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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Narratives of young South African fathers: redefining masculinity through fatherhood

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In the new South Africa gender role constructions are slowly shifting, this article explores early fatherhood as a potential site for the development of alternative masculinities. Existing research tends to cast young men as subjects of risk factor vulnerability and negative outcomes who become uninvolved fathers. The narrative data from young men in this study contradict this view. The analysis reveals that young men deliberately shift their life focus and actively renegotiate their identity through the choice to take responsibility for their children. They structure their personal goals and their relationships with families and partners in terms of providing emotional and financial stability for their child. Fatherhood becomes a highly valorised masculine identity. These young men resolve the tension between the pursuit of hegemonic gender ideals and determination to act as caregivers to their children, thus casting fatherhood as a site to challenge stereotypes of irresponsible young men and absent fathers. This study indicates that young fathers are not invisible and that early fatherhood is a potentially transformative force in the construction of masculinities which include provision, protection *and* caring.

Keywords: young fathers; masculinity; gender; narrative; fatherhood; South Africa

Introduction

There is a growing body of South African research that focuses on gender broadly and more specifically on how gendered practices contribute to negative outcomes such as high HIV rates, violence against women and sexual abuse. While there is copious research on masculinities and an increasing number of organisations that engage men, a single essentialised discourse on gender persists – a discourse in which females are oppressed by aggressive and forceful males (see Varga 1997). Gender has become synonymous with the disadvantages that women and young girls face in a patriarchal context (Barker and Ricardo 2005). While gender oppressions are a stark reality, perceptions of young fathers are coloured by this representation and they are often assumed to be disinterested and wilfully absent.

Counter to the discourse of 'bad men' widely used in South African gender activism (Morrell *et al.* 2012b), gender equality cannot be solely contingent on the empowerment of women – it should include the development of alternatives to the constructions of

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masculinity which undermine gender equality (see Ratele *et al.* 2011, Morrell *et al.* 2012b). We contend that early fatherhood is a possible site for the development of progressive masculine identities that privilege care, respect and active involvement.

Early parenthood provides a unique opportunity to study the 'dialectic between genders and generations concerning ideas and practices surrounding manhood and womanhood' (Mkhwanazi 2006, p. 102). Contrary to the understanding of young fathers[1] in terms of risk profile, we argue that they actively formulate and redefine the parameters of their masculine identity through fatherhood, creating potential sites for resistance of hegemonic gendered discourse. An important contribution of this article is the suggestion to look more closely at the paradoxes within constructions of masculine identity (e.g. father as both provider and carer), which indicate the potential for the development of alternative masculinities.

Masculinities and fatherhood: a theoretical context

In exploring early fatherhood as a site for the development of alternative masculinities, the link between fatherhood and masculinity should be considered in a socio-historical context such that 'paternal masculinities and manhood itself are mutually constructed and maintained' (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill 2003, p. 45). Pleck (2010) suggests a Fatherhood-Masculinity model in which men's definition and performance of their gender identity impacts their practices of fatherhood and vice versa. A reading of Pleck's model, which draws on social constructionist understandings of identity, sees a parallel between a strong masculinity orientation (identification with masculine ideals) and hegemonic masculinity.

Connell (1995) suggests the concept of hegemonic masculinity to refer to the collection of practices that subordinate women to men in the maintenance of patriarchy. Hegemonic masculinity is a composite of the traits that afford the greatest power socially. It is normative, regulating the behaviour of men in terms of acceptable manhood (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, Lindegger and Maxwell 2007). In this analysis, there are multiple masculinities (complicit, subordinate and marginal) that afford power differently depending on respective proximity to the standards of hegemonic masculinity (Pascoe 2003, Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, Williams 2009, Richardson 2010). Masculinities, as relationally defined gender identities in constant flux, are provisional and context dependent (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, Richardson 2010). We use Connell's theorising on masculinity as a reference point in this article. It provides a way to theorise about gendered power relations that support gender oppression, and we are concerned with the development of alternative masculinities that support a reconfiguration of these systems of power.

Connell's theory has been instrumental in establishing men and masculinities as a focus point in research and work around gender, both internationally and in South Africa (Morrell *et al.* 2012b). However, the use of the theory of hegemonic masculinity is not without complications and it has not gone uncritiqued or unexpanded (see Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, Hearn *et al.* 2012). Although it is beyond the scope of this article to explore the reformulation of the theory, hegemonic masculinity is most successfully conceptualised as 'multifaceted and constantly changing' (Phoenix and Frosh 2001, p. 28).

In order to continue to expand masculinities research, we should maintain an awareness of the intersections of gender with other identities such as age, ethnicity, class and culture (Ellis 2008). For example, adolescent boys, broadly the same population as our

sample, define themselves as acceptably masculine by creating a hybrid identity in their gender narratives, legitimating exceptions from some hegemonic norms and laying claim to others (Phoenix and Frosh 2001, Pascoe 2003). While the 'long shadow of hegemonic masculinity' (Doucet 2004, p. 279) can be seen as a strong regulatory force in men's behaviour, it is in constant change and may come to include tropes of subordinate masculinities (Anderson 2009, Demetriou 2001). The participants in this study illustrate this point by pairing caring and emotional investment, decidedly non-hegemonic constructions, with the strong hegemonic norm of father-provider to generate an acceptable alternative masculinity. The young age of these fathers augers well for future development of alternative masculinities and speaks about the potential for dominant masculinities which encompass previously subordinate practices in support of equality with women (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

Although marginally so, this research is also located within a body of work on early reproduction thus far framed largely within a discourse of risk. We turn to this body of work next.

Risks and outcomes, involvement, and the experiences of young fathers

Existing research on early fatherhood focuses on antecedent risk factors and associated negative life outcomes, with considerable emphasis on the factors which influence paternal involvement. There is a smaller collection of studies dedicated to exploring the experiences of young fathers. The established risk profile and negative outcomes for early fatherhood include having young parents, being of low socioeconomic status and underperforming at school (Thornberry *et al.* 1997, Stouthamer-Loeber and Wei 1998, Bunting and McAuley 2004, Pears *et al.* 2005). Young fathers are more likely than non-fathers to suffer emotional and psychological problems, often combined with delinquent behaviour and compromised educational and professional opportunities (Thornberry *et al.* 1997, Anda *et al.* 2002, Wei *et al.* 2002, Bunting and McAuley 2004, Miller-Johnson *et al.* 2004, Lee *et al.* 2011).

The greatest determinants of young father involvement are finances and interpersonal relationships. Young fathers identify the ability to provide financially as a key determinant of their involvement with their child (Rhein *et al.* 1997, Bunting and McAuley 2004, Gavin *et al.* 2002, Futris *et al.* 2010). Family interactions can either support (Fagan *et al.* 2007) or undermine (Gavin *et al.* 2002, Bunting and McAuley 2004) father involvement. The strength of the relationship between the new parents is also a significant predictor of father involvement (Johnson 2001, Gavin *et al.* 2002, Futris and Schoppe-Sullivan 2007). This literature tends to portray young fathers one dimensionally; as socially problematic and disinterested. However, the studies which focus directly on young fathers collectively point to finances as a major concern for young fathers who report great pressure to provide financially and be involved with their new families, and are greatly disheartened when they are unable to do so (Allen and Doherty 1996, Glikman 2004, Wilkes *et al.* 2011). Fathers who are unable to be present in the life of their child show reduced self-esteem and self-confidence (Caldwell and Antonucci 1997, Bunting and McAuley 2004).

Across studies, young men reveal a strong emotional connection with their children and emphasise that negative experiences with their own fathers provide a strong motivation to give their children a positive experience of fatherhood (Glikman 2004, Lemay *et al.* 2010, Wilkes *et al.* 2011). The weight of not being able to fulfil father provider expectations speaks to the significant influence of normative gender roles on socially preferred forms of fatherhood.

Early parenting research in South Africa

In the socio-political period of transition from apartheid to democracy, identities are being reconstructed and renegotiated (Prinsloo and de la Rey 1999). The South African case is ripe for the study of masculinity, in its multiple and varied forms, and this challenge has been taken up by a host of South African scholars (e.g. Shefer *et al.* 2007, Ratele 2008, Morrell 2001). This research points to problematic constructions of masculinity and has begun to question some ways in which South African men have been demonised without recognition of the complex ways in which contextually bound and fluid masculinities may be constructed (Ratele 2008). Furthermore, within the wider context of globalisation involving shifting gender regimes and 'new father' discourses, this research serves as a necessary contribution in theorising about gender from the global periphery (Connell 2012). An investigation of alternative discourses of masculinity made possible through talk about early reproduction is a key contribution to the existing body of literature.

Early parenting research in South Africa illustrates the centrality of gender role ideals in relationship dynamics (Harrison and O'Sullivan 2010). These unequal power relations compromise communication and negotiation in sexual decision-making (see Varga 1997, 2003, Jewkes *et al.* 2001). The research on teenage pregnancy in South Africa generally follows the risk paradigm trend in international literature, informed by the association between HIV, gender-based violence and teenage pregnancy (see Macleod 1999a, 1999b, for a full review).

The majority of South African studies reviewed focus on early parenthood in impoverished communities, exploring how adolescent childbearing is mediated by contraception, power dynamics in relationships, family structure, tradition and fertility, and contact with health services (Harrison *et al.* 2001, Jewkes *et al.* 2001, Kaufman *et al.* 2001, Manzini 2001, Bakilana and Esau 2003). Morrell *et al.* (2012a) discuss the high rates of teenage pregnancy among learners in South African schools. In reflecting on their research, Morrell and colleagues made two key observations. First, they comment upon the difficulty of locating young fathers and second, they mention the possible, often invisible, trauma and distress that young fathers experience. There is limited knowledge of young fathers and the issues they face. Two possible reasons are offered. First, it is understood that young men often elect to deny paternity to avoid the payment of damages or *lobolo*[2] (Kaufman *et al.* 2001, Morrell *et al.* 2012a). Second, the majority of demographic data in South Africa is gathered via household surveys, which collect details of those residing in the household; these data are not utilisable in quantifying fatherhood because the vast majority of children in South Africa live with their mothers or extended family, and not with their fathers (Posel and Devey 2006).

Swartz and Bhana's (2009) research is the first South African study to investigate young fathers' experiences directly. This phenomenological study highlights the responsibility and emotional investment that young fathers feel for their children; emphasising financial challenges and relationships with parents, families and partners within the related socio-cultural context. Young fathers often feel a strong sense of responsibility towards their children. This relationship is heavily influenced by financial difficulties and father involvement is often a function of the degree of support that they receive from family members. Findings point to the importance of the young fathers' experiences of their own fathers and the role that pursuits of gender norms play in early parenthood. These findings further substantiate that young fathers want to be involved with their children. Our study builds on this understanding by documenting the themes that young fathers chose to include in their narratives, with an aligned focus on the implications for the construction of alternative masculinities.

Methods

A qualitative, narrative methodology, informed by a social constructionist lens, was chosen for this study, which allows for a rich description of early fatherhood through the stories of young men (Morse and Richards 2002). In a social constructionist approach, the responses of participants are not seen as a means to tap a fixed unitary reality, but rather as constituted through social relatedness. Language is understood to shape and produce reality, and personal identity is formed through prevailing social discourses and constructions of meaning (Terre Blanche *et al.* 2006). In current research, young people are not considered participants in the construction of their identities (Andrews *et al.* 2000). In contrast, the narrative approach allowed the participants to give voice to their experience, so *they* could define fatherhood and the practices associated with this identity. This approach allowed a more temporally continuous picture of the stories of young fatherhood to emerge, contrasting the snapshot view of young people's experiences, which characterises research around early parenthood in South Africa (see Manzini 2001).

The sample included 10 participants between the ages of 18 and 23, all of whom fathered a child before the age of 21, most of whom became fathers during adolescence. At the time of the interviews, three of the participants were studying at tertiary institutions through financial aid, three were unemployed and the rest had jobs but minimal income. Of the 10 participants, three lived with their partners, two lived alone and the remaining five stayed with their families. The participants all only had one child, with the exception of one participant who had two.

The participants were recruited with the snowball method via contact with an organisation which supports youth to leadership through training and social development projects; the only prerequisite was that they should be young fathers. The first author conducted 10 interviews over a 6-month period in 2010. The interviews were conducted in English, and although it was not the first language of some of the participants, they were fluent enough to not require translation.

The small size of the sample is testament to the fact that young fathers are a notoriously difficult group to recruit (Wilkes *et al.* 2011). However, this is not necessarily problematic, given that the primary focus was not generalisability but rather exploration of an undocumented perspective. The research context was confined to Cape Town. Although indicators of socioeconomic status were not collected, 9 of the 10 participants resided in low socio-economic or working class neighbourhoods. Six of the participants were 'Black', three were 'Coloured' and one was 'White'[3] The interviews took place at the home of the participant or at the university.

Individual unstructured narrative interviews were conducted with the participants. They were prompted to describe their 'story of being a young father'. A thematic narrative analysis of the data followed which identified themes within narratives as they are knitted together in a synthesis of individual experience and broader social context (Riessman 2008).

Narratives of fatherhood

The analysis focused on identifying the themes that colour the experiences of the young fathers. As the analysis progressed, it became apparent that, although there were many similarities in content themes, the life change through choice of responsibility was the single overarching structural theme in participants' narratives. As Sanda so poignantly put it: 'Ja[4], I live for him now, I live for him now'.

The participants were able to tell their own stories, allowing them to challenge taken-for-granted concepts and open up alternative possibilities of being and of action. In order

to maintain the narrative coherence of the texts, the structure of the analysis and discussion follows the choice to take responsibility and the shift in life focus as these manifest in a renegotiated identity. The analysis highlights themes as they play out across the intersection of commonalities and dissimilarities within the stories about fatherhood. 'Being a father' becomes the focal point of masculine identity for these young men.

Taking responsibility

In this study, fatherhood was talked about as a considered choice to accept paternity. This finding supports other research in which 'taking responsibility' is a strong discourse for young fathers (Swartz and Bhana 2009, Wilkes *et al.* 2011). Some participants described feeling compelled to accept paternity by the connection that they felt to their unborn child.

> Sanda: 'I could never think about denying my flesh and blood'.

Many of the participants expressed foreboding because of the negative reaction from their families. For six of the participants, accepting paternity entailed the additional consequence of adhering to the cultural norms around pregnancy, such as the payment of 'damages' or *lobolo*, the costs of which are borne by their families. Thus, the entrance into fatherhood is contingent on the choice not to opt out, as many young men do, but to face the consequences of rebuke from both families.

These men's narratives conveyed the understanding of the pregnancy as a mistake, with some participants explicitly talking about it in those terms. However, they neutralised any thoughts of regret by valorising the choice to take responsibility for the sake of the child. Sizwe spoke about the impact of his daughter on his life.

> Sizwe: But this thing came, came along, then I have to face it, it is really really tough. I dunno where it will end, I dunno, but I will sacrifice for her. Ja, that is what I told myself.

These words encapsulate what each of the participants mentioned, for example the need to face what they had done and take up the challenge of being a father. Most of the participants chose to omit detailed accounts of the events that led up to the pregnancy, preferring to cast themselves as individuals who had made bad decisions against their better judgement, but were willing to face the consequences. Tebogo and Mandla, for example, dedicated space in their narratives to describing the issue of 'taking responsibility'.

> Tebogo: the first thing that I can say is that being a young father is not that you lost your future or that you lost your dreams . . . as long as you are a person you can deal with, like I said, it is up to yourself, if you believe in yourself you can do anything.

Believing in themselves seems to be the way in which the participants combated the disruption of unexpected pregnancy, contrasting the traditional emphasis on the negative life consequences for young parents (Macleod 1999b). This motivational tone appears at different points in all the narratives and communicates the idea that the participants legitimate their new identity as acceptably masculine by showing that they can make things happen and resist domination by circumstance (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009).

For many of the participants, the act of taking responsibility was compounded by the wish to distinguish themselves from the majority of young men who deny paternity.

> Lutho: that is why you see so many children without fathers because some people don't want responsibility.

Taking responsibility was framed as a rare event within the social contexts of the participants. They cast their choice as a definitive step towards higher masculine status, a

response to the discourse of 'absent fatherhood'. For many of the participants, being a responsible father was a signifier of the possession of a 'masculine self' (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). These men are therefore pointing to the paradoxes of masculine discourse by, on the one hand, challenging the absent father and, on the other hand, reinforcing the 'taking responsibility' discourse of dominant masculinity.

Family

The choice of performing the role of a father was accompanied by the imperative to focus on the well-being of the child. Participants cast their families, partners and friends as enabling or impeding forces in being a father, highlighting their concern for their children.

Many of the participants found support from the female members of their family.

> Mandla: They are giving me so many advices, you see, they are encouraging me the whole time . . . my best friend it is my sisters, yabo, that is what I say.

By mentioning the supportive role of families, the participants showed how they recruited familial resources in support of fulfilling their father roles. Existing research also supports the finding that mothers and female family members play the predominant supportive role for young parents (Allen and Doherty 1996, Swartz and Bhana 2009, Shefer and Fouten 2012). However, some families also impeded the fulfilment of father roles. Simon, for example, talked about how intensely emotional arguments and meetings with the mother's family were necessary before he could re-enter the life of his child. The predominant theme of John's narrative was the tension between the two families and how this curtailed his efforts to be with his child.

> John: My parents will be there and her parents will be there and it is always kind of awkward. Because there is also tension . . . So bonding with the boy is really hard.

Support or difficulties within and between families have a considerable effect on the involvement of a father in his child's life (Gavin *et al.* 2002, Glikman 2004, Swartz and Bhana 2009). However, families play an additional role in the South African context, where they police the cultural norms around pregnancy, acting as mediators of the entrance into fatherhood (Varga 1997, 2003, Kaufman *et al.* 2001). The acceptance of paternity and payment of damages play a significant part in the trajectory of father involvement (Shefer and Fouten 2012). These once more highlight the centrality of finances to the practice of fatherhood.

The pained way in which the participants talked about being denied access to their children illustrates the high value that they put on this interaction. The connection these fathers feel to their children is further evidenced by the diplomacy employed in maintaining a good relationship with the mother of the child so that they can stay in the child's life.

Partners

In these narratives, half of the participants were still with their partners, and the other half had broken up. Those who were no longer with their partners spoke about the breakdown of the relationship. Despite this, they seemed insistent on remaining in the lives of their children, which motivated the reparation of interaction with former partners.

> Sanda: but we are not together anymore and the only thing that brings us together is the baby. You have to get along for the sake of the baby . . .

The participants were acutely aware of the factors which influence their relationships with the mothers of their children. Getting involved with the mother again or being involved with other people was carefully considered in terms of a possible compromise in the relationship with the mother and with the child.

> Simon: I just don't want to like get intimate or emotionally involved with her again and like distract me from where I really am at. And like imagine we have a little fight or something happens again and then I will be like reluctant to like go to my daughter because of something like that man. I wouldn't want to rob her of that man.

The nature of the relationship between the young parents seems to significantly influence the way in which participants fulfil their role of father. The participants still in a relationship with the mothers of their children engaged in an on-going shuffle of relationship dynamics. Stability was jointly re-established by sharing the responsibilities of a child and maintaining the relationship.

> Lutho: and since then (the birth), ja, ups and downs, ups and downs. Our relationship is very tight, we love being together, when it is just the three of us.

This excerpt depicts the strength of connection that some of the participants report feeling to their family units. Despite the changes that early parenthood caused in the participants' lives, the plots of these narratives were progressive and future-focused. Whether the young men were still together with their partners or not, they spoke about endeavouring to create an environment conducive to the well-being of the child. In this study, similarly to Wilkes *et al.* (2011), young fathers express a desire to maintain an active presence in their child's life despite uncertainty of the nature of the relationship with the mother. The care that these young men take to secure access to their children, either through trying to manage conflict or maintain the coherence of the family unit, point to the fact they make life choices to facilitate the performance of their role as fathers. The implication is that young men are active in defining the practices of their fatherhood, indicating that there is greater complexity to father involvement than disinterest or inability to provide. The focus on maintaining amicable relationships for the sake of the child shows that becoming a young father precipitated a renegotiation of masculinity to potentially include more respect towards partners.

Renegotiating identity and the role of father

The acceptance of fatherhood involves a significant shift in life focus and renegotiation of identity. John and Sizwe, for example, related painful experiences such as rebuke and exclusion from their religious communities. Other participants talked about having to stop seeing friends, drinking and breaking off relationships with other women. All of the participants talk about a change in focus following becoming a father. The participants talk about how they began to see life through the lens of '*me* + *child*'.

> Sizwe: everything I am doing I am doing it for her. Because I don't want her to suffer, that is a big change in my life, ja.

As the young men talked about how they recovered from the unplanned pregnancy and new responsibilities, they began to describe the identity of 'father'. The parenting role of the father was referred to in terms of financial provision, protection and guidance, physical care and emotional support. Parallel to the accounts of the participants' role of fathers runs a less explicit account of how they relinquished the particular gender ideals of their young male peers to centre their masculine identity on performing more caring roles. For almost

all of the participants, having a child caused them to eschew some of the traditional markers of young masculinity.

> Sizwe: Now even my friends we used to say we are going to do that, but now that I am a father I wont say I am going to do this and that and that. Because I am only restricted to use a certain amount of money, because other will go, will go to my baby.

Mandla, Sizwe, Sanda, Thabo and Simon explicitly spoke about how they redefined their masculinity through fatherhood, by shifting their focus from away from having multiple partners, substance abuse and spending money, to taking responsibility for their child.

Emotional connections

Much of the identity of fatherhood was constructed through reference to the role of a father in a child's life. These narratives positioned fathers as essential to the well-being of a child, lending further legitimacy to the choice of taking responsibility. They highlight the different caregiver roles that these young fathers play. In each narrative, the functions expected of fathers were set against the backdrop of the intense emotion that the young fathers report feeling for their children.

> Lutho: I can't even explain how it is… I can't tell you. I was very very very happy when I saw her taking her first steps…. I love that girl very much, I love her a lot. I would give anything, anything just to be with her.

The care that the fathers feel is clearly displayed in the emotionally charged language they use to describe how they feel about their children. Evidence from other studies also points to the poignant emotional connection that young fathers have with their children (Glikman 2004, Swartz and Bhana 2009, Lemay *et al.* 2010). This emotion is not always expected or condoned within the current confines of normative masculinity (Adams and Coltrane 2005). In the context of a father–child relationship, however, it becomes permissible.

> Tebogo: I am trying to make it different from my own experience of life. I used to not get much support like from my father you see. So I am always comparing myself to my father.

Many of the young men mentioned personal experience of absent, neglectful and abusive fathers as the motivation for them to be participatory fathers. This finding is consistent with other research in which the parenting intentions of young fathers are powerfully determined by having experienced absent or abusive fathers themselves (Allen and Doherty 1996, Glikman 2004, Swartz and Bhana 2009, Lemay *et al.* 2011, Wilkes *et al.* 2011). Here, the creation of an alternative identity is about dis-identification (Richardson 2010). This is another mechanism that the fathers use to emphasise their care and investment as acceptably masculine. Taking on responsibility strengthened the participants' resolve to realise their hopes for the future. As 'responsibility' took form, life focus shifted to providing for the child and dealing with the consequences of parenthood, most markedly the financial struggles.

Father as provider

One of the most frequently drawn upon cultural resources was 'father as provider' script. Engaging in paid work has traditionally been a significant aspect of masculine identity, particularly for fathers (Brandth and Kvande 1998, Doucet 2004). The participation of young men in the public economic sphere is an integral part of establishing a masculine identity in relation to the family (Adams and Coltrane 2005). The young South African fathers in this study draw on a father-provider discourse to

lend legitimacy to a new masculine identity which also involves caring and emotional investment. Without exception, the financial aspect of father identity was mentioned as the greatest life change. The 'father as provider' discourse which emerged in this study echoes the finding that young fathers feel enormous pressure to provide, which changes their financial and employment priorities considerably (Glikman 2004, Swartz and Bhana 2009, Lemay *et al.* 2010). The majority of the participants talked about how their spending changed to incorporate the child, often leaving them with no money for themselves. Interestingly, the father-provider discourse was most often drawn on by participants from impoverished communities; this may be because poverty strongly binds fatherhood and manhood in South Africa where material signifiers of masculine status are scarce (Morrell 2007).

In these narratives, the expectation to provide financially appears to be the sole responsibility of fathers, framing them as indispensible to their children and families. The emphasis on provision is a point of intersection of masculine identity and fatherhood.

> Thabo: All the cultures, we make the culture . . . if you are the guy you look after the family.

For these young men, the transformation of their masculine identity entails the addition of caring and responsibility to the more traditional father provider construction. Literature on father involvement emphasises inability to contribute financially as a major obstacle to father involvement (Rhein *et al.* 1997, Bunting and McAuley 2004, Gavin *et al.* 2002). However, in agreement with our findings, studies that interview young men directly find that early fatherhood often acts as a catalyst to seeking self-improvement (Lemay *et al.* 2010). In fact, key aspects of the father as financial provider discourse in these narratives include furthering education and securing a job. Participants talked about attending school or university during the week and working on the weekends in order to have enough money. Mandla worked two jobs, week and weekend, to support his child. Sanda worked every holiday and used money designated for living expenses to support his child. Sizwe did the same, leaving him very little to subsist on.

> Sizwe: where I am getting the money from, no you won't believe . . . out of the thousand I am taking six home and I will be left with four, every month every month.

In many cases, supporting the child financially allowed the participant 'access' to the identity of father, which began with the payment of damages. Planning for the future of the child was an important aspect of this financial role and an expression of care for the child. Again, an alternate masculinity is being forged where heteronormative constructions are repurposed to align with care and responsibility.

Caring, guidance and good examples

The practice of fatherhood was not only defined as being physically present. Fathers are meant to protect and guide, set a good example, take physical care of the child and provide emotional support and reassurance. Fathers were spoken about as protectors and guiding forces who will ensure that the child follows the right path. Lutho and Sizwe talked about how a father should perform a protective function against the negative influence of families on the child. Sizwe removed his child from the family context of his partner because there were tensions in that family. He also spoke about establishing his own home with his child to keep her away from the influences of alcoholic sisters. For many of the fathers in this study, the motivating force behind the provision of protection and guidance was to give the child a better life than they experienced themselves.

Sizwe: like all this bad that has happened to me, then if I could prevent some of it for her then I would really feel like a dad really.

Although offering guidance was talked about as central to performing the role of a father, the participants also expressed a desire for their children to make their own choices in studying or choosing which home to live in. Part of offering this guidance is giving the child a positive reference point.

Lutho: You can't do certain things and then tell your child later on when she is older, you can't do these things. You have to be the example.

Almost all of the participants talked about being a good example to their child as an act of parenting. The majority of the participants mentioned that they could not tell their children to not do something that they themselves had done. It would seem that 'being an example' for their child meant that they have to be very aware of their actions.

While protectionist discourses are reiterating a type of hegemonic masculinity, there were also two distinct stories about caring that emerged in participants' narratives. With the exception of Thabo and Mandla, all the participants spoke about participation in care work as a necessary part of fatherhood: bathing, feeding and changing nappies, comforting and playing with the child, getting up at night and taking care of them when they were sick. Some fathers were even exclusive caregivers for a time.

Rodney: No, I do it myself, like the bathing, the cleaning and the feeding.

Sizwe: but ja, to her I can be a father, and a mother I think, I can be a mother and a father.

For these participants, caring for their child was an important part of being able to take up the identity of father. In many cases, these young men challenged gender norms about socially sanctioned caring behaviours for men.

Tebogo: I used to say that those things I will never do but changing a baby nappy, washing a baby, I didn't know how to do those things but I just did it because it is something that I care for.

These, similar to findings in other research (Lemay *et al.* 2010, Wilkes *et al.* 2011), attest to the potential of fatherhood to shift constructions of masculinity by combining dominant and subversive scripts. The notion of care taking extended to providing emotional support for children. Providing emotional support is a prominent feature of the 'being there' discourse employed in these narratives.

Simon: I would like to be there for her and provide emotional support and grow this bond . . . come hug her daddy, come cry by her daddy, like really depend on me.

Giving their children a place to find emotional comfort challenges the understanding of young fathers as uninvolved, and establishes emotional care and investment as an integral part of father identity.

The different roles that the participants saw as part of fatherhood were often spoken about in a temporal sense, with reference to the past and future needs of the children and what this means for them as fathers. A projection of the future of fatherhood left many narratives somewhat open-ended.

Sizwe: I don't know what will happen afterwards, I don't know. Maybe there are still more coming, but I am willing to face them. Even the ones that are coming I will face them. I think I am stronger than I was.

Although these young men are uncertain about what their futures hold, they were not deterred from their initial choice to undertake an active fatherhood role. This is further supported by the fact that at the time of the interviews, the children were all still babies

or young toddlers, and the need for guidance and emotional support was anticipated as a future role.

The participants' descriptions of their role as fathers and the ideals they held in fulfilling these roles demonstrates the changes that these young men are willing to undergo in order to fulfil their roles as fathers. The emotional connection that they feel for their children, and the wish to give their children a better life than they experienced, were powerful motivators for becoming active fathers. The participants framed their father roles of providing, protecting, caring for physical needs and offering emotional support, as part of their masculine identity.

Conclusion

Collectively, these findings show that the young men in this study consciously undertook the responsibility of fatherhood and moulded their lives to accommodate this new identity. They negotiated relationships around the aim of fulfilling their role as fathers; and this role guided their decisions and actions. We found that the young men interviewed saw fatherhood as a choice to take responsibility which ran counter current to the social norms of denying paternity. Determined to give their children the experience of a present and involved father, they talked about facing the challenges of early fatherhood. Young men negotiate relationships with families and partners amidst conflict and the pull of cultural norms; they experience a deep emotional connection to their children; they redefine themselves through financial provision, offering guidance and good examples, providing care and emotional support. These narratives are crafted to reveal the active role that the young men play in defining how they wish to practice fatherhood.

Many of the participants mentioned the intention to be different from the abusive or absent fathers they experienced themselves. These young men see themselves as anomalies in a population of predominantly absent fathers. Clearly, there is a need for increased focus on identifying the factors which inspire involved fathers to remain present in the lives of their children.

The analysis of these narratives shows an overlap with findings from South African and international studies; namely, the centrality of finances to 'father' identity, the emotional attachment young fathers have to their children and the factors influencing father involvement (Allen and Doherty 1996, Caldwell and Antonucci 1997, Bunting and McAuley 2004, Glikman 2004, Swartz and Bhana 2009, Lemay *et al.* 2012, Morrell *et al.* 2012a). This study also provides several new insights. It brings avenues for future research to light. First, the narratives in this paper indicate a complex interaction of social, cultural and family dynamics. Often, families police cultural norms, which significantly impact how the role of father is played out. More culturally situated studies on young fathers are needed in order to deepen the understanding of how culture and early fatherhood intersect in South Africa. Second, father involvement is often a function of the ability to provide financially. This is not just about gaining access to the child in a practical sense, but about the implications for the masculine identity of young men. These young men may eschew fatherhood because they are unable to provide, provision being a central tenant of their masculine identity.

For the participants in this study, fatherhood emerges as a potential transformative force in developing positive masculinities. Positive masculinities may be defined as 'peace loving, democratic, tolerant and respectful' (Morrell 2006, p. 21). Datta (2007) asserts that changing masculinities and gender ideals, and therefore relationship dynamics, requires a repositioning of men as partners and fathers within families. Indeed, the findings in this

study speak to the possibility of the development of alternative masculinities as they show the capacity of young men to subvert some hegemonic gender ideals in favour of privileging the identity of caring father. However, what this analysis also shows is that the crafting of alternative scripts of masculinity is often tentative and sometimes contradictory. In attempting to frame a narrative of caring masculinities, men simultaneously draw upon long established ways of constructing masculinity, which involve taking responsibility, protection and provision. Constructs such as masculinity and femininity, as illustrated particularly in post-structuralist feminist work (see Gavey 1989, de la Rey 1997), are not fixed. Gendering is a social process (Lorber 1994) through which manhood and womanhood are continually reconstituted in ways that accommodate ambiguity and contradiction (Glenn 1999). The potential for transformation in gender identities, norms and social practices is highlighted in this work and should continue to be at the forefront of future masculinities research.

Notes

1. In this article, the term 'young' designates men who fathered a child during late adolescence, most typically between the ages of 16–20. The terms 'teenage pregnancy' and 'early parenthood', in this article and in the relevant literature, refer more broadly to both women and men for whom conception occurs during adolescence.
2. *Damages*: payment for impregnating a women outside of wedlock, *ilobolo*: isiXhosa word for bridewealth.
3. We have used inverted commas around these terms to acknowledge the artificiality of racial classification. We have decided to include them because of the important ways in which apartheid embedded these categories as forms of 'identity' and because of the power they still hold in contemporary society. The term 'Coloured' is typically used to designate a person who is of mixed ethnic descent.
4. South African colloquialism for yes.

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