

# **Deconstructing patriarchy and masculinity with teen fathers**

## A narrative approach

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The study of teen parenthood has become almost synonymous with the study of teen mothers, but relatively little research attention has been devoted to the study of teen fathers. Nevertheless, because it appears that becoming a teen father has negative developmental consequences for both the teen father and his children, it is an important area of inquiry. Furthermore, the information gathered on teen mothers is not necessarily applicable to adolescent fathers in that different factors may influence their parental behavior and experiences. The purpose of this chapter is to provide insight into and understanding of the experiences of teen fatherhood and to examine the barriers to effective teen father parenting. Because the voices of young male parents are not adequately represented in the discourse of social science literature and social policy, this chapter provides an account of their experiences and examines the context in which their experiences occur, from the lens of a clinical example.

Research on teen father participation in child rearing suggests that the majority of teen fathers were significantly involved in the lives of their children (Rhein *et al.* 1997; Smith *et al.* 2002; Glikman 2004). The findings in these qualitative research projects help to challenge a societal stereotype of the irresponsible young father. Yet these research projects suggest that there are particular barriers that predict parental uninvolvedness, including limited income, youth immaturity, and lack of parenting skills. Paschal (2004), using the lens of social ecology and feminist theory, found that many African American young fathers who were not involved with their children subscribe to traditional ideas of masculinity. These beliefs propose that mothers are responsible for parenting and fathers, at best, help out. My clinical work with many teen fathers confirms Paschal's argument; many of my clients were underinvolved with their children due to internalizing patriarchal ideas of parenting. This chapter will illustrate how I might work with young fathers to examine their ideas of fatherhood and encourage them to become involved and interested in child rearing. First, I will lay out the theoretical foundation that informs this work, namely narrative therapy. Second, I will offer a case example as an exemplar of this work.

## Narrative therapy

Narrative therapy is premised on the idea that people's lives and relationships are shaped by the stories that people tell and engage in to give meaning to their experiences (White and Epston 1990). People construct certain habits and relationships that make up ways of life by staying true to these internalized stories. A narrative therapist assists people to resolve problems by separating the problem from the person based on the perception that the person is not the problem. Once the problem is separated and externalized from the person, space is open to facilitate the experience of new stories – narratives that are more empowering and more satisfying, and give hope for better futures.

Narrative therapy provides a framework for seeing problems within a cultural, political and socio-economic context, and allows the therapist to maintain heightened sensitivity to issues of oppression, shame, and marginalization. Hence, narrative therapists pay a great deal of attention to discourses of gender, race, class, and sexuality. A discourse, according to the French historian of thought Michel Foucault (1980), is a system of words, actions, rules, beliefs, and institutions that share common values. Particular discourses sustain particular worldviews. One might think of a discourse as a worldview in action. The dominant discourses in our society powerfully influence what gets storied and how it gets storied. Discourses tend to be invisible – taken for granted as part of the fabric of reality, such as taken for granted ideas about what it means to be a man or woman. Locating problems in particular discourses helps us see people as separate from their problems. As a narrative therapist, I seek to identify the discourses that support problematic stories, such as traditional, patriarchal masculinity. Once a problem is linked to a problematic discourse, narrative therapists can more easily help people oppose the discourse and choose to construct their relationship in line with a different, preferred, discourse.

Narrative therapists view gender (and other identity categories) as social constructions that assume different forms in different historical moments and contexts. I am particularly interested in deconstructing dominant gender discourses including hegemonic masculinity. Scholars of gender (Brod 1987; Kimmel 1994) have described at least five distinctive features of hegemonic masculinity in US culture:

- 1 physical force;
- 2 occupational achievement;
- 3 patriarchy;
- 4 frontiersmanship; and
- 5 heterosexuality.

R.W. Connell (1990) defines hegemonic masculinity as “the culturally idealized form of masculine character” (p. 83) that emphasizes “the connecting of masculinity to toughness and competitiveness,” as well as “the subordination of women,” and “marginalization of gay men” (ibid.: 94). Connell also suggests that

hegemonic masculinity is not a static phenomenon, but is an always contested, historically situated, social practice.

Michael Messner (1997) has a useful framework in theorizing masculinities in a US context:

- Men, as a group, enjoy institutional privileges at the expense of women, as a group.
- Men share very unequally in the fruits of male privilege/patriarchy: normative/hegemonic masculinity (white, middle and upper-class, heterosexual) is constructed in relation to femininities and to various subordinated masculinities (racial, sexual, class, female masculinity).
- Men can pay a price – in the form of poor health, shallow/narrow relationships, for instance – for conformity with the narrow definitions of masculinity that promise to bring them status and privilege.

Messner's thematics allow theorists and therapists to speak of masculinities in the plural and to put the relationship between gender and power at the centre of analysis. Furthermore, his conceptualization creates space to examine connections between the construction of masculinities with other social constructions, such as race, class, and sexuality.

I find the concept of hegemonic masculinities useful in my work with teen fathers. Owing to the pervasiveness of dominant gender ideologies, many of the young fathers I work with subscribe to the tenets of hegemonic masculinity. A feature of traditional ideas of manhood includes the ideas that it is a woman's role to take on the majority of the parenting tasks. Through the narrative process of deconstruction, I invite young fathers to examine the negative effects of traditional masculinity and their link to parenting. I will describe some of the therapeutic strategies that unpack traditional ideas of parenting.

Since masculinity has multiple and contradictory meanings and different significance in different social contexts, young men, in addition to being influenced by patriarchal masculinity, have been influenced by social/cultural movements, including feminism. Feminist ideas about gender equality influence to some extent the ways in which young men construct their identities. Hence, contemporary masculinity for young men is informed by a competing set of ideas and discourses rather than a single set of values promoted by patriarchy. In my narrative work, I ask re-authoring questions that amplify feminist ideas about gender equality that may open up space for young men to perform an alternative masculinity and become more involved in the daily practices of parenting. I will now illustrate some of these deconstruction and re-authoring questions.

## **Deconstructing masculinity and fatherhood**

When working with young fathers, I often began the work by asking them about their ideas of manhood such as, "What ideas do you have about what it means

to be a man?” and “Where did you learn these ideas?” Frequently we talk about the sites where dominant masculinity is sustained and reproduced. Some of these sites include school, family, and the larger culture. I will often ask them questions about experiences of manhood such as (Kivel 1992):

- Have you ever worried you were not tough enough?
- Have you ever exercised to make yourself tougher?
- Were you ever told not to cry?
- Have you ever been called a wimp, a queer, or a fag?
- Have you ever been told to act like a man?
- Have you ever been hit by an older man?
- Have you ever been in a fight to prove your manhood?
- Did you ever see an adult man you looked up to hit or emotionally abuse a woman?
- Have you ever been physically injured and hid the pain or kept it to yourself?
- Have you ever stopped yourself from showing affection to, hugging, or touching another man because of how it might look?

The above questions, which can be asked in individual or a group context, facilitate a rich discussion about the negative effects of traditional masculinity, including how cultural idealized forms of manhood limit men’s ability to connect to others, restrict emotional expression, and reinforce violent masculinity as a cultural norm. In addition, these questions began the process of talking about fatherhood. Many of the young men, in response to these questions, share that their father or another older man helped reinforce traditional ideas about manhood through various practices of ridicule and intimidation.

Since many young men are immersed in popular culture, I also spend a great deal of time enquiring about the movies, TV shows, books, video games, and music they consume. In a mass-mediated society, popular culture has become a primary influence on young people’s identities. The media, in particular, play a pivotal role in making, shaping, and recycling specific attitudes about manhood. In his compelling video titled, *Tough Guise: Violence, Media, and the Crisis in Masculinity*, Jackson Katz (1999) argues that media images have a primary influence in reinforcing hegemonic masculinity. Katz suggests that looking critically at constructed ideals of manhood by definition diminishes the otherwise silent power these very images might wield in shaping our perceptions of manhood. Employing Katz’s stance, I will ask teen fathers about the images in popular culture:

- What kinds of movies, TV shows do you watch? What kind of manhood is depicted in these shows?
- Why do so many men find these shows entertaining?
- What would it mean to you if these shows helped reinforce the idea that disrespect toward women is OK?

- Do you see many young male characters in popular culture taking care of children? Why not?
- What messages do you think popular culture sends young men about fatherhood?

Many of the young fathers I have worked with have separated or broken up with the mother of their child. After the break-up, they often become minimally involved in the daily rigors of parenting. Their child, often an infant or toddler, lives with the mother and they are at a loss as to how to stay connected to their child. Such men, often, had very little to do with their children as babies, as this was “women’s work.” Here typically the mother had coached and mentored the young father as to how to be in relationship with their child. She would also have filled in the “gaps” in his fathering and made excuses for any of his shortcomings. After separation, many fathers are unsure as to how to conduct themselves without the cues and supervision that were provided by the mother. Often, the mother and father are in conflict with each other and the father finds it difficult to negotiate and stay in dialogue with the mother. This often leads to the young father backing away from the mother and/or child and becoming inconsistently involved. Typically, the father will arrange for visits through the mother relying on her to do the majority of the work of trying to conduct the father–child relationship.

To address the issue of underinvolvement or what I call “minimal fathering,” I will ask several questions about the style of fathering the young man is practicing, among them:

- Did you connect with your son mainly through your connection with his mother and your now ex-girlfriend?
- When you wanted to know what was going on in his life, did you generally go to your ex to catch up with him or find out what was happening in his life?
- Would you generally remember his birthday and have some idea of what he would want as a gift or would your ex remind you?
- In the end, would you say you were relying on your ex for your relationship with him? Would you describe her as the “conductor” of your father–son relationship, keeping it going and in harmony?
- If you were to do it all over again, would you have a first-hand/direct or a second-hand/indirect relationship with your son?
- Do you suspect that if your son had a problem, a concern or a very deep worry, he would bring this to you, his mother, or both of you?
- What kind of father–son relationship have you been left with now that you and ex are separated?
- Do you think she is still expecting that she should keep up her conducting of your father–son relationship? And, if so, are you happy about that, now that there is so much bitterness between you?
- Is it possible that this makes it more unlikely that you and your son will have a first-hand father–son relationship without you taking some action?

- If you were to take over the conducting of your father–son relationship, what relationship skills would be required to put you in the picture of your son’s heart and soul? (These questions are inspired by my colleague, Wally McKenzie.)

By externalizing “fathering practice,” I can then engage the young father into a critical inquiry from a somewhat detached position. I typically am interested in locating any such practices in discourses of gender and culture. For example, I might ask, “What is the tradition of fathering in the family you came from, the family your father came from, and the family your grandfather came from? Has a practice of fathering more or less been passed down from father to son to father to son? Are there any useful examples of fathering that you have witnessed?”

Often, young men will tell me that their fathers were absent or under-involved in their lives. For the young men who grew up with father absence, the wish to do things differently becomes fairly strong. Glikman (2004: 199) echoes this experience in her year-long ethnographic study of low-income fathers:

The young men [who grew with a father absent] were clearly using their experiences with their own fathers as a sort of benchmark as they considered how they would play the father role. This may be one of the most important explanations of why, despite the economic odds, low-income young men may remain involved with their children. As one young man (who remained involved with his child over the study year) said, “I just don’t want my children to grow up feeling the way I feel about my dad. That’s all. So, if I have to work two jobs and go to school at the same time, and sleep only two hours a day, that’s what I’ll do. To be sure that they don’t feel the way that I feel.”

Once I have externalized and deconstructed styles of fathering, the young men I work with are in a better space to consciously choose their own preferred fathering practice. If such a practice is outside their own experience, some research into alternative fathering might have to be undertaken and the skills, ideas, and habits associated with it might have to be practiced on a trial and error basis. Alternative versions might first take some conscious shape in response to such questions as these: “Now that you have the opportunity to consciously choose your own fathering practice rather than merely following in your fathers footsteps, what practice might fit with your views about father-son relationships?”

At this point in the therapy, the young father is beginning to take up a more active role in the parenting. Often, the mother, who is seeking relief from the endless demands of single parenting, is appreciative and grateful. Typically the conflict between the mother and father lessens as they negotiate a more collaborative, shared parenting arrangement. At this point, I ask re-authoring questions – questions that invite the young man to appreciate and re-work their identity that is more preferred:

- Now that you are more in the forefront of your son's life, what new possibilities do you see for your father–son relationship?
- What new relationship skills are you building?
- What are you learning about yourself that is important to know?
- Would your father have gone to therapy to address these issues? Would he have had the courage to face up to his minimal fathering and take on more responsibility of the conducting of your father–son relationship?
- What does it say about you that you have changed your style of parenting? Are you setting a new tradition in your family? What messages are you sending your son about what it means to be a man/father? Are you teaching your son some new ideas about what it means be a man?
- If you had a father such as yourself, what difference might it have made to your life?

I will now describe and discuss a case vignette to illustrate narrative work with a young father.

### **Mauricio's journey into active fathering**

Mauricio, a 19-year-old Latino male, was referred to me by the substance abuse clinic at the outpatient mental health agency where I was working at an at the time. Mauricio had successfully finished a 6-month intensive group drug treatment program. Apparently, Mauricio was abusing amphetamines, which led to the break-up of his relationship with his girlfriend, Sarah. Sarah and Mauricio had been dating for 3 years and had one child, Stephen, who was 2 years old at the time I began working with Mauricio. Although Mauricio had been clean and sober for 6 months, he was feeling depressed over the break-up of his relationship with Sarah.

On inquiring about the status of his relationship with Stephen, Mauricio stated that he rarely saw his son since the break-up 8 months previously. Mauricio, who was living with his mother at the time I was seeing him, blamed Sarah for his not seeing Stephen. "She doesn't trust me with him, so I backed off," he angrily said in the first interview. I asked Mauricio what kind of relationship he wanted with Stephen. Mauricio replied, "I want to be close but I don't know how to. Plus, I am so angry at Sarah, I don't want to deal with her." He was also jealous with Sarah because she was dating another man. This led to me asking the following questions:

- With you and Sarah breaking up, did you break up with Stephen in the same way?
- Has Stephen, in any way, indicated that he wanted a break-up with you?
- Is it fair to break up with Stephen? Doesn't he deserve some warning before you cut him out of your life?

- Is your fatherhood something that endures or is it a “take it or leave it” kind of thing?
- Is your anger and jealousy at Sarah being taken out on your relationship with Stephen?

Mauricio stated that he did not want to break up with Stephen, but was unconfident about how to become close with him. In inquiring about Mauricio’s relationship with his father, Mauricio painfully talked about his father’s inconsistent parenting since his parents divorced when Mauricio was 7 years old. This led to the following questions:

- What kind of fatherhood theory did your dad subscribe to?
- What were his ideas about manhood?
- Did he leave the bulk of the work for your mother?
- What has single parenthood been like for your mother?
- Is your dad’s version of fatherhood the kind of parenting style you want to take up?

In response to these questions, Mauricio named his father’s parenting style as “hot and cold fathering.” Mauricio, with difficulty, described his relationship with his father as involving bursts of intense relating followed by long periods of virtual neglect. In fact, Mauricio had not had any contact with his father for over 2 years.

Future sessions focused on the effects of “hot and cold” fathering on Mauricio’s childhood. Mauricio recalled “dreaming” that his father would be more involved in his life than he actually was. Mauricio’s wish for a more consistent relationship with his father understandably led to a great deal of sadness and disappointment. I asked Mauricio some questions about the impact of “dream father” thinking had on his childhood:

- To what extent did your “father dream” deceive you into believing your father was a different kind of father than the father he has been to you?
- Where did the “father dream” come from? From TV? Books? Friends? Fathers? Or someplace else?
- What things have you tried to make your “father-dream” come true? With what success?
- How might you channel your “dream father” thinking into becoming a better father to Stephen?

These questions led to a discussion of where his “father dream” came from, namely popular culture. Mauricio recalled watching *The Bill Cosby Show* and dreaming that his father would be similar to the Bill Cosby character – present, available, nurturing, and involved. We also examined other role models for fatherhood in popular culture, at which point Mauricio realized that the role models

were far and few between on TV and film; that popular culture reinforced that idea the parenting was mainly “women’s work.”

After several sessions of deconstructing ideas about fatherhood, Mauricio was clearly able to state his preference for the kind of father he would like to be. Yet, Mauricio was not sure that he had the skills and patience to become more involved with Stephen. I asked Mauricio if he knew when he started the substance abuse program that he had skills necessary to “walk away from drugs” and at which point he replied “no.” I asked him several questions about the skills and competencies necessary to become sober from drugs. Mauricio realized that he was stronger and more patient than he had realized. I then asked how might use those same skills and talents and apply them to his preferred sense of fatherhood. Next, I asked Mauricio if his idea of manhood included trying to understand the experiences of others, including Sarah. When Mauricio answered “yes,” I asked him to imagine himself as Sarah, while I asked him several questions. These questions, referred to as “internalized other questions,” allow the client to step into an embodied experience of the “other.” I often use these questions with men to help them step into the experience of their significant others, allowing them to develop a more relational notion of self (Nylund and Corsiglia 1993). I asked him the following questions as Sarah:

- Sarah, do you feel that the bulk of parenting is on you? What is that like? Do you get any rest?
- Sarah, what’s it like to experience Mauricio’s jealousy? Do you feel that Mauricio is punishing you by neglecting Stephen?
- What dreams do you have for your life? Do you see parenting getting in the way of your dreams?
- What do you need from Mauricio?
- Is Mauricio taking care of his financial responsibilities with Stephen?
- What would it mean to you if Mauricio took over a bit more of the responsibility of parenting so you could get a break?

These questions enabled Mauricio to realize that he needed to get a job to support his son. Soon after, Mauricio got a job at a local department store and began paying child support. Mauricio also made it clear to me (and Sarah) that he wanted to do more than just fulfil his legal and financial requirements of parenting, that he wanted to have a father–son relationship based on a moral perspective. We had lengthy discussions about what fatherhood, based on a moral perspective, would look like. Mauricio was able to envision a style of parenting that was premised on nurturing and cultivation of a close father–son relationship.

Still, Mauricio would go through periods of resentment as a result of working long hours to pay child support in addition to spending most of his free time with Stephen. He also intimated that he was envious of his male friends who “were having a good time and had more freedom . . . sometimes I feel trapped.” In response to these concerns, I asked Mauricio the following questions:

- What does being a parent at this particular time in your life offer that might not be available at other times?
- If you keep the knowledge of this advantage in your awareness, how will that make a difference?
- If you think about your whole life, are there important things that you are putting on hold? How can you keep dreams and plans of those things alive for your future?
- Which people support and find joy in your parenting at this time in your life?

These questions help to deconstruct and challenge biases against people becoming parents early in life. A number of factors are associated with this bias: ideas about lack of maturity and experience, lost opportunities to complete academic education, and low earning potential because of limited formal education recruit young people into feeling bored and trapped. Some of the biases against parenting at a young age have to do with associated problems, such as poverty and instability of relationships, that could occur at any age and may not be relevant to particular parents. Rather than conceptualizing and generalizing parenting by persons of a “younger” age as problematic, it may be more useful to identify specific problems and abilities that are unique to particular parents. In addition, although feelings of being bored and trapped can be experienced by parents of any age, young parents are more vulnerable to these feelings because they contrast with the freedom and exploration available to many of their peers. The other side of the picture, which is less often presented, is of a different life sequence in which teen parents have more energy for parenting and later go back to complete their education when they are more likely to appreciate it and are more clear about career goals.

Consequently, Mauricio, while recognizing the struggles of parenting, reconsidered the ideas of fatherhood as a “trap” and realized that being a young father may have particular advantages. We talked about his future plans to go to college and become an architect. Future sessions included one with Mauricio’s mother, who offered to help Mauricio so that he could attend community college. She was willing to help because she was proud of Mauricio’s attempts to become a responsible father. In addition, Sarah attended a session with Mauricio in which she expressed appreciation for Mauricio’s increased involvement. (Mauricio agreed to have Stephen every other weekend and once a week, plus he was paying consistent child support.) Mauricio continued to remain drug free and was pleased with stepping into a new story of manhood and fatherhood.

## **Conclusion**

Although teen parenting is the center of much social concern and policy debate, the focus tends to be young mothers. It continues to be the case that little research and clinical attention is paid to the experiences and stories of young fathers. More

research on this topic may help us challenge societal stereotypes of the negligent and immature young father. Similarly, more research needs to examine the institutional and discursive barriers that prevent young men from becoming more responsible as parents. In addition to economic issues, one considerable obstruction is the institution of patriarchy and its ally, hegemonic masculinity. Narrative therapy, with its focus on stories and culture, gender, and power, is a clinical practice that critically examines the social construction of masculinity. One feature of dominant masculinity is the old idea/discourse that parenting is “women’s work.” My work with Mauricio demonstrates how deconstructing ideas about manhood, motherhood, and fatherhood enabled my client to become more accountable as a father. The practices of narrative therapy can be one more tool, along with other clinical and policy interventions, to increase fathers’ responsibility for their children.

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