

Men's perception of the experience of parenting in adolescence: a bioecological perspective



Percepções de homens sobre a vivência da paternidade na adolescência: uma perspectiva bioecológica
Percepción de hombres sobre la vivencia de la paternidad en la adolescencia: una perspectiva bioecológica

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ABSTRACT

Objective: to know the perception of men of the experience of parenting during adolescence.

Method: a qualitative study conducted with five men who experienced paternity during adolescence. Data were collected by means of in-depth interviews at the homes of the subjects in August 2013, in a city of southern Brazil. The data were analysed with the theoretical model of Urie Bronfenbrenner.

Results: paternity in adolescence was a coming of age experience that triggered reflection on the role of the father and his duties. The referenced microsystem was the family and it influenced the development of parenthood. Paternity has implications during adolescence and repercussions throughout the lives of the subjects.

Conclusion: it is important to introduce the topic of fatherhood in the health and education systems in order for adolescents to exercise parenting in a healthy manner. Nursing plays an important role because it can assist this population and target attention toward the singularities of parenthood.

Keywords: Paternity. Adolescent. Father-child relations. Qualitative research.

RESUMO

Objetivo: conhecer a percepção de homens sobre a vivência da paternidade na adolescência.

Método: estudo qualitativo, realizado com cinco homens que vivenciaram a paternidade durante a adolescência. A coleta dos dados ocorreu por meio de entrevista em profundidade, no domicílio, em agosto de 2013, em um município do Sul do Brasil. Analisaram-se os dados com o modelo teórico de Urie Bronfenbrenner.

Resultados: viver a paternidade na adolescência foi uma experiência de amadurecimento e reflexões a respeito do papel de pai e suas atribuições. A família foi o microsistema referenciado e influenciou o desenvolvimento da paternidade. Identificou-se o quanto as implicações da paternidade na adolescência repercutiram ao longo de suas vidas.

Conclusão: é importante introduzir a temática paternidade nos sistemas de saúde, para que o adolescente possa exercitá-la de maneira saudável. A enfermagem tem papel relevante, pois pode acolhê-los e direcionar o olhar para suas singularidades.

Palavras-chave: Paternidade. Adolescente. Relações pai-filho. Pesquisa qualitativa

RESUMEN

Objetivo: conocer la percepción de los hombres acerca de la experiencia de la paternidad en la adolescencia.

Método: estudio cualitativo, realizado con cinco hombres que han experimentado la paternidad en la adolescencia. La recolección de datos ocurrió a través de entrevistas en profundidad, en casa, en agosto de 2013, en una ciudad en el sur de Brasil. Los datos se analizaron con el modelo teórico de Urie Bronfenbrenner.

Resultados: la experiencia de paternidad en la adolescencia fue un crecimiento como hombre y estimuló reflexiones sobre el papel de padre. La familia fue el microsistema referenciado y influyó el desarrollo de la paternidad. Se identificó cuanto las implicaciones de la paternidad en la adolescencia repercutieron a lo largo de sus vidas.

Conclusión: es importante introducir el tema de la paternidad en los sistemas de salud, para que el adolescente pueda ejercitarla de manera saludable. La enfermería tiene un papel importante, ya que puede acogerlos y dirigir la visión a sus singularidades.

Palabras clave: Paternidad. Adolescente. Relaciones padre-hijo. Investigación cualitativa.

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■ INTRODUCTION

For men, fatherhood is a phase of new experiences in which they learn how to express and deal with different emotions. This phenomenon may cause constructions and reconstructions of the father role, which are commonly achieved through the active participation of fathers in the pregnancy of their partners. These modifications may be linked to the social meaning that the child represents to fathers, such as proof of virility, acknowledgement of power, the role of family provider and responsibilities to family and society⁽¹⁾.

Fatherhood has become a major issue in the social policies of some countries, especially when it comes to adolescent parents due to the additional pressures and problems directly related to their age and the assumption that they are unprepared for the demands of fatherhood⁽²⁾. The insertion of adolescents in the process of becoming fathers generally causes changes and adaptations of the psycho-social order, thus forming new roles for the organization of their lives⁽³⁾.

When individuals experience fatherhood and adolescence at the same time, they usually face difficulties because their chronological age may prevent them from completing their studies and, in many cases, from reaching professional stability⁽⁴⁾. These aspects of vulnerability for adolescent parenthood frequently involve educational precariousness and abandonment, remuneration without an employment bond and economic dependence on the family⁽⁵⁻⁶⁾.

It is essential to look at the social relations of adolescent fathers to grant visibility to their needs. Adolescents should receive support from their family, friends, and the health services for them to experience fatherhood in the best possible way.

In adolescent parenthood, the family is considered the main form of support because it is the core of the direct and meaningful interactions and experiences. The family is responsible for helping adolescents understand basic concepts and values by engaging in the performance of tasks and the social role⁽³⁾.

When adolescents experience parenthood, they are often full of doubts, anxieties, conflicts, and the ambivalence of being fathers and being adolescents. Therefore, expanding the knowledge on the perception that men have of adolescent parenting may qualify health professionals to provide better care for this population. By extending the focus of their attention and care to the singularities of the life cycle of men, these professionals can contribute to their insertion in public health policies.

Adolescent fathers are immersed in a phase of many transformations and concerns. Consequently, the ideal moment to investigate paternity experienced by adolescents is believed to be adulthood, given the greater maturity of adult men. Adult men can also address the changes experienced during the process of parenting in adolescence in relation to the changes they personally experienced.

The research question was the following: How do men perceive the experience of parenting in adolescence? The aim of this study is to know the perception of men of the experience of parenthood.

■ METHODS

This is an exploratory descriptive study with a qualitative approach. This paper is based on the data of a dissertation titled "*Percepção de homens sobre a vivência da paternidade na adolescência*"⁽⁷⁾. The participants were five men who experienced parenthood during adolescence. Data were collected individually at the home of each respondent in August of 2013 using in-depth interviews to gain further knowledge, better describe and explain the social phenomena and understand its entirety⁽⁸⁾.

The data were subjected to the snowballing technique, which is an intentional sampling method that defines a sample by means of indications from people who share common characteristics or know other people with common characteristics of interest to the study⁽⁹⁾. The starting point for selecting the participants was at the Primary Care Unit (UBS) in the peripheral area of a municipality in southern Brazil. The criteria for inclusion were: experienced parenthood between the ages of 10 and 19⁽¹⁰⁾; over 24 years old⁽¹¹⁾; residing in the urban perimeter of the municipality in question.

The data were subjected to content analysis⁽¹²⁾. The interviews were transcribed and the resulting data were grouped according to similarity of ideas and distributed into categories. We then identified the core meanings of the statements of the participants. These cores were interpreted and analyzed using the theoretical foundation of the Bioecological Model of Human Development of Urie Bronfenbrenner⁽¹³⁾.

We adopted the four key elements of the Bioecological Model of Human Development (BMHD): Process, Person, Time and Context⁽¹³⁾. The subject supports the use of the model since the adolescent father (person) goes through changes in time in search of an identity to express a new ongoing process (fatherhood), namely changes in role and context with the arrival of a child.

This theoretical model addresses the behaviour of humans (**person**) through relationships/interactions that are

presented to other people/objects/symbols and environments (**context**) during the cycle of human development (**process**) throughout the generations (**time**). It is believed that the multiple interactions that accompany and involve the process of parenting in adolescence are related to the components that define the BMHD⁽¹³⁾.

The **person** refers to certain biopsychological characteristics that are constructed during interactions with the environment. The **process** is built through the roles and activities of the developing person⁽¹³⁾.

Time involves the interactions and changes in the characteristics of the person and the environment throughout the life cycle of human development⁽¹³⁾. In this study, time was considered an important element because it allowed us to acquire further knowledge of fatherhood experienced in adolescence, since the adult male has already developed interactions, experiences and transitions in his relationships. **Context** is another important element for the developmental process to occur, and is found both in the more immediate environments in which the developing person lives and the more distant environments where the person does not participate but does establish relationships, and which have the power to influence the course of human development⁽¹³⁾.

This study was approved by the research ethics committee of the Faculdade de Enfermagem da Universidade Federal de Pelotas n° 333.830/2013, and observed Resolution 466/12 of the national health council of the Ministry of Health⁽¹⁴⁾. The participants signed two copies of an informed consent statement; one for the participant and one for the researcher. The anonymity of the participants was guaranteed and the men were identified with the fictitious names Roberto, Matthew, John, Rafael and Rodrigo.

■ RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data analysis led to the creation of a core theme: "Perceptions of men of the experience of parenting in adolescence", which is presented below.

It is important to introduce the five men who experienced parenthood in adolescence in order to understand the context in which the study took place. The age of the participants ranged from 29 to 34 years. Two of the men were still married to the mothers of their first child and three were single. Two had more children after adolescence. In relation to age, three of the men became fathers at the age of 17 and two at the age of 19. At the time of data collection, two of the men were attending college, three had completed their secondary education, and two were technical-level graduates.

The analysis of relevance to the present study and the theoretical model led to the emergence of three categories related to the perceptions of men who experienced fatherhood in adolescence, as follows: Developmental process of parenting in adolescence: changes and interactions; Family – a bond that supports the process of parenting in adolescence; Thoughts and feelings of the process of parenting in adolescence.

Developmental process of parenting in adolescence: changes and interactions

Fatherhood is constructed throughout development to the extent that the person interacts with other men in the exercise of being a father. Becoming an adolescent father leads to shifts in the manner in which the adolescent perceives and interacts with other people and his environment, so he acquires a broader, unique and valid notion of the ecological environment and is motivated or repressed to engage in activities that reveal his parenting skills⁽¹⁵⁾.

The accounts of Matthew and Roberto reveal that, despite the initial shock with the news of being fathers, they managed to start the development process of becoming fathers by assuming roles and skills and acquiring knowledge that they had not previously developed.

It was a shock at first [...] it didn't sink in. Wow! I'm going to be a father, am I going to have to change? Because I received my salary and spent it all on clothes, parties [...] but then I started to be more responsible with my own salary. I had to change my lifestyle. The responsibility was something that really changed (Matthew).

It was very complicated, I freaked out because I was only 16 [...] It was at that stage when I played football, partied, and then you realize it's all over. So for me it was a shock [...] I thought: now that I'm a father, how am I going to reconcile these two things? I had to jump that stage, I had to work to maintain the commitments with my son, pay the bills, buy things for him [...] (Roberto).

Fatherhood represented responsibility for Matthew and Roberto, and they were forced to change their habits and stop frequenting certain places to help care for and support their child. Other studies reveal the same feelings and changes in the lives of young people who have experienced parenthood^(1,4,16).

Based on the BMHD, when Matthew and Roberto became fathers they assumed the corresponding role and interacted in the contexts in which they were involved,

thus learning to develop new roles that accelerated their transition to adulthood.

In this sense, inclusion in the process of becoming a father causes changes and adaptations that are full of meanings, feelings and responsibilities for the construction of the new roles and for the organization of their lives^(3,5).

Fatherhood in adolescence is marked by various sentiments that range from satisfaction that a child is coming, loss of freedom, and not living and acting according to personal whims and desires⁽¹⁵⁻¹⁶⁾. The adolescent Matthew and Roberto realised they would have to give up experiences that gave them pleasure because of the new life they had undertaken.

The coming of a child can change the life of an adolescent and make him understand that by being a father he is now less of a child and more of an adult. Moreover, he perceives the changes that will incorporate new tasks and responsibilities into his life^(1,16).

[...] I never thought I'd see her when she was only a month old, and I was taking care of her, changing nappies. I never saw myself doing it, and we were had to assume a certain responsibility [...] at our age, building a home and having child is a lot harder [...] (John).

I didn't know what it was to be a father [...] I thought I wouldn't be able to be a dad, how can I support my child? I was completely dependent on my father [...] and what happens when my son asks me for things? What am I going to do? I had no way of knowing. It was hard, but I managed (Roberto).

These statements show the impact that the change of roles had on the experience of parenthood in adolescence. When adolescents⁽¹⁷⁾ become heads of families, they are confronted with the changing of roles within the home and assume responsibilities that are incompatible with their age and the special condition of being an individual who is still developing.

Consequently, a network of support for young people who are experiencing this stage of life becomes exceedingly important. The process of accepting fatherhood is slow and difficult for adolescents, since they need help that is based on dialogue, understanding and interaction with various contexts⁽³⁾.

However, it appears that Rafael had a hard time facing this process and believes he did not acquire the sense of responsibility to assume his role as a father.

[...] I always wanted to have children early, but I knew I couldn't because I lacked the skills, I was very irresponsible

[...] I was immature at 18 [...] maybe because I was an only child at the time [...] I was really spoiled by my mother and my grandmother [...] I had no responsibility as a father [...] my father also, I'm more or less like him, very irresponsible (Rafael).

Rafael's statement shows that the immaturity is related to the developmental process he experienced and the context in which he was raised, which made it difficult for him to develop his role as a father. The exercise of parenting was based on the absent/irresponsible experience of the father, which he reproduced in this adolescence. The context⁽¹³⁾ of a system can positively or negatively influence the characteristics of a person, and is the result of the interactions created within the environment.

The transitions needed to experience parenthood during adolescence are often accompanied by stress and emotional adjustments⁽²⁾. This situation was confirmed by Rodrigo's father, who reported he did not feel he was the father of the daughter he conceived during adolescence, thus showing a weakness to assume the tasks and responsibilities of parenting.

Total disappointment, at 17 [...] I wasn't prepared, I was very young, I knew nothing about life [...] Look, I only have one daughter [referring to the child he had at 23], the rest is just verbal [...] that is, the child is not in my name (Rodrigo).

When individuals are faced with difficulties or obstacles during the developmental process, they are forced to cope with situations that may help them overcome such difficulties or, contrarily, make them feel incapable of generating the energy to overcome the obstacles⁽¹⁴⁾.

Although Rodrigo claimed he does not consider the child he had in his adolescence his daughter, he frequently revealed that this situation was caused by the lack of interaction he had with the child and her mother.

It was just a one-night stand and it just happened [...] I've never seen the child, never participated, I have no contact, nothing! She doesn't even live here [...] another man became assumed the role of her father [...] (Rodrigo).

The fragility of Rodrigo in his interactions with his first daughter may not have favoured the development of his role as a father in adolescence. There were evidently obstacles in the ecological transition since, although his role changed in the face of society, Rodrigo did not interact or experience his role as a biological father.

For this, the father must engage in the activities of fatherhood, i.e. accept he is a father, carry out activities and maintain contact with the child on a regular basis. Father-son activities become increasingly complex, so reciprocity in these interactions, and interaction with other people and contexts throughout human development also become important.

Family – a bond that supports the process of parenting in adolescence

The participation and support of the family are important elements in the exercise of fatherhood. This microsystem^(3,15-16) provides the emotional and material support that adolescents need to assume their paternity.

The testimonies of Robert, John and Matthew stress the importance of the family in the experience of parenthood.

[...] I did a lot of things with the support of my family. Everything was new to me, my son stayed at home crying, then I would say: Mum, my son's crying ... And she would say: "Right, and he's your son!". I was like, he is my son, but ... [...] (Roberto).

Our mothers were present at all times, since the beginning of this insanity, of course, sometimes it was not understanding or criticizing, trying to help, giving advice, but always with us. The family itself makes it easier to carry the burden [...] (John).

[...] our parents, a lot of people who gave us their support, give advice, her brother helped a lot, gave a lot of advice, someone was always there to say something good, I can't complain, I got a lot of help (Matthew).

The relationship of Robert, John and Matthew with the family microsystem was important for them to interact with the new role and develop the process of parenting. Thus, the relatives were supporting bonds that played a key role in providing emotional and/or financial support, minimizing the insecurities, fears and anxieties, and playing the roles of parents in adolescence.

However, the interaction of the family during the development of the adolescent parent might also inhibit the construction and exercise of parenting. The statements show that the mother and grandmother protected Rafael and consequently hampered the process of parenting.

My mother raised my daughter until she was a year and a half, and then my grandmother, and that really helped

[...] I've always been loving, but I had no responsibility as a father [...] I was pretty hen-pecked [...] when the stepfather of my girlfriend found out, he talked to me at the time, but it was nothing bad, it could have been worse. If it had been worse, I might have taken it more seriously (Rafael).

The family microsystem of Rafael hindered the parenting skills and interaction with his daughter by assuming all the tasks that would enable this development. The family context⁽¹⁸⁾ influences the development process and varies according to the established interactions with people and the psychological perception of the environment and characteristics of the individual.

Thoughts and feelings of the process of parenting in adolescence

A situation triggers feelings that are unique to each individual experience. When these feelings are externalised, they reveal the characteristics, the perceptions and the understanding of an individual regarding a given situation and how this individual will interact with this experience⁽¹⁹⁾.

The understanding of feelings does not end the moment they are unveiled. Consequently, time was important for the men to think about the changes that had occurred in the course of their lives as adolescent parents, which triggered feelings about how they exercised paternity and the desire to recover some of the stages they missed.

The feelings that emerged during early fatherhood were fear and responsibility for the baby, which lead men to experience a period of conflict⁽¹⁶⁾.

I want to have a girl again, because that period from birth to 15 years just flew by, I only remember a few small things [...] I kind of skipped some phases (Rafael).

I did not enjoy my son, today I'm at a stage in life and I would like to have a son here and be able to embrace my son, and I missed it and I didn't know what it was to be a father. I didn't used to care much about my son [...] today I go to sleep thinking about his future [...] today I want to experience what I was supposed to have experienced in the past [...] (Roberto).

The process of parenting in adolescence caused changes in the characteristics of these men that they reorganized during the course of their lives. The experience of parenting in adolescence sparked their desire to become parents again in an attempt to regain some of the roles and interactions that they did not fulfil in their adolescence.

Parenthood is a stage in which people make several plans for the future. In the case of adolescent parents, however, this stage is altered or delayed and can affect the development of individuals throughout their lives.

I would have focused more on my studies, thought more about work, guaranteed my support and hers [daughter], so much so that today I'm broke [...] I'm rebuilding my professional and financial structure now. If I had been more mature at the time [...] (Rafael).

I could have finished college [...] I finished secondary school even though I was a dad and I was working, but it was harder because at the age I was a father, I could have been starting college (Roberto).

Improve the framework for a base [...] we had no home, so having a home, doing something like that to then think about having children, improve the structure [...] (Matthew).

For some parents, the postponement of their studies was the most relevant consequence, which shows that they still suffer the effects of parenting in adolescence. These fathers also regretted they did not have a job or the right structure before becoming parents.

The abandonment of dreams and plans, and of the leisure of adolescence and other experience have been described in literature⁽¹⁶⁻¹⁷⁾. Literature also provides the testimonies of the parents, who believe their children should have waited for a better moment, thought harder and taken more precautions to prevent pregnancy. According to the parents, paternity meant the need to assume many responsibilities during a stage in which they were unprepared⁽¹⁶⁾.

The statements showed that the men became more mature with experience and time, and more aware of the importance of being a father and their role in the development of their children.

The first thing to be a father now, I would have to have a family atmosphere. I plan on having a boy and a girl, but only after a person comes to live with me or after marrying, once I have plans with that person (Rafael).

I was ashamed to say I had a son [...] I would give more love, not that I didn't, but I didn't really live with him, if you know what I mean. Because he lived the entire time with his mother and that hurt and still hurts me [...] I'd be closer to him, I wouldn't worry about things that used to bother me [...] if I could have been a father today, it would have been better for me [...] (Roberto).

After the experience of parenting in adolescence, the men in this study reflected and matured in order to exercise their role as fathers. Thus, the parental process in adulthood shows the importance of combining family planning and personal wishes.

■ CONCLUSIONS

The men in this study showed that the experience of adolescent paternity brought maturity and many reflections regarding the role and duties of the father, which were exercised in accordance with the uniqueness of each participant and ranged from denial to overcoming the phenomenon.

The family microsystem played a key role in building the support bonds for the fathers to cope with the parental process in adolescence, and in influencing the development of their roles. However, this support needs to be extended because these parents should also count with friends and health services to experience paternity in a participative and responsible way.

When some of the men thought back about their experience of adolescent paternity, they mentioned feelings of anxiety due to their lack of responsibility and because they believed they lacked the maturity required to exercise the role of father. However, they reported that their bond with their child helped them plan a future paternity in which they hoped to exercise and recover the roles they had not performed during their parenting experience in adolescence.

Fatherhood in adolescence brought some important consequences to the lives of these men, especially in relation to their studies and financial stability. This finding reveals the extent to which the implications and impacts of paternity affected their lives. Paternity, however, did not prevent them from returning to their studies to obtain professional qualifications and improve their quality of life.

The limitation of this study was the scarce state of knowledge of this subject. It is therefore necessary to continue the investigation and conduct further studies to extend knowledge of this subject. This study does not intend to generalise the results, since the universe of participants contains some peculiarities of the context in which they were inserted.

The results of this study should contribute to further reflection and debate on the experience of parenting in adolescence and the insertion of these men in health actions. Furthermore, nursing plays an important role in this line of care, since nurses are generally the first professionals to receive these men in the health services. It is therefore

important to insert these men in healthcare policies that observe the singularities of their life cycle.

Institutions that promote research should invest in resources that support further studies in this field. These studies can help nurses better understand this subject and acquire the scientific knowledge they need to provide qualified care.

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