 18-year-old Eric, the father of 1-year-old, discussed how he could not father his child and lead the life he wanted at the same time.

Eric: I love my child, I really do. But I got to do right for myself . . .

Interviewer: What does doing right for yourself mean?

Eric: Being right for me means not letting this situation get me down and doing what I got to do.

Interviewer: Do you mean being a father when you say not letting the situation get you down, or what do you mean by that?

Eric: Yes, I’m talking about being a teen father. I can’t let that situation get me down. I want to go to college and become a lawyer one day. So, I can’t let what’s happened with Tisha [*mother of his child*] stop me. I can’t stop doing what I have to do and give up my dreams. Should I? Why should I throw away everything I want to achieve because of a mistake her mom . . . o.k., we, made?

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore African American teen fathers' perceptions of the primary role of fathers and to examine the ways they behaved in these roles. While the majority of participants thought about and cared for their children, the teens expressed distinct beliefs about what constituted fatherhood. Primarily conceptualized as provider and nurturer roles, these two themes were not mutually exclusive and reflect the findings of previous studies conducted with African American adult fathers (Gerson, 1997; Hamer, 2001). Because there was considerable overlap, the current study borrowed terminology (i.e., provider, nurturer, and autonomous father) from one of the adult studies (Hamer, 2001). On the other hand, some teens (autonomous fathers) rejected the father role altogether, taking no part or responsibility in parenting their children.

Diversity among these adolescent fathers was reflected not only in their perceptions of the fatherhood role, but also in whether and how they behaved as parents. The extent, frequency, and nature of their parenting behaviors varied regardless of how fathering roles were idealized. Yet, the findings indicated that despite being economically poor, many of these teen fathers provided or attempted to provide some kind of support to the mothers of their children, albeit in some cases through their own parents' assistance or even by illegal means. The majority made some provisions or attempted to "help out." Likewise, many were involved in their children's lives and did what they could to meet their perceived responsibilities of the nurturing father role. These results are consistent with those reported in earlier studies (Gavin et al., 2002). Still, many fathers failed and/or deliberately chose not to behave in either role.

It is interesting to note that fathers who described their relationship to their child's mother as romantic and loving were generally more likely to behave in accordance with their idealized father roles. In other words, among the participants who reported being in a romantic and loving relationship with their child's mother, "provider" fathers tended to make financial contributions, and "nurturer" fathers tended to spend quality time with and "be there" for their child. In contrast, nearly all (five out of six) of the teen fathers considered to be "autonomous" expressed negative feelings (e.g., resentment, hostility) toward their child's mother. Most participants, however, described the status of this relationship as friendly and amicable.

It is important to keep in mind that the individuals in this study were attempting to cope with their new father role but were not yet fully developed adults; the young fathers were still in need of nurturing and parenting

themselves. Teen fathers face “double-doses” of stress as they are confronted with not only the transitions and challenges associated with parenthood, but also those associated with normal adolescent development (Ketterlinus et al., 1991). Thus, that study participants’ parental behaviors were not fully consistent with their beliefs about father roles is expected.

A number of individuals in the current study revealed a dissonance between their views and intentions as fathers and their actual fathering behaviors. For example, many of those who perceived fatherhood in a providing sense were unable to fulfill that role because they were still in school and had to rely on their parents (mostly single mothers) to buy necessary items for their children. These teens primarily identified with the “provider” role, but were at times prevented by external factors from accomplishing their fathering tasks.

As stated earlier, older participants in the study were more likely to describe the father role in terms of “being there” for their child. This finding may reflect the important way adolescent development can impact how teen fathers conceptualize fatherhood. Among the three father categories, teens who did not assume any fathering role (“autonomous” fathers) were most consistent with their perceived fatherhood roles (or lack thereof). Role conflict and strain may help explain why these participants were indifferent to fatherhood and felt justified in their parental detachment. For instance, interviewed fathers expressed feeling overwhelmed by the idea of being a parent; the young men did not know how to manage adult expectations. Instead of adopting a father identity, many of these youths may chose to maintain only their identities as teenagers: “Trapped between profound longings to be totally dependent and fears of separation implied by assuming adult responsibilities, some take flight, as characterized by the stereotype of the absent, uninvolved teen father” (Applegate, 1988, pp. 211-212). The unwillingness of adolescent fathers to support their children has been associated with uninvolved (Rhein et al., 1997). It is therefore not surprising that some study participants exhibited such “autonomous” attitudes and behaviors.

### *Contributions of the Study*

The current study contributes to the literature by providing important information on an under-explored subpopulation of teen parents (i.e., African American males). While the results generate questions that require further probing (e.g., the role of socioeconomic conditions in their perceptions of and ability to carry out fatherhood roles), the study also provides a base upon which to generate future work.

In addition, the current study provides information about very young fathers. Although the goal of recruiting 13-year-olds for the study was not met, teens on the younger end of the age spectrum were accessed, including three 14-year-old fathers. Therefore, while most research on African American teen fathers has focused on those 15 years of age and older, the views of very young fathers were included in this study.

In depicting the diversity of fatherhood behavior, the current study also dispels some myths that teen fathers do not take care of their children or do not want to act as fathers. As the results indicate, despite being relatively poor economically, there was a great deal of diversity in how participants perceived fatherhood and its responsibilities and how they performed in this role.

### *Limitations of the Study*

While the “credibility” of quantitative research depends on instrument construction, in qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument (Golafshani, 2003; Patton, 2002). In the current study, the interviewer’s gender may have represented one limitation. Specifically, that the male study participants were asked personal, potentially sensitive questions about gender-specific issues (i.e., fatherhood) by an African American woman may have caused the teens to feel uncomfortable, which in turn may have influenced their interview responses. In order to minimize this effect, measures were taken to ensure that interviews would take place in settings where participants felt relaxed, such as their homes. In addition, the interviewer conducted three pilot interviews to ensure that interview questions were relevant and meaningful to participants. This step also helped the interviewer to prepare for the interviews. On other hand, the fact that the researcher was of the same racial/ethnic background as participants (i.e., African American) likely contributed to her credibility from the perspective of the teen fathers.

“Credibility” also refers to the credibility or believability of study results based on information provided by the research participant (Trochim & Donnelly, 2007). In this study, the researchers did not conduct member checking with participants to ensure that the themes and portrayals from the study results were congruent with their experiences. Nonetheless, while the fathers were not involved in the data interpretation process, they were continually asked to confirm the interviewer’s summaries of their statements and stories during the interview process. They were also given the opportunity to assist in developing the research questions as part of the pilot interviews.

A related limitation is inherent in the nature of qualitative research itself; it is not clear whether and to what extent participants may have provided socially desirable answers throughout the interview process. However, precautions were also taken to address this issue. For example, the interviewer explained to participants that their accounts of their experiences and perceptions might be used to address the needs of other teen fathers. In addition, participants were assured that their names and identities would not be shared with others. Finally, that the interviews were conducted by a female researcher does not alone diminish the credibility of the respondents' firsthand accounts of their experiences. Rather, the narratives represent a valuable aspect of their experiences and should not be discounted (Anderson, 1993).

In qualitative research, "transferability" rather than generalizability is the focus and is primarily the responsibility of the reader (Golafshani, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Trochim & Donnelly, 2007). The qualitative researcher can enhance transferability by providing a thorough description of the study context and the central assumptions surrounding the research (Trochim & Donnelly, 2007). In the current study, the interviewer probed participants' statements during interviews to ensure that concepts were defined and understood within the personal context and individual life experiences of the teen fathers. Furthermore, the authors strived to provide contextually "thick" descriptions of those interviewed and their circumstances, so that readers could determine whether the study's findings were transferable to another setting and group.

The concept of "dependability" in qualitative research is somewhat similar to the quantitative notion of "reliability" (Golafshani, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, to demonstrate the dependability of qualitative study data, the researcher is expected to provide a detailed account of the context within which the study was conducted (e.g., research conditions, methodology, and processes; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The aim is not to discover absolute "truths," but rather to recognize and present the true experiences and perceptions of a particular group (in this case, African American teen fathers) in a particular place and time. While replication of the same or similar study findings is not guaranteed, the current study addressed this criterion by providing a dense description of the applied research methods. (Golafshani, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

"Confirmability" refers to the degree to which study results can be confirmed or corroborated by others (Trochim & Donnelly, 2007). Objectivity in this study may have represented a limitation, as the qualitative data was collected and analyzed (coded and recoded) by a single researcher. In other words, without the benefit of multiple research perspectives, the confirmability

of the qualitative data may have been compromised. However, procedures for checking and rechecking the data were thoroughly documented in the current study. In addition, all researchers were involved in the process of interpreting the study's findings.

### *Future Research*

Adolescent pregnancy prevention literature is particularly clear on the risks associated with teen pregnancy. These risks include unsupervised free time, lack of condom use, and poor school grades (Card, 1999; Gest, Mahoney, & Cairns, 1999; Holden, Nelson, Velasquez, & Ritchie, 1993; Lammers, Ireland, Resnick, & Blum, 2000). While many of these studies have centered on adolescent females, it is important to identify and document the cultural, risk, and protective factors affecting adolescent (especially African American) males, as well as develop comprehensive prevention programs that target this population.

The current study's findings have several implications for future research. The purpose of this study was to identify the roles that are central to fatherhood according to African American youths who were also fathers themselves. Additional research is needed which further explores the perspectives and lives of these teens. Future studies could incorporate larger sample sizes and comparison groups and provide follow-up to adolescent fathers in longitudinal studies. For example, one topic that merits attention is whether and how conceptualizations of fatherhood change as African American teen fathers become adults. As paternal choices are neither innate nor unalterable (Gerson, 1997), future studies could explore the possibility of shifting perspectives that might occur while transitioning from adolescent to adult roles, whereby young fathers' earlier notions of fatherhood are modified in order to better harmonize with their lived realities as parents.

The complex nature of these intersecting development processes is likely further compounded by race-related factors (e.g., racial identity), calling attention to the need for appropriate development models for the African American teen father population. While mainstream frameworks may be appropriate to reflect developmental aspects of White, middle-class teens, the existing literature largely overlooks the need to explore what constitutes normal development among economically disadvantaged, ethnic/racial minority adolescents (Burton, Allison, & Obeidallah, 1995).

In addition, the impact of teen fathers' parents and the mothers of their children on their conceptualizations of and behaviors as fathers is another potential area of research. While this relationship was explored to some extent in the current study, the findings are beyond the scope of this article. Previous

research has indicated that these relationships are significant factors (Gavin et al., 2002).

A related topic is the influence of socioeconomic status on teens' attitudes and behaviors as fathers. Previous research findings indicate that adolescent fathers who have jobs are more likely to be involved in their children's lives than those who are unemployed or have unstable employment (Kaplan, 1997; Sullivan, 1989). Some fathers with limited means resorted to illegal activity specifically for the purpose of fulfilling a traditional role as "provider."

The transition to fatherhood can be extremely taxing, but this is especially true when the father is still a youth himself. As indicated by the "autonomous" teen fathers in this study, role conflict sometimes results in abandoning attempts to fulfill parental role altogether. Thus, it is essential that these young fathers not only learn how to cope with their new, life-altering responsibility, but are also shown the practical steps necessary to become the fathers they want to be.

## Appendix

### *Sample of Interview Questions*

Topic	Question
Identity	1. Please tell me a little about yourself?
	2. How would you describe yourself?
	3. What things are important to you?
	4. How would you describe yourself as a father?
Fatherhood involvement and parental support	1. Describe your child(ren)
	2. How often do you see your child?
	3. Do you have visitation rights? Are you pleased with how much you see your child(ren)? Why or why not?
	4. Where do you normally visit with your child(ren)?
	5. Do you feel comfortable around your child(ren)?
	6. Describe the way in which you and your child(ren) communicate or relate to one another
	7. What activities do you do with your child(ren)?
	8. Are you able to contribute to the support of your child(ren)? If so, could you please describe in what way(s) you do so, and how often?
	9. What is it like providing for your child(ren)?

(continued)

## Appendix (continued)

Topic	Question
<p>10. Are there things that you really enjoy doing and things that you really don't like doing with your child(ren)? Who do you go to if you need help or advice as far as parenting? What else, if anything, do you find useful?</p>	
<p>11. What sort of relationship do you want with your child(ren) as your child(ren) gets older?</p>	
<p>12. Does your paid employment or job have an impact on the way you father, and if so how?</p>	

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