






Re-imagining Culture and Masculinity through the Lense of Teenage Fathers in Eldorado Village of South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The growing rate of teenage fatherhood in South Africa has been portrayed as a product of several social-political factors, particularly the broken system of racial injustice and economic inequality. In such discussions, scholars argue that the racialised social-political structures of apartheid and the corresponding persistent economic inequalities set the path for a distorted understanding of parenthood and the normalisation of teenage fatherhood. The current study is an extension of such argument. Drawing from the experiences of four purposefully selected teenage fathers at Eldorado village in the Limpopo province of South Africa, the study investigates how similar resources, such as peer interactions and cultural expectations, set the contexts and form the basis for teenagers' fatherhood identity. These elements the study finds, interact with the existing racialised political structures of apartheid, to influence the motivations and aspirations for fatherhood in their community. Being exposed to early parenthood due to cultural expectations and family background, potential teenage fathers are further encouraged to accept teenage fatherhood and assume biological responsibilities due to added socio-economic challenges that are associated with raising their children within their community. Based on these findings, the study recommends that schools create conducive and supportive environments to re-orient potential young parents, facilitate a working relationship with various stakeholders, and initiate program for schools to help already evolved teenage fathers.

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INTRODUCTION

Teenage fatherhood has, in the last decade, become a severe problem in South Africa, particularly within black communities.¹ A recent study by Mkwanzani et.al. suggests that despite a general decrease in the fertility rate, there has not been a decrease in the percentage of teenage pregnancies

¹ Fazel E. Freeks, Simone M. Peters, and Helenard Louw, "Reframing Masculinity and Fatherhood: Narratives on Faith-Based Values in (Re)Shaping 'Coloured' Fathers," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 78, no. 1 (December 7, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i1.7624>; Wame Maryjoy Kesebonye and Kennedy Amone-P'Olak, "The Influence of Father Involvement during Childhood on the Emotional Well-Being of Young Adult Offspring: A Cross-Sectional Survey of Students at a University in Botswana," *South African Journal of Psychology* 51, no. 3 (2021): 383–95; S. Swartz and D. Bhana, *Teenage Tata: Voices of Young Fathers in South Africa* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2009).

and fatherhood.² Five out of every ten children born in South Africa are from teenage fathers.³ This has a lot of social implications for the growing appeal of fatherhood for South African teenagers.

Unfortunately, the focus on South African teenage fatherhood has not received as much attention as its female counterparts in black communities. In other words, most studies have thus far focused on adolescent mothers and teenage pregnancies, leaving out teenage fathers. The concern is more on pregnant teenagers, adolescent mothers, and teenage women's vulnerability to HIV within sexual relationships. Due to this biased focus on adolescent pregnancy and teen motherhood, there has been minimal data and information on the continuous appeal of teenage fatherhood in South Africa.⁴ Few studies concentrating on teenage fatherhood however seem to focus on socio-structural explanations. Mostly pointing to the racialised structures of apartheid, studies demonstrated how racialised structures of apartheid and persistent economic inequalities set the path for distorted family life.⁵ With the economic and land dispossession that made demands for cheap labour in urban and mining areas very appealing, black men moved away from their families in search of employment. In this situation, they became distant providers who left the raising of their male children at the hands of only their women.⁶ Teenage fatherhood quickly became normalised in such a disrupted traditional family life context. As valuable as these kinds of explanation are, they hardly provide explanation for the fluidity that characterises the normalisation of the teenage fatherhood in the modern era in South Africa.

In few of contributing to the literature, the current study provides more insight into how formation of masculine identities and justifications for teenage fatherhood are based on cultural imperatives and economic challenges. Throwing more insight into this relationship is the key to addressing the negative consequences of teenage father absenteeism, household poverty and preparedness for fatherhood in South African black communities. These elements are stated in the current South African policy framework, highlighting parental rights and responsibilities in the Children's Act No 38 of 2005. The significance of the Act is to set out frameworks aligned with the principles stated in the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. These principles were adopted in South Africa in 1995 to put forth the child's interests, as the Children's Act alluded to. The significance of this Act is that it outlines the legal rights and responsibilities of both the mother and the father in the child's life. This Act protects both mothers and fathers and gives them equal parental status regardless of socioeconomic background.⁷

What follows is a discussion of teenage fatherhood in South Africa and a justification of how the study is underpinned by the masculinity theory, first developed by R.W. Connell. Connell's Masculinity theory provides the theoretical lenses for analysing how elements such as peer interactions, cultural expectations, could interact with the existing racialised political structures of apartheid, to influence the motivations and aspirations for fatherhood in the Eldorado Village. A discussion of the methodological components used in the study, as well as the presentation of the data and discussion of the findings are presented to present the study's thesis.

² Sibusiso Mkwanzani, N Mkhwanazi, and D Bhana, "Teenage Mothers and Fathers: A Demographic Perspective," *Young Families: Gender, Sexuality and Care*, 2017, 31–48.

³ Lynn Hendricks, Sharlene Swartz, and Arvin Bhana, "Why Young Men in South Africa Plan to Become Teenage Fathers: Implications for the Development of Masculinities within Contexts of Poverty," *Journal of Psychology in Africa* 20, no. 4 (2010): 527–36; Mkwanzani, Mkhwanazi, and Bhana, "Teenage Mothers and Fathers: A Demographic Perspective."

⁴ Hendricks, Swartz, and Bhana, "Why Young Men in South Africa Plan to Become Teenage Fathers: Implications for the Development of Masculinities within Contexts of Poverty."

⁵ Victoria Hosegood and Sangeetha Madhavan, "Data Availability on Men's Involvement in Families in Sub-Saharan Africa to Inform Family-centred Programmes for Children Affected by HIV and AIDS," *Journal of the International AIDS Society* 13 (2010): S5–S5; M. Hunter, "Fathers without Amandla: Zulu Speaking Men and Fatherhood," in *Baba: Men and Fatherhood in South Africa*, ed. L. Richter and R. Morrell (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2006), 99–107.

⁶ Hunter, "Fathers without Amandla: Zulu Speaking Men and Fatherhood."

⁷ N. Koopman, "Hope, Vulnerability & Disability? A Theological Perspective," in *Searching for Dignity: Conversations on Dignity, Theology & Disability*, ed. J. Swartz, L. Hanson, and L. Claassens (Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2013), 43–54.

Contextualising Teenage Fatherhood in South Africa

Teenage fatherhood is a global concept that affects many communities, including South Africa. Increasingly, teenage fathers are wrongly portrayed in the media and by researchers on teenage mothers without their views being explored to unearth their actual experiences of parenthood and the influences of such a state in particular.⁸ Culturally, fathers are assumed to have a massive responsibility of being providers for the needs of the child, while mothers serve as caregivers. However, with the socio-economic challenges facing many teenage fathers, it is difficult for them to assume their provider responsibilities for their children. This highlights the role of culture in influencing masculine identities and fatherhood.

In South Africa, teenage fathers' challenges and the factors contributing to teenage fatherhood are best explained by exploring the family background, biological responsibilities, and socio-cultural and economic responsibilities that define the challenges, discriminations and stereotypes teenage fathers face.⁹ These young fathers are viewed as absent, not caring, or predators. Subsequently, these social and developmental challenges may lead adolescent fathers to encounter a wide range of stress surrounding pregnancy and parenthood. It is this combination of psychosocial factors which differentiates adolescent fathers from adult fathers and places them at risk for parenting failure.¹⁰ Transition to parenthood typically comes along with an outstanding level of stress. Much turmoil can be expected when role transition occurs out of synchrony with expected social standards.¹¹ Therefore, to understand the factors influencing the experiences of teenage fatherhood, such as culture and masculinity, the norm of masculinity is viewed to serve the assumption that, in general, teenage fathers are selfish and intentionally impregnating girls with nothing to lose rather than gain status.¹² Panday et al. reported that similar to young mothers, young fathers experience a strong emotional response when hearing about their pending fatherhood.¹³ This questions the role and influence of culture and masculinity on teenage parenthood.

Family Background

Many teenage fathers grew up in different family circumstances. It is more often the case that their mothers were young, and their fathers were not engaged or negatively engaged.¹⁴ The habit of poor parenting practices becoming transmitted across generations raises essential questions about how to interrupt negative intergenerational patterns and help young parents develop the parenting skills that their parents may have lacked.¹⁵ Leath categorised eight (8) problems that unwed adolescent African American fathers encountered during their teen years: providing financial support for the child, relationships with the child's mother, the relationships with in-laws as well as their own families, being restricted in their freedom resulting from the needs for the child, attending and completing school, employment, coping with the physical and emotional demands of being fathers and responsibilities inherent in setting a good example for the child.¹⁶ This means that teenage fathers, including African American adolescent fathers, are more likely to be victims of child labour or to enter the workplace earlier than their peers. They are more likely to drop out of school in search of employment to take responsibility for their children.¹⁷ Family background is embedded in the cultural practices that may

⁸ Deevia Bhana and Nomvuyo Nkani, "When African Teenagers Become Fathers: Culture, Materiality and Masculinity," *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 16, no. 4 (2014): 337–50.

⁹ Bhana and Nkani, "When African Teenagers Become Fathers: Culture, Materiality and Masculinity."

¹⁰ Stephen D Whitney et al., "FATHERS' IMPORTANCE IN ADOLESCENTS' ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT," *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies* 8, no. 3/4 (2017): 101–26.

¹¹ Bhana and Nkani, "When African Teenagers Become Fathers: Culture, Materiality and Masculinity."

¹² Bhana and Nkani, "When African Teenagers Become Fathers: Culture, Materiality and Masculinity."

¹³ Saadhna Panday et al., "Teenage Pregnancy in South Africa: With a Specific Focus on School-Going Learners," 2009.

¹⁴ H. Ward, R. Brown, and G. Hyde-Dryden, *Assessing Parental Capacity to Change When Children Are on the Edge of Care: An Overview of Current Research Evidence: Research Report* (Pretoria: Department of Education, 2014).

¹⁵ Timothy G Moore et al., "Early Childhood Development and the Social Determinants of Health Inequities," *Health Promotion International* 30, no. suppl_2 (2015): ii102–15.

¹⁶ Seanna Leath, "Being Better than My Dad: A Qualitative Case Study of One African American Father's Journey with Parenthood and Intergenerational Change," *Sage Open* 7, no. 1 (2017): 2158244017697163.

¹⁷ Lenka Van Zyl, Mariette van Der Merwe, and Shingairai Chigeza, "Adolescents' Lived Experiences of Their Pregnancy and Parenting in a Semi-Rural Community in the Western Cape," *Social Work* 51, no. 2 (2015): 151–73.

influence the boy's child to become a father in his teenage years because of cultural expectations in the family. In essence, family background plays a significant role in teenagers becoming parents early, although the impact is more severe on teenage girls than their male counterparts. Therefore, this calls for the need to explore the influence of culture and masculinity on teenage parenthood to tap into the experiences of adolescent fathers.

The effect of income on teenage risky sexual behaviour is the idea that teens from higher-income households have better future outlooks than their peers, so they behave in ways that will protect their future.¹⁸ Teenagers from wealthy families have been shown to have better health and more tremendous academic success than their counterparts, predicting better futures for them in terms of longevity, health, economic well-being, and overall quality of life. This is because they have more optimistic futures, which makes them less likely to partake in risky behaviours since becoming pregnant or contracting Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) could result in significant opportunity costs.¹⁹ This shows the role that family structure and background play in influencing teenage parenthood. In this view, most teenage fathers engage in risky behaviours to prove their masculinity and be seen as one who follows and respects culture.

Biological Responsibilities

The responsibilities of fatherhood involve taking care of and providing for the child. This calls for much sacrifice from the parents. Firstly, the independence of the teenage parent is immediately and abruptly curtailed by committing oneself to earning income, followed by a life overburdened by work. All these constrain the time spent with the child.²⁰ The tension between the competing demands of parental time is not unique to adolescent parents. Leath corroborates this assertion by arguing that three-quarters of parents often wish for more family time.²¹ This shows that being an active father and being involved as a responsible father is not easy. As a result, young fathers often have financial, cultural, and relational problems.²² All these views are explored to determine the role of culture in influencing teenage fatherhood. This is the case because biological responsibilities align with the cultural expectations that a man is responsible for providing for his children.

Socio-cultural Expectations

Umme and Nduna postulate that gender and cultural norms are used to position the teenage father within provider status.²³ Being a teenage father does not provide immunity from the cultural demands and payment of 'inhlawulo'. One way in which African men negotiate their financial lack is to claim sexual prowess and multiple partners.²⁴ This means that teenage boys can use love to boost their masculinity or to prove their manhood, and having a baby also forms part of supporting their masculinity. Furthermore, culture plays an influential role in teenagers becoming parents early.²⁵ Therefore, this study needs to explore the cultural expectations of teenage boys at Eldorado and the influence that culture has on teenage boys' becoming fathers at an early age. The negotiation of fatherhood is a consequence of and shapes male power, thus serving as a powerful site to express masculinity.²⁶ In KwaZulu-Natal, as is the case elsewhere, expressions of masculinity and the cultural

¹⁸ Zainab Alimoradi et al., "Empowerment of Adolescent Girls for Sexual and Reproductive Health Care: A Qualitative Study," *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 21, no. 4 (2017): 80–92.

¹⁹ Alimoradi et al., "Empowerment of Adolescent Girls for Sexual and Reproductive Health Care: A Qualitative Study."

²⁰ K. Tuffin, G. Rouch, and K. Frewin, *Constructing Adolescent Parenthood: Responsibilities and Intergenerational Repair* (Routledge, 2010).

²¹ Leath, "Being Better than My Dad: A Qualitative Case Study of One African American Father's Journey with Parenthood and Intergenerational Change."

²² Hendricks, Swartz, and Bhana, "Why Young Men in South Africa Plan to Become Teenage Fathers: Implications for the Development of Masculinities within Contexts of Poverty."

²³ Jasmine Habiba Umme and Mzikazi Nduna, "Parenting in Bangladesh: A Review of the Literature from 2006 to 2018," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 53, no. 1 (2022): 76–103.

²⁴ M. Hunter, *Love in the Time of AIDS: Inequality, Gender, and Rights in South Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

²⁵ Umme and Nduna, "Parenting in Bangladesh: A Review of the Literature from 2006 to 2018."

²⁶ Bhana and Nkani, "When African Teenagers Become Fathers: Culture, Materiality and Masculinity."

ideals of fatherhood attach significant power to breadwinning status, which Hunter, in a study of Zulu men in South Africa (SA), calls ‘provider masculinity’.²⁷ Therefore, it is maintained that masculinity goes beyond breadwinning status, although it does not count for sexual prowess; the demonstration of power is influenced by the availability of cultural repertoires and resources.²⁸ When men are not able to fulfil cultural expectations such as payment for damages, the girl’s family often takes the responsibility to dismiss the father of the child as useless. Young fathers usually experience the adverse effects of not legitimising non-marital childbearing through ‘*inhlawulo*’ (i.e., damages paid to the family of a woman who became pregnant out of wedlock).²⁹ The above assertions create space for this paper to question the influence of culture and masculinity on the experiences of teenage fathers in parenthood.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this study drew mainly on the Masculinity theory developed by R.W. Connell, known for her influential work ‘*Masculinities*’ in which she introduces the concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’.³⁰ This term refers to the culturally exalted forms of masculinity that are often seen as the ideal, while other forms are subordinated or marginalised. The reason behind exploring masculinity theories is to understand how societal and cultural pressures dictate the behaviours and roles deemed appropriate for men, influencing various aspects of male identity and experience, such as teenage fatherhood.

Delving into the intricate layers of masculinity, culture, and teenage fatherhood leads to uncovering a complex interplay where societal norms and personal identity clash and intertwine. This dynamic is crucial in comprehending the challenges and expectations faced by young fathers. Applying masculinity theory to this article on teenage fatherhood in South Africa provides a pivotal framework for understanding how young fathers navigate these complexities. At the heart of this exploration is the concept of hegemonic masculinity,³¹ which suggests that dominant societal expectations significantly shape the behaviours and identities of men and boys, creating a hierarchy of masculinities that privileges certain norms over others.

The hegemonic model of masculinity, with its emphasis on traits like strength, stoicism, and the capacity to provide, often places young fathers in conflict with societal expectations. Traditional narratives around masculinity and fatherhood advocate for a sequential life course: education, career, then parenthood—leaving little room for deviations such as teenage parenthood.³² According to Grave, et.al., the clash of these expectations with the reality of teenage fathers challenges the conventional paradigms of masculinity.³³ This necessitates a critical re-evaluation of what it means to be a man and a father in contemporary society, a re-evaluation that this study aims to encourage with utmost urgency and importance. Masculinity theory delves into how societal expectations influence the behaviour and identity of men and boys within a specific cultural and historical context. The concept of hegemonic masculinity, as outlined by Connell, underscores the significant role of dominant societal expectations in shaping the behaviour and identity of men.³⁴ This suggests that certain cultural norms and ideals regarding how men should act and express themselves are perpetuated within society, ultimately influencing men's actions and self-perception.

The study focuses on the intersection of race, economic inequality, and cultural expectations and provides a nuanced understanding of teenage fatherhood. It highlights how these young fathers navigate their identities within a complex web of socio-political and cultural forces. Thus, applying

²⁷ Hunter, *Love in the Time of AIDS: Inequality, Gender, and Rights in South Africa*.

²⁸ Umme and Nduna, “Parenting in Bangladesh: A Review of the Literature from 2006 to 2018.”

²⁹ M. V. Malinga, “Precarious Employment and Fathering Practices among African Men” (University of South Africa, 2015).

³⁰ Robert W Connell and James W Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829–59.

³¹ Connell and Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept.”

³² Rita Grave et al., “A Meta-Synthesis about the Study of Men’s Sexual Behavior through the Lens of Hegemonic Masculinity,” *Psicologia* 34, no. 2 (2020): 225–44.

³³ Grave et al., “A Meta-Synthesis about the Study of Men’s Sexual Behavior through the Lens of Hegemonic Masculinity.”

³⁴ Connell and Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept.”

masculinity theory, particularly the concepts of hegemonic masculinity and performative gender, offers valuable insights into the motivations, challenges, and aspirations of teenage fathers in South Africa and the socio-economic and cultural contexts that influence their experiences of fatherhood.

METHODOLOGY

This study has adopted a qualitative research approach. Within this approach, it is easier to understand the social world through the teenage fathers' lenses and realities. Using the qualitative approach, the study was also able to draw from phenomenology as a research design, in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants, or teenage fathers in the context of this study.³⁵

For the data, this study has relied on semi-structured interviews of four adolescent fathers, who were learners at Mphengwa Secondary School in Blouberg Municipality in Limpopo Province. This sample size was guided by saturation of the data, and was drawn using purposive and snowball sampling. These learners were selected after gaining access to the school and learners formally from the School Management Team (SMT). These learners at Mphengwa School are primarily from low-income families with socio-economic issues in their communities. The participants were aged between 15 and 20 years old and were all Africans who spoke Sepedi (home language) and English (First Additional language at school and medium of instruction). The selection was made through the assistance of Life Orientation teachers from the school. The idea was to find out from the teenage fathers their experiences of parenthood, focusing on culture and masculinity. In addition to coming from very poor background, most of the participants depended on their parents to economically cater for most of their children's needs.

During the interviews, the researchers employed mostly face-to-face interviews method. All the interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. They were also conducted both in English and Sepedi and later transcribed. The interviews were recorded using an audiotape, and translated. For the presentation of the data, pseudonyms such Participant 1, 2, 3 and 4 have been used to protect the participants.

Thematic analysis was employed as a data analysis method in this paper as it allows the researcher an opportunity to break down the data into meaningful elements, characteristics, and structures.³⁶ During this process, the researchers placed units of meaning into categories, and developed themes about the research question. The analysis was conducted using the six phases of conducting thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke.³⁷ These phases include becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report. This is crucial as we aim to expand this argument through an analysis of the experiences of teenage fathers and how resources such as culture influence masculine identity and aspirations for teenage fatherhood.

In addition, several ethical principles, as approved by the University of Venda Research Ethics Committee were followed throughout the study. These include: (a) the provision of clear and correct information about the aim and purpose of the study to the participants, before the commencement of the data collection process; (b) the assurance of informed consent and voluntary participation of the participants throughout the study; (c) the avoidance of any form of harm on the participants, which entailed protecting and hiding their identity both during the study and while reporting the findings. In fact, all data in the study have been anonymized. None, other than the three researchers involved in the study has access to the data.

³⁵ Raj Kumar Bhardwaj, "Institutional Repository Literature: A Bibliometric Analysis," *Science & Technology Libraries* 33, no. 2 (2014): 185–202.

³⁶ D.E. Gray, *Doing Research in the Real World* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2009).

³⁷ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Few important themes emerged from the analysis of data. These include family background, Cultural influence on teenage fathers, cultural influence on teenage fathers and burden on teenagers' parents.

Family Background

Family is a fundamental institution in the lives of young people. Most young people in this article revealed that their families have never been a bad influence in their lives. However, these teenage fathers affirmed that having a child is considered an attribute that separates boys from men in a community. This shows that cultures influence defining one's masculinity while promoting teenage parenthood. This agrees with Dery's view that teenage boys can use love to boost their masculinity or to prove their manhood, and having a child also forms part of supporting masculinity.³⁸ It was also revealed that when teenagers' age mates are having children, and they don't, they are made to feel that they have a problem. This means that the culture where these teenagers grew up plays a significant role in young boys' becoming parents early, as being a father defines one's masculinity in society.³⁹ Evidently, their families have always wished them well. In addition, the following are the extracts which allude to the influence of family background or otherwise on teenage fathers:

Participant 1:

"I was raised by both parents, who never influenced me to be a teen father. I just started engaging in sexual activities at a young age; I was playing or having fun because my girlfriend was staying alone in her room. I used to sneak out at night sometimes to spend time with her, and if my parents realised that I was not in, I would lie that I was with friends. And after finding out that my girlfriend was pregnant, I was terrified."

Participant 2 also concurs with Participant 1:

"I was raised by both parents, who did not influence me to become a teen father. It was just peer- pressure because when you have a child, they respect you and call you a real man. I even suggested that she abort the baby because it was never planned, but suddenly, I had second thoughts about it. But it was a mistake."

Participant 4 also agrees by saying:

"Both parents raised me, but not so long after having a baby, my father passed on. I think I was influenced by peer pressure because all I wanted was to fit in. You know when you chill (sic) out with boys, and they tell you not to call them by their names since they are fathers, they are like, "Don't call me John, I'm Lesego's father; it comes with a lot of pressure to the one who has no child."

Participant 3 attests:

"I was raised by a single parent (mother), and it never had a bad influence on me to be a teen father. I was playing, which was a big mistake because it was unplanned."

In line with the above assertions, it is evident that various factors influence teenage fatherhood because of family background. However, most findings contradict Trivedi, et. al.'s assertion that their familial background influences young men's chances of becoming fathers early.⁴⁰ Adolescent boys from low-income families are more likely than those from higher-income families to report that their partner has become pregnant or given birth to their child. Participants in this study indicated that their

³⁸ Isaac Dery and John Kuumuori Ganle, "'Who Knows, You May Overpower Him': Narratives and Experiences of Masculinities among the Dagaaba Youth of Northwestern Ghana," *The Journal of Men's Studies* 28, no. 1 (2020): 82–100.

³⁹ Yeukai Chideya and Fatima Williams, "Adolescent Fathers: Exploring Their Perceptions Of Their Role As Parent," *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 49, no. 2 (May 26, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.15270/49-2-65>.

⁴⁰ D. Trivedi et al., "Early Fatherhood: A Mapping of the Evidence Base Relating to Pregnancy Prevention and Parenting Support," *Health Education Research* 24, no. 6 (December 1, 2009): 999–1028, <https://doi.org/10.1093/her/cyp025>.

family background did not influence them in any way to become teenage fathers; however, culture and social contracts did. They alluded that most of the influence was from their peers; they wanted to fit in, be viewed as cool, and gain the manhood title in their circle. As a result, teenage fathers' contestation is in line with Hofferth and Goldscheider, who state that familial background and socioeconomic status do not affect young males' and females' early transition into parenthood.⁴¹ On the contrary, other researchers have suggested that familial history and socio-economic status had a more significant impact on teenage pregnancy experiences for girls than for boys.

Cultural influence on teenage fathers

Culture is an essential aspect of life in any community. However, many teenagers postulated that they do not see culture's role in their lives; some stated that they do not have culture. Umme and Nduna postulate that gender and cultural norms are used to position the teenage father within the provider status.⁴² Being a teenage father does not provide immunity from the cultural demands and payment of *'inhlawulo.'*

Participant 1 stated that:

"My culture has no impact on me as a teenage father. However, having a baby at a young age is against the cultural expectations of young boys. If you become a father at a young age, your parents can even disown you. My girlfriend's pregnancy also revealed that my family and my girlfriend's family are relatives. But they sat down as adults and sorted it out."

Participant 2 said:

"No, my culture has no impact on me becoming a father. Our culture expects us as teen boys to be educated and successful before we become fathers. Our parents expect us to grow as responsible individuals and be accountable and responsible for our actions."

Participant 3 stated:

"I don't have culture. I don't think it played a role in me becoming a teen father. I don't think culture expects anything from us as young boys. However, culture is important to those who believe in it."

Participant 4 said:

"I think my culture has an impact, although it is not much of it, because after the child was born, my girlfriend's family came to my home to report the damages, and my family paid."

In most cultures, the father's involvement in a child's life is a negotiated customary process which outlines the significance of the payment of *inhlawulo* in mediating a father's involvement in his child's life. However, it is vital to remember that this tradition evolves as people who follow its rules change their lifestyles and move between cultural expectations and state legislation.⁴³ The participants in this study revealed that their culture played no role in their early parenthood. Instead, they assume that they went rebellious toward their cultural expectations as teenagers when they transitioned into parenthood at an early age or schooling age. Masculinity theory, which investigates how societal norms and expectations shape men's behaviours and identities, can shed light on this narrative.⁴⁴ In this context, the participants' decision to become parents at such a young age was motivated by a desire to assert their masculinity differently from the cultural norms and expectations they had grown up with.

This argument calls into question the idea that culture is the only determinant of early parenthood among teenage fathers. Instead, it implies that the participants actively rejected or rebelled

⁴¹ Sandra L. Hofferth and Frances Goldscheider, "Family Structure and the Transition to Early Parenthood," *Demography* 47, no. 2 (May 1, 2010): 415–37, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dem.0.0102>.

⁴² Umme and Nduna, "Parenting in Bangladesh: A Review of the Literature from 2006 to 2018."

⁴³ Mkwanzzi, Mkhwanazi, and Bhana, "Teenage Mothers and Fathers: A Demographic Perspective."

⁴⁴ Connell and Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept."

against the cultural expectations placed on them, possibly to assert their masculinity differently. This behaviour could be interpreted as a form of defiance against long-standing cultural norms that might have put more emphasis on different facets of masculinity, like financial security or career advancement, before starting a family.

However, culture is critical in grooming teenage fathers into responsible fathers. This is portrayed in the study conducted by Swartz and Bhana on *Inhlawulo*, which revealed that the increased popularity of premarital sex, “*inhlawulo*” was transitioning from a payment required for taking a woman's virginity to a payment expected for making her pregnant.⁴⁵ With that trend, young boys had to think of the consequences of having unprotected sex, which could lead to pregnancy. This is a way of building and shaping young people's demeanour. When developing interventions to involve teenage fathers, special consideration should be given to social, cultural, and economic factors because of the complexity of these interconnected social processes in generating patterns of vulnerability for teenage fathers' involvement in and support of their children.

The burden on teenagers' parents

The emerging sentiment in this theme is that teenagers cannot care for their children as they are still at school and have no means of income. It has been stated that the parents of these teenagers have no choice but to care for their grandchildren as their sons and daughters, who are parents to those children, are not working. It becomes their burden to ensure the child's needs are met daily. Teenagers attested to this argument as follows:

Participant 1 stated:

“I'm not supporting the child, but my parents are. And sometimes, when I ask for something for myself, they tell me they can't support me and my child.”

Participant 2 concurred by saying:

“I'm not financially involved as I'm still at school and working, but either way, my parents are taking care of her. I would be happy if they cared for her until I finished school. If I were working, I would take care of her alone.”

Participant 3 also attested to this argument by saying:

“My girlfriend's mother is taking care of her.”

Participant 4 differs from others as he said:

“I'm taking care of my child financially. I do piece or odd jobs at people's homes during school holidays and some weekends and have petty cash to buy anything needed. But my family and my girlfriend's family also play a huge role in maintaining the baby. I can say she is well taken care of.”

Many parents in South Africa face considerable barriers in their efforts to fulfil parenting tasks. As if that was not enough, they are expected to help their teenage children raise their kids as they are not economically independent, and most are young fathers still in high school.⁴⁶ This is postulated by the participants in this study, who confirmed that they cannot provide for their children financially since they are still at school. This puts more pressure on these teenagers' parents as they must take care of their children and grandchildren fully. For instance, poverty increases the stress that parents experience when trying to provide for and protect their children and makes emotionally distant, harsh, and inconsistent parenting more likely. This means that some teenage fathers may be exposed to unstable family environments because of the challenges experienced by their parents. Parents living in poverty are also likely to be poorly educated and thus less able to support their children's educational

⁴⁵ Swartz and Bhana, *Teenage Tata: Voices of Young Fathers in South Africa*.

⁴⁶ Ward, Brown, and Hyde-Dryden, *Assessing Parental Capacity to Change When Children Are on the Edge of Care: An Overview of Current Research Evidence: Research Report*.

development.⁴⁷ Poverty, by definition, also reduces the ability of parents to provide adequate nutrition and to access good educational opportunities for children on the consistent basis necessary for healthy development.⁴⁸ Therefore, family background determines whether teenage fathers can provide for their children financially. This includes their financial ability through the support or help of their parents. As a result, this results in provider masculinity, which is a sociocultural concept that identifies men as providers, especially to their children.⁴⁹ This affirms that culture plays a significant role in identifying masculinity, which often leads to early fatherhood, as asserted by the participants in this study.

Poor performance at school

The teenage fathers in this study revealed that they started underperforming at school due to the stress caused by their parenthood. Some reported that they have decided to settle for less by abandoning their dream careers to get a quick job to support their children. Their sentiments are shared below:

Participant 1:

“Yes, I’m very affected academically. Sometimes, I feel stressed thinking about my child, eventually shifting my focus to schoolwork. I never wanted people to know that I’m a father, my siblings betrayed me, and I feel ashamed in public. It stresses me.”

Participant 2:

“I’m affected because I think even if I pass my grade 12 very well, I might not be able to follow my dream career. I will go for some short courses and find a quick job to play the role of father to my child. It is very stressful, but I’m fine now because I accepted the situation. Back then, I was struggling because I was wondering what I was going to give or how to feed her. Immediately after birth, I realised that it is not as easy as I thought, but acceptance does it all to be a better person.”

DISCUSSION

This section discusses the study's significant findings, which explored the challenges facing teenage fathers in parenthood at Mphengwa Secondary School.

Family Background

The study found that both parents adequately raised most teenagers in the study, and they did not regard their family background as a bad influence on their behaviour. However, the culture and practices embedded in society influenced teenage fathers to be fathers at a young age as they wanted to fit in and be called men instead of boys. Many teenage fathers grew up in different family circumstances. Applying masculinity theory effectively supports the finding that the culture in which teenagers grow up plays a significant role in young boys becoming parents at an early age. According to Chan, masculinity theory, cultural norms and expectations shape societal definitions of masculinity.⁵⁰ The role of a father is closely linked to the concept of masculinity in many societies, and this link can profoundly influence young boys as they navigate their journey into adulthood. It is argued that the negotiation of fatherhood results from and shapes male power, thus serving as a powerful site for expressing masculinity.⁵¹ In other ethnic groups in South Africa, expressions of masculinity and cultural ideals of fatherhood point to significant power to breadwinning status, as Hunter explains.⁵²

⁴⁷ HB Ferguson, S Bovaird, and MP Mueller, “The Impact of Poverty on Educational Outcomes for Children,” *Paediatrics & Child Health* 12, no. 8 (October 2007): 701–6, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pch/12.8.701>.

⁴⁸ Ferguson, Bovaird, and Mueller, “The Impact of Poverty on Educational Outcomes for Children.”

⁴⁹ Bhana and Nkani, “When African Teenagers Become Fathers: Culture, Materiality and Masculinity.”

⁵⁰ Jason Chan, “‘Am I Masculine Enough?’: Queer Filipino College Men and Masculinity,” *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* 54, no. 1 (2017): 82–94.

⁵¹ Jennifer Beggs Weber, “Becoming Teen Fathers: Stories of Teen Pregnancy, Responsibility, and Masculinity,” *Gender & Society* 26, no. 6 (2012): 900–921.

⁵² Hunter, *Love in the Time of AIDS: Inequality, Gender, and Rights in South Africa*.

It is more often the case that their mothers were young, and their fathers were not engaged or negatively engaged, and then social constructs play a central role in defining what it means to be a man.⁵³ The habit of poor parenting practices becoming transmitted across generations raises essential questions about how to interrupt negative intergenerational patterns and help young parents develop the parenting skills that their parents may have lacked.⁵⁴

However, educators disagreed with teenage fathers in their view that most teenage fathers were raised in single-parent families with single mothers in most cases. This brought attention to the fact that the lack of a father figure is unsuitable for the development of teenage boys as it influences them to act like fathers from early childhood, and they lack someone with whom they can relate. Cabrera *et al.* support this, contending that many teenage fathers grow up in different family circumstances.⁵⁵ They further state that the teenage fathers' situation may be because their mothers were young and their fathers were not engaged or negatively engaged.

This study showed that well-off families also play a significant role in teenagers becoming fathers at a young age. Educators in this study revealed that teenagers from well-off families tend to be fathers earlier than their counterparts from disadvantaged families; they outlined that these boys use their family status or economic background to lure young girls from poor backgrounds into being in a relationship with them. However, this is disputed by McLaughlin and Kaplan who postulate that the effect of income on teenagers exposes them to risky sexual behaviour.⁵⁶ This is because teenagers from higher-income households have better future outlooks than their peers. So, they behave in ways that will protect their future. Teenagers from wealthy families have been shown to have better health and more tremendous academic success than their counterparts, predicting better futures for them in terms of longevity, health, economic well-being, and overall quality of life.⁵⁷

Biological Responsibilities

This study found that most teenage fathers in the study were still at school and not employed. Therefore, this makes it impossible for them to maintain or support their children. Some of the teenage fathers reiterated that if they were working, they would probably take good care of their children. They mentioned that they wanted to be involved in the upbringing of their children. However, the above sentiments differ from the views expressed by Bhana and Nkani.⁵⁸ This scholar states that teenage fathers are selfish and intentionally impregnate girls with nothing to lose than gain status.⁵⁹ Some teenagers plan to take short courses to find quick jobs and support their kids.⁶⁰ In addition, Makhanya postulates that teenage fathers, including African American adolescent fathers, are more likely to be victims of child labour or to enter the workplace earlier than their peers, and they are more likely to drop out of school in search of employment to take responsibility for their children.⁶¹ This is influenced by the impact of early parenthood, where they have to take responsibility and play a parental role in their children.

This narrative reflects the concept of "fatherhood" as a traditional masculinity marker, as Bhana and Nkani argue.⁶² Men are frequently expected to fulfil roles such as providers and protectors, including becoming fathers. Refusing to be addressed by their given names and insisting on being referred to as fathers can be interpreted as an attempt by these men to assert their masculinity and the

⁵³ Ward, Brown, and Hyde-Dryden, *Assessing Parental Capacity to Change When Children Are on the Edge of Care: An Overview of Current Research Evidence: Research Report*.

⁵⁴ Moore et al., "Early Childhood Development and the Social Determinants of Health Inequities."

⁵⁵ Natasha J Cabrera et al., "Low-Income, Nonresident Father Involvement with Their Toddlers: Variation by Fathers' Race and Ethnicity," *Journal of Family Psychology* 22, no. 4 (2008): 643.

⁵⁶ Caitlin McLaughlin and Valerie Kaplan, "Risky Business: The Effect of Family Income on Teen Risky Sexual Behavior" (Duke University, Durham, 2008).

⁵⁷ Malinga, "Precarious Employment and Fathering Practices among African Men."

⁵⁸ Bhana and Nkani, "When African Teenagers Become Fathers: Culture, Materiality and Masculinity."

⁵⁹ Umme and Nduna, "Parenting in Bangladesh: A Review of the Literature from 2006 to 2018."

⁶⁰ Malinga, "Precarious Employment and Fathering Practices among African Men."

⁶¹ Thembelihle Brenda Makhanya, "Young Unmarried Fathers in the Hibiscus Coast Local Municipality: Experiences and Perceptions of Fatherhood" (University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2016).

⁶² Bhana and Nkani, "When African Teenagers Become Fathers: Culture, Materiality and Masculinity."

responsibilities that come with it. This affirms that culture defines masculinity in that teenage fathers who are unable to support their children are regarded as not being man enough. According to Elliott, the gendered perspective recognises the importance of redefining masculinity as including nurturing, caregiving, and emotional openness.⁶³ Therefore, encouraging teenage fathers to embrace these aspects of masculinity can lead to healthier relationships with their children and partners.

Teenage fathers in this study asserted that they are essential to their children even though they cannot care for them. They stated that every child deserves to be raised by both parents, regardless of the father's financial background. They further said that every child should know their birth parents. This aligns with Louw's argument that the biological father should also be given the right to acquire parental responsibilities and rights in Sections 20 and 21 of the Children's Act No 38 of 2005.⁶⁴ The father may claim entitlement to the same rights as the biological mother based on the equality provisions contained in Section 9 of the Constitution. This is also affirmed by Pittman, et.al., who assert that encouraging teenage fathers to engage in parenting actively can positively affect their sense of self and identity.⁶⁵ Actively participating in caregiving responsibilities can challenge traditional gender roles and promote a more equal division of labour within the family.

Socio-cultural Expectations

It was found in the study that culture plays a significant role in teenagers becoming fathers at a young age. The educators in the study revealed that culturally, when boys come from the mountain (initiation school), they are regarded as men, and they often try to prove their manhood by having a baby. This agrees with Bhana and Nkani's view that teenage boys can use love to boost their masculinity or to prove their manhood, and having a baby also forms part of supporting masculinity while Omukunyi, further supported the above narrative by saying that Male children who went through the entire initiation school rituals and endured great pain are considered to be brave men.⁶⁶ It was also revealed that when teenagers' age mates have children and they do not have, they are made to feel that they have a problem. This means peer pressure plays a significant role in young boys becoming parents early.⁶⁷ Evidently, culture plays an influential role in teenagers becoming parents at an early age.

However, teenage fathers in this study revealed that the culture never influenced them to engage in sexual activities at a young age. Although teenagers may assert that culture did not directly affect their early sexual behaviour, cultural norms and practices frequently come into play once such incidents take place. Umme and Nduna argue that management of the consequences of early pregnancy can be determined by these norms, including the payment of damages and lobola, which are seen in these cultural contexts as crucial steps in the maturation process.⁶⁸ Situations that are complex and difficult for young people can result from the conflict between cultural expectations and personal beliefs. They stated that it was just peer pressure. However, they confirmed that after having children, in terms of the culture, they were expected to pay damages for impregnating a girl out of wedlock. Once they have paid damages, they are granted full access to their children. This is in line with the views of Makhanya, who states that when men cannot fulfil cultural expectations such as payment of damages, the girl's family often takes the responsibility for dismissing the child's father as useless.⁶⁹ Similar to how things are usually done, participants showed signs of conflict with their cultural and masculine identities. On the one hand, due to ingrained beliefs associating masculinity with power and success, social and cultural pressures, and a desire to distinguish them from socially constructed

⁶³ Karla Elliott, "Caring Masculinities: Theorizing an Emerging Concept," *Men and Masculinities* 19, no. 3 (2016): 240–59.

⁶⁴ Anne Louw, "The Constitutionality of a Biological Father's Recognition as a Parent," *Potchefstroom Electronic Law Journal* 13, no. 3 (2010): 155–206.

⁶⁵ Karen Johnson Pittman et al., "Preventing Problems, Promoting Development, Encouraging Engagement," in *Washington, DC: Forum for Youth Investment* (Citeseer, 2011).

⁶⁶ Bhana and Nkani, "When African Teenagers Become Fathers: Culture, Materiality and Masculinity"; Bernard Omukunyi, "Understanding the Bamasaba Men and Masculinity in Response to the Safe Medical Male Circumcision Policy in Uganda," *Masculinities & Social Change* 11, no. 3 (2022): 237–61.

⁶⁷ Jacobus Stephan Van der Watt, "Images of Men and Masculinities within Cultural Contexts: A Pastoral Assessment" (Stellenbosch University, 2007).

⁶⁸ Umme and Nduna, "Parenting in Bangladesh: A Review of the Literature from 2006 to 2018."

⁶⁹ Makhanya, "Young Unmarried Fathers in the Hibiscus Coast Local Municipality: Experiences and Perceptions of Fatherhood."

behaviour, they were compelled to act in a traditionally masculine manner. On the other hand, there was a desire to reject traditional masculinity's rigidity and constraints, to embrace cultural fluidity, and to be authentic and unaffected by cultural expectations. Due to exposure to new contexts and environments, these tensions resulted from teenagers incorporating new knowledge about culture and masculinity into their daily lives.

Young fathers often experience the adverse effects of not legitimising non-marital childbearing through *inhlawulo* (which refers to damages paid to the family of a woman who became pregnant out of wedlock by the father of the future child). This means that when these teenage fathers do not comply with cultural expectations, they face consequences, including the inability to visit or care for the child.⁷⁰ Furthermore, Englar-Carlson and Kiselica assert that traditional notions of masculinity often emphasise traits like strength, autonomy, and provider roles.⁷¹ Therefore, teenage fathers may feel pressured to conform to these norms, striving to demonstrate their ability to support their child and partner financially. This can lead to stress and inadequacy if they cannot meet these expectations. Similar to how things are usually done, participants showed signs of conflict with their cultural and masculine identities. On the one hand, due to ingrained beliefs associating masculinity with power and success, social and cultural pressures, and a desire to distinguish them from socially constructed behaviour, they were compelled to act in a traditionally masculine manner. On the other hand, there was a desire to reject traditional masculinity's rigidity and constraints, to embrace cultural fluidity, and to be authentic and unaffected by cultural expectations. Due to exposure to new contexts and environments, these tensions resulted from teenagers incorporating new knowledge about culture and masculinity into their daily lives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the discussion, it is recommended that the Department of Education (DoE) initiates a working relationship with all legal initiation schools in the province and the country at large to ensure that teenagers who go there are given proper education on manhood, which in return will not affect them academically. The DoE must further ensure that teenagers are taught how to be responsible individuals and make great fathers in the future rather than just making them believe that being a man means having children.

CONCLUSION

The study has examined the experiences of teenage fathers at Eldorado village in the Limpopo province of South Africa. Based on the experiences of teenage fathers, the study concludes that teenage fathers may have been well-raised in their homes, but however have been influenced by mostly peer pressure, to engage in sexual activities at a young age, which resulted in parenthood. The peer pressure is further compounded by the initiation school. Coming from the initiation, where young men are socialised into believing that they are 'men', young men actively seek to prove their manhood through sex and romantic relationship with women. The result of this is often teenage fatherhood.

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