A Framework for Studying Minority Youth's Transitions to Fatherhood: The Case of Puerto Rican Young Men

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Abstract

A review of literature on young fathers and their involvement with their children reveals that most minority group young men’s transitions to fatherhood remain unexplored. Existing literature relevant to Puerto Rican Young men’s transitions to fatherhood is examined. A theoretical framework for studying minority young men that combines the integrative model of minority developmental competencies and a life span developmental perspective with Lamb’s revised four-factor model of father involvement is proposed.
While men bear half of the biological responsibility for conception, until the 1980's, they had been largely ignored in the discourse on pregnancy and child care. In the last two decades, however, studies of fatherhood have experienced an explosive growth (for comprehensive reviews of the literature see Lamb, 1976, 1981, 1987, 1997). Lamb, in his 1997 edition of The Father Role in Child Development, summarizes his reading of the last two decades of the fatherhood literatures in terms of three themes which merit special attention: "that fathers play complex, multidimensional roles, that many patterns of influence are indirect, and that social constructions of fatherhood vary across historical epochs and subcultural contexts" (p. 1)

This last theme of historical and cultural variations in the social constructions of fatherhood echoes the messages of cultural ecologists (Ogbu, 1981; Slaughter-Defoe, Nakagawa, Takanishi and Johnson, 1990) and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) human ecology model in emphasizing the importance of the social ecology of fatherhood. Lamb notes that while researchers have finally recognized that fathers have different roles in different cultural or subcultural contexts and that many communities hold different views of what constitutes normative fatherhood (see also Hochschild, 1995), these subcultural variations in the social construction of fatherhood have been less frequently and less comprehensively studied than other fathering topics (see Lamb, 1987; Sullivan, 1993). Consequently, current discussions of fatherhood continue to be dominated by what is known about white, North American, middle-class society, hence perpetuate the practice of using Euro-American family functioning as a basis for judging families in other ethnic groups regardless of their unique histories and cultural practices.

Whereas nationally representative samples of longitudinal data sets such as National Longitudinal Survey of Labor Market Experiences--Youth Cohort (NLSY) and High School and Beyond (HSB), have made it possible for researchers to examine transitions to fatherhood in a prospective framework, the reporting has been limited to Caucasian and African American respondents (see Elster, Lamb, & Tavare, 1987; Hanson, Morrison, & Ginsburg, 1989; Lerman, 1986; Michael & Tuma, 1985; Pirog-Good, 1995). Data from different Spanish speaking youth in the national samples have been too few to warrant separate reporting even though Hispanics have
been over-sampled (Center for Human Resource Research, 1995). The same is true for different
groups of Asian and Pacific Islanders and Native Americans.

Prospective longitudinal studies which have made it possible to examine the transition to
fatherhood on nationally representative samples have presented the typical profile of the adolescent
father as a young man with a truncated education, limited earning capacity, depressed, and likely to
have come from a family which received public assistance. Since adolescent parenting rates for
minority teens are higher than that of white teens' (see Marsiglio & Cohan, 1997), the typical teen
father is erroneously assumed to be a minority adolescent. While this typical profile is appropriate
for Caucasian adolescent fathers, it is not for African-Americans or adolescents categorized as
"other" with respect to race and ethnicity (see Lerman, 1993a; Pirog-Good, 1995). We need both
theoretical and empirical studies on young men of color that addresses their unique circumstances
and consequent profiles.

Why Study Puerto Rican Young Men?

Puerto Rican young men fall into the "other" category to whom the typical profile of the
adolescent father may not necessarily apply. The need for subgroup-specific information on them
is lacking, as it is for all "other" groups whose limited presence in representative samples does not
allow for separate analyses. On the other hand, recent changes in Puerto Rican adolescent fertility
rates present an anomaly which begs an explanation. The secular trend of lower adolescent
childbearing observed every year since 1991 does not hold true for Puerto Rican girls (Mathews,
Ventura, Curtin & Martin, 1998). Figure shows that the decline in birth rates for African-
Americans and Whites has been steady and linear; whereas, for Puerto Ricans it has been
curvilinear, increasing from 1991 to 1992 then leveling off and declining by 1994 and then
declining sharply in 1995. Puerto Rican teen mothers have been the focus of several studies (see,
for example, Darabi, 1987) and with this intriguing drop in fertility in 1995, we are confident they
will be the focus of intense study in the near future. However, there is currently no systematic
information on the role Puerto Rican young men play in birth rates observed in this subgroup. Just
as we have no information on their impact on the fluctuation in birth rates, we do not have even a rudimentary understanding of the factors influencing early fatherhood among Puerto Rican young men, nor the processes through which these factors come to influence birth rates. To begin this process, in what follows we review the relevant literature on young fathers, in general, and specifically research on Puerto Rican fathers. We then propose a theoretical framework for an examination of Puerto Rican young men's transitions to fatherhood.

Young fathers

Adolescent fatherhood is treated in both the adolescent development and fatherhood literatures as an off-time event (see Marsiglio & Cohan, 1997; Montemayor, 1986); that is, it occurs too early during of a young man's life course development. Consequently, a "deficit model" of development has been the lens through which teen fathers have been observed. Adolescent fathers are compared with a same-age group of boys who have not yet become fathers (or with a group of "on-time," older fathers), emphasizing the ways in which the young fathers are different from boys their age (or from older fathers) and framing those differences as deficits. The period of adolescence, marked as it is by developmental struggles for autonomy and defining one's sexuality, coupled with a lack of interest in and knowledge of children has led many to suggest that adolescent boys may be too immature to be effective fathers (Lamb & Elster, 1986; Marsiglio & Cohan, 1997).

The young fathers studied up to this point have tended to come from disadvantaged families and to have completed fewer years of education than their childless peers (Lerman, 1986, 1993a; Marsiglio, 1987). In fact, Lerman found in his analysis of data from the NLSY (cohort of young men 23-27 in 1987) that young unwed fathers (as of 1984) worked fewer hours and earned less than their peers in 1983, even before they became fathers. Lerman's analyses illustrated not only that young fathers are disadvantaged educationally and financially, but they are also more likely to engage in a number of risky behaviors such as drug abuse and even criminal activities (1993b). As with so many of the other "negative" characteristics of young fathers, the tendency to engage in
risky behaviors was more pronounced for Caucasian fathers than for African American or Latino fathers (Lerman, 1993b; see also, Pirog-Good, 1995). These findings suggest that different pathways may be conducive to early parenthood in different ethnic populations.

In examining Puerto Rican young fathers, Laguna (1984) compared 15 Puerto Rican adolescent fathers with 15 non-father same-aged peers. He found no differences between the two groups of Puerto Rican youth on single-parent origin, on placing greater value on fathers than mothers, or self reports of using contraceptives. On the other hand, he also found that fathers reported less favorable attitudes toward contraceptive use, more frequent sexual encounters, and a closer attachment to their Puerto Rican peers. Unfortunately, the nationally representative data sets provide no information on Puerto Rican young fathers whose data remain submerged within the category of "Hispanics," preventing us from examining the generalizability of Laguna’s findings.

Father involvement

An extensive body of research has documented that positive, or constructive, father involvement is associated with positive child outcomes (see Doherty, Kouneski, & Erikson, 1996 for an overview). Fathers’ financial involvement has been shown to be critical to family well-being (Furstenberg, 1989; Weitzman, 1985), especially in low-income, female-headed households (Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1986). Moreover, children of highly involved fathers have been found to show increased cognitive competence, increased empathy, less sex-stereotyped beliefs, and a more internal locus of control (Pleck, 1997; Pruett, 1983; Radin, 1982;1994). Involved fathers also have a positive indirect effect on the family system by sharing the parenting burden of mothers (see Lewis & Weinraub, 1976).

There is a considerable body of research on "on-time" fathers’ involvement with their children (see for example, McBride, 1990; McBride & Mills, 1993; Radin, 1994; Snarey, 1993; Volling & Belsky, 1991). Pleck (1997) in his review of the father involvement literature concludes that the recent research confirms Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, and Levine’s (1985; Pleck, Lamb & Levine, 1986) four-factor model of father involvement. The model proposes that the degree of
father involvement depends on (1) the motivation to be a father, (2) skills and self confidence to perform fathering tasks, (3) social supports to both relieve burdens and to reinforce positive fathering, and (4) institutional practices which make it easier or harder to perform fathering tasks.

On the other hand, Pleck argues that recent advances in the father involvement literature suggest a need to reconsider the model's content-free notion of the amount of father involvement. He proposes that, "involvement needs to be combined with qualitative dimensions of paternal behavior through the concept of 'positive paternal involvement’" (1997, p. 67).

The importance of the shift from concern with simple quantity of father involvement to include its quality makes sense, especially as in the extreme case of a sexually abusive father who may be quite involved with his children. Underscoring the importance of the quality of father involvement, Leadbeater, Way, and Raden's (1996) study of African American and Puerto Rican young mothers showed that many mothers wished to limit their children's contact with a non-resident father. This was because mothers perceived the fathers as tending to undermine the limits that the mothers set. Mothers reported that the children get emotionally upset so that they become either "hyper" or depressed during the visitations. In fact, Leadbeater and her colleagues found that increased quantity of father involvement was associated with more externalizing behaviors in the children as measured by the Child Behavior Check List which corroborated mothers' perceptions. Leadbeater et al. reported that the negative impact of fathers' involvement was stronger for Puerto Rican children than African American mothers.

Lamb and Elster (1985) carried out an observational study in the homes of adolescent mothers of 6-month-old infants whose partners ranged in age from 16 to 29. The researchers found that the quality of father-infant interactions was correlated with all aspects of the father-mother interaction. The quality of mother-infant interactions, however, were not correlated with measures of the couple's interaction. This finding closely parallels research which documents the pivotal role played by the quality of the father's relationship with the mother as a determinant of father-child involvement (see, DeLuccie, 1995). Marsiglio and Cohan (1997) suggest that dependence of father's involvement on the quality of the father-mother interaction does not bode...
well for young men's involvement with children. This is because most adolescent unions are
marked by strife and tend to be short-lived. The lack of harmony in most young couples'
relationships implies that many young fathers will not be involved with their children on a long
term basis. Or, if they are involved, mothers may not perceive it as particularly beneficial to the
child.

Just as young fathers' involvement with their children can be facilitated by a positive
relationship with the mother, so it can be blocked by the mother and/or her family. This is
particularly true if the father is viewed as not being a good enough provider (see Achatz &
MacAllum, 1994; Sullivan, 1993). For example, Achatz and MacAllum's (1994) ethnographic
study of inner city youth gives vivid illustrations of young fathers' frustration at not being able to
provide for their families through legitimate employment. Their bleak employment prospects lead
them to illegitimate means such as selling drugs to make money. Wattenberg (1993) suggests that
adolescent mothers' parents' doubts about the young fathers' ability to be a good provider may be
behind many young mothers seeking "good cause exemption" from legally establishing the child's
paternity.

A young man's ability to support his family through regular employment will have a
hearing on the level of his involvement with his children. Labor market research has demonstrated
that Puerto Ricans, especially Puerto Rican women, are greatly influenced by macro level
economic fluctuations (see Melendez, 1992; Tienda & Wilson, 1992). As the local demand for
low-skilled labor has declined, so has Puerto Rican labor force participation. Residential
segregation, language barriers, as well as racial/ethnic discrimination play a role in the greater
impact of unemployment on Puerto Ricans than other Latino groups (Tienda & Wilson, 1992). To
the extent that Puerto Rican young men have limited access to steady employment, their
involvement with their children may be compromised.

We must rely on a few small-scale studies to describe Puerto Rican fathers' involvement
with their children. On the island, Puerto Rican fathers' roles have been described as a provider
and a disciplinarian (Borrás, 1989). Roopnarine and Ahmeduzzaman (1993) studied father
involvement with preschool-aged children with 40 lower- to lower-middle income mainland Puerto Rican families. The fathers' assessments of their commitment to the whole family and their sense of competence as family problem solvers were significantly associated with their involvement with their preschool-aged children, as measured by Radin's (1982) Paternal Index of Child Care Involvement. When Roopnarine and Ahmeduzzaman's findings on commitment and competence are taken as representing motivation and skill respectively, these results lend at least partial support to the four-factor model of father involvement proposed by Lamb, et al. (1985). It is not full support because Roopnarine and Ahmeduzzaman did not find that degree of extra-familial support received was related to father involvement.

Theoretical Framework

In light of the research reviewed above we have formulated framework for studying young Puerto Rican fathers. The framework is grounded in the integrative model of development (García Coll, et al., 1996) which is anchored in social stratification theory, especially as articulated by Tumin (1967). Tumin posits that individuals are placed in a social hierarchy based on such social position variables as gender, race, ethnicity, and social class. The fundamental assumption of Garcia Coll and her colleagues' model is that developmental outcomes are significantly affected by the minority adolescent's position in the social hierarchy. The impact of social position is mediated by an alienation resulting from racism and prejudice which create the social environment within which the adolescent must learn to navigate. Adaptation to these inhibiting environmental circumstances are moderated by resources available to the adolescent, his/her level of acculturation, and current contextual demands such as fluctuations in unemployment.

To accommodate the exigencies of development in late adolescence and young adulthood, we have augmented the integrative model with a life span perspective which also emphasizes the role of contextual factors. An example of a contextualized examination of an adolescent's fathering behaviors using a life span perspective is to view it as embedded in family systems involving the
couple relationship, the family of origin, and the father-child relationship (see, Belsky & Volling, 1987; Parke & O'Leary, 1976).

The timing and sequence paradigm associated with a life-span perspective (see Baltes & Schaie, 1973; Elder, 1979; Neugarten & Datan, 1973) brings an additional lens for viewing fatherhood. The life course is normatively patterned such that there is a widely shared timing and sequential order for important life events such as marriage and becoming a parent and a set of formal and informal supports for these events. Deviations from this normative pattern can have negative consequences because the necessary supports such as peer and family approval may not be present or available. Montemayor (1986) has suggested that teenage fatherhood is both early and out of sequence—before completion of high school, getting a full-time job and before marriage. Consequently, the adolescent father can become isolated from his peer group in addition to being hampered in earning capacity by early school leaving.

On the other hand, García Coll (1989; García Coll & Vázquez García, 1996) has persuasively argued that, just as it has been the case in many societies historically, adolescent pregnancy, childbearing, and parenting is normative for many families in contemporary Puerto Rico. Her research with adolescent and older mothers from low SES, urban environments in Puerto Rico and Caucasian adolescent and older mothers in low SES urban environments in Rhode Island, found that the negative outcomes associated with early parenthood for both the mother and the infant do not hold true for Puerto Rican young mothers. There were no differences in the obstetric and perinatal outcomes of adolescent and older mothers in Puerto Rico. One-year follow-up assessments of mental and motor development and temperament ratings by both the mothers and trained observers also revealed no significant differences between infants born to adolescents and those born to older mothers in Puerto Rico.

As the integrative model postulates, minority community definitions of what constitutes normative events will have a bearing on social supports available to promote these events. García Coll's findings raise the possibility that adolescent parenting may be similarly normative among Puerto Ricans on the U.S. mainland which would lead us to hypothesize that early fatherhood is
not necessarily associated with negative outcomes. On the other hand, the integrative model also postulates that factors such as migration, acculturation, and poverty can disrupt the support systems available to young families on the mainland. For example, as Zavala-Martinez (1994) has described in her discussion of "entremundos," the process of migrating from Puerto Rico to the mainland can provoke disruptions not only in the family unit but also in other support systems leading to generational conflicts, role confusion, and feelings of not belonging to one place or another. García Coll and Vázquez García (1996) caution that in spite of the possibility that adolescent parenting may be viewed as normative among Puerto Ricans on the island, external stressors created by migration and becoming a minority in the majority Anglo society may render young parents--both men and women--susceptible to negative consequences of early parenthood.

Laguna (1983) has found Puerto Rican fathers to be more closely attached to their Puerto Rican peers, suggesting that they were less acculturated. To the extent that there are differences in the normative definitions of fatherhood with respect to timing, sequence and responsibilities between the mainland and Puerto Rican cultures, acculturation may play a role in the transition to fatherhood. García Coll's claim that adolescent parenting has been normative on the island leads us to expect that adolescents with a stronger Puerto Rican than an Anglo or mainstream cultural orientation are more likely to view early timing of parenthood as acceptable or even desirable.

In addition to the timing and sequence of life events, the life-span perspective brings into focus psycho-social developmental milestones, or developmental tasks, in the study of transition to fatherhood. Late adolescence is the time of life when majority culture youth formulate and begin to implement plans for becoming an adult. The major developmental tasks facing adolescents have been described as establishing a commitment to values, ideology, occupation, and life styles (Adams & Looft, 1977; Erikson, 1968), leaving home (Bloom, 1980), entering the work-force, selecting a mate, and becoming emotionally and financially independent of one's family (Havighurst, 1951) on the road to becoming independent "...adults who can carry on the business of [their] society" (Havighurst & Dreyer, 1975, p. 125). In the majority culture, adulthood is associated withshouldering responsibilities for one's own and others' care. Education or training
to get a job, looking for work, and working become focal activities essential for sustaining independence and family formation (Holmes, 1995; Muus, 1962). To the extent that a young man is preoccupied with such developmental tasks as gaining independence from his parents, pursuing education to prepare for the world of work, or the romance associated with selecting a mate, he may not place a high priority either on becoming a father or on fathering any children he may have.

Whether and to what extent the majority culture definitions and tasks of transition to adulthood, in general, and parenthood, in particular, are relevant to the lives of Puerto Rican adolescents growing up on the U.S. mainland remains unknown. Viewed through the lens of the social, political, and economic context of their lives, Puerto Rican adolescents are preparing for adulthood in the majority white culture where their ethnic group has a very low social standing—next to the last in a "social standing" rating of 37 racial/ethnic groups (Lewin, 1992); they are discriminated against in employment and wages (Torres, 1992; Rodriguez, 1989), have little political power or representation (Rodriguez, 1989), and, with 37.5 percent of families living in poverty (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991), constitute one of the most impoverished racial/ethnic groups in the U.S. mainland. Therefore, there is a need for prospective studies of transition to fatherhood which examines the lives of these young men, their families of origin, and the families which they form in the context of social class, race/ethnicity, and the attendant oppression these create.

Conclusion

To ensure that the crucial psychological and social factors surrounding an adolescent’s transition to fatherhood are better understood, particularly among minority youth; to better comprehend the antecedents, correlates and consequences of teenage pregnancy and childbearing, particularly with a developmental perspective; and to guide policy formulations and programmatic efforts for minority young fathers, there is a need for research on young minority fathers.

The national longitudinal studies of youth have yielded much valuable information on Caucasian, and to some extent African American, young men’s characteristics as fathers. Similar
prospective research on minority youth, however, has not been possible because information from the many subcultures of youth of color (other than African American) has been submerged under the category “other.”

The integrative model of minority developmental competencies (Garcia Coll, et al. 1996), a life span developmental perspective (Baltes & Schaie, 1973; Elder, 1975; Neugarten & Datan, 1973) and Lamb and his colleagues’ (Lamb, Pleck, Charnov & Levine, 1985) four-factor model of father involvement as revised by Pleck (1997) offer a useful heuristic for studying Puerto Rican young men’s transitions to fatherhood. We believe that this approach can be adapted to other understudied populations as the framework specifically builds on the integrative approach to minority youth development which incorporates such social stratification-related variables as gender, race, ethnicity, and social class. Moreover, the integrative approach also emphasizes minority community definitions of what constitutes normative events and their timing and sequence in a given cultural milieu.
References


and Human Services, Public Health Service, CDC. (Monthly vital statistics report, 42(2))


Figure 1: Birth Rates of Mothers, aged 15 - 19, by Racial/Ethnic Origin, 1991 - 1995