

Managing Identity: Adolescent Fathers Talk About the Transition to Parenthood

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Adolescent fatherhood is often associated with negative stereotyping and deficiencies in the adolescent's situation or characteristics, which effect his investment in child rearing. Developmentally, adolescence is a time when parenthood is not conventional practice nor a well-accepted norm. Understanding how adolescent fathers make sense of transitioning to parenthood allows us to re-think our public representations of young fatherhood. This article seeks to examine the ways that adolescent fathers reconstruct their identity in the midst of becoming a parent. Social constructionism offers a critical approach to the consideration of this transition process. A discursive analysis, based on interview transcripts, looks at the talk of adolescent fathers, and suggests they have a significant investment in their changing identity. Through their language, they actively engage in a process of change that illustrates management of new responsibilities, which arguably develops an attitude of mastery in their lives, instead of ineffectiveness as suggested by stereotyping.

Becoming a father in adolescence is about growing up very quickly. The young men interviewed in this study identify fatherhood as a turning point in their lives where they are propelled into adult roles and responsibilities. To illustrate the ways that these adolescent fathers attempt to re-locate themselves in the world amongst the changes and the conflict they experience while transitioning to fatherhood, we use a social constructionist perspective oriented around discourse analysis. Many beliefs about adolescent fathers revolve around stereotypes such as absent, uncaring, disinterested, unable to meet responsibilities, and unwilling participants in the lives of their children (Miller, 1997; Rickel, 1989; Strug & Wilmore-Schaeffer, 2003). We suggest that through their talk, the adolescents in this study reconstruct their identity so

that they can manage the transition from adolescent male with few responsibilities to adolescent father.

From a social constructionist perspective, rather than understanding identity as a part of personality, or as a fixed and stable construct, the consistent re-languaging of identity status is the focus of enquiry. In other words, as an alternative to exploring adolescent identity through the lens of developmental progression, social constructionism interprets the language, or discourses utilised by people to make sense of themselves. Adolescence, in particular, is a time when parenthood is not expected and is not necessarily the norm. We suggest that understanding the ways that adolescent fathers make sense of this transition process is an important aspect of re-thinking our public representations of young fatherhood.

This builds on the work of Cherrington and Breheny (2005) who suggest that it is through explorations of meaning that we gain clarity about the transition of young people to a parenting role. In the next few pages we give a brief overview of our standpoints in relation to 'identity formation' and discursive analysis and an outline of our method of inquiry. This is followed by analysis and discussion of the transition to fatherhood illustrated through excerpts of text from adolescent fathers interviewed for this study.

Making Sense of Identity

Adolescence is a challenging developmental period marked by profound physical, psychological and social change. This is a time of pubertal change, the development of abstract thinking, increased self-consciousness, and changes in self-concept. Thoughts of the future and explorations of future possibilities occupy much of adolescent life (Berk, 2001). It is a time of establishing independence from family and developing close bonds with peers and often, romantic partners (Dalton III, Frick-Horbury, & Kitzmann 2006).

Three major developmental processes, autonomy-seeking, identity formation, and cognitive development are linked with this period of self-discovery (Everall, Bostick, & Paulson, 2005), and with Erikson's (1968) developmental tasks which revolve around issues of identity. This traditional perspective suggests that through the challenges of relationships with others, adolescents explore values and feelings,

learn about skills and strengths, and begin to develop a sense of who they are.

Fitzgerald (2005) suggests that adolescents have sufficient abilities and the wisdom to persevere during this challenging time. Rather than definitively delineating this period as a stage to be negotiated before moving on to the next stage, Fitzgerald argues this time can be understood as part of an existential process that takes into account the entire lifespan. From this perspective, the formation of identity is considered an ongoing process influenced by both past and future. Schrag (1997) speaks of a "subject-in-process ... in the throes of a creative becoming" (p40) and of self-identity produced through relationship, through what is known as the "zone of the discursive event" (p20).

The production of early adult identity can be understood within the context of relationships and discourse, through which adolescents develop a sense of self-identity, a sense of consistency across time and space. Similarly, O'Connor & Hallam (2000) propose that identity formation takes place through our present-day reflections, while Sarbin (1994) argues that if we wish to understand human experience then we must review historical and cultural contexts. Sarbin, and others (Gergen & Gergen, 1986; Riessman, 1993; Robinson & Hawpe, 1986) suggests we live in a storied world and the way that we make sense of that world is through narrative, or discursive structures, in relation to ourselves and to others.

Narratives are considered social constructions, "linguistic implements", "symbolic systems" (Gergen & Gergen, 1993, pp203-204) through which people appear coherent, organised and sensible (Gergen & Gergen, 1986). It is through our everyday narratives that we not only make sense of our selves, but that we also signify our selves to others. Our discursive accounting is illustrative of where we are finding ourselves in a particular moment in time in relation to events, people, objects, and, of how we position ourselves (Harré, 1991) relative to circumstances. Discursive narrative is a socially interactive process. Through social interaction both narrative and self-identity are produced simultaneously,

one is not called into being without the other (Lee, 1994; Sarbin, 1994; Schrag, 1997). From this perspective it is through our narratives that we relate, connect, belong, understand, and produce meaning.

In this study, young men tell their stories of fatherhood in adolescence. From a social constructionist perspective, analysis of these stories offers a way of illuminating the discursive re-organisation of identity formation; in particular the social processes illuminated through the talk, with the talk itself illustrating the cognitive and discursive work taking place in the transition from adolescent to father. Discursive analysis allows us to garner understandings of how these young men make sense of fatherhood; something traditionally expected in adulthood rather than during adolescence. We can see how these adolescent fathers use language to re-position themselves in relation to the challenge of dual identities, new expectations of responsibility, and emerging identities as parent as opposed to school-boy.

Through their stories, rather than avoiding obligations or involvement, these young fathers illustrate the depth of their commitment to their children, and also illuminate the struggle to claim some form of identity at an age when they are expected to still be exploring and discovering themselves. Through an examination of linguistic resources and discursive structures of meaning, analysis offers insight into how these fathers attempt to position themselves as dependable parents.

Analytic Theory

Analysis was guided by the tenets of critical social psychology (Tuffin, 2005) which employs a constructionist epistemology. Talk and text are regarded as social practices which argue for positioning language as the central focus of enquiry (Potter & Wetherell, 1994). Social constructionists subscribe to a theory of language which challenges the view of language as simply reflecting the 'reality' it claims to portray. This linguistic philosophy holds that language has a powerful constructive function (Austin, 1962; Lather, 1992).

Critical social psychologists (Gough & McFadden, 2001; Tuffin, 2005) have

argued for a re-conceptualisation of social life as language use. Such argument develops the discursive insight of Edwards & Potter (1992) who propose that the way language functions to achieve particular ends is a topic of study in its own right, thus privileging the linguistic over what has been considered the psychological (Wetherell, 1995). From this perspective, the way that we understand the social world is located through linguistic practices, organised around metaphors and discourses. These practices offer us structures of meaning for constituting and understanding the world within particular contexts.

Constructionist enquiry seeks to demonstrate how experience is constructed in and through language. In privileging the linguistic, this style of research affords fine grained analysis of text, with a view to examining the discursive resources that are utilised and the ways they are being used. Consistent with these aims we sought to identify the linguistic resources that operate in the talk of adolescent fathers. From a social constructionist position, these resources do not merely describe; they structure the very experience of adolescent fatherhood.

Method

Twelve adolescent fathers were interviewed. Criteria for participation included the requirement that the young man had become a father before his 19th birthday, and also that he was 20 years old or younger at the time of the interview. These criteria ensured that participants were, indeed adolescent fathers (Newman & Newman, 1991). The twelve participants were drawn from two areas. Firstly, participants were recruited from a large state co-educational high school where they were invited to make contact with the third author if they wished to be involved in the study. This method recruited seven adolescent fathers. The second means of recruitment involved guidance counsellors at secondary schools distributing letters of invitation to adolescent fathers. This method of recruitment obtained 11 referrals, five of whom agreed to participate.

Interviews were conducted with the approval of a University Ethics committee and according to a post-

structuralist format (Burman, 1994) which attempted to avoid establishing power relationships with participants. Mostly, interviews were conducted in participants' homes. Interviews were fully recorded and subsequently transcribed according to the conventions of Atkinson and Heritage (1984). All identifying features of interviews have been altered to ensure full participant anonymity and confidentiality.

Interview transcripts were coded manually (Tuffin & Howard, 2001). Coding necessitated 'close reading' of the text, a pre-requisite for analysis, and organising the data into coding categories (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Coding identified systematic themes, troupes, and resources drawn on by participants. Through identifying variation in text the action-orientation of the talk was identified. Variation indicates the linguistic resources used by the speaker to achieve a particular effect, or to position themselves or others in a particular way. The text was then re-read in context to reduce the possibility of misinterpretation or over-reading.

We have avoided providing further information about participants as the discursive orientation of this study places greater interest in their talk rather than personal details. As the analysis will show, data from only three of the twelve is offered, however these extracts are illustrative of the wider patterns that existed in the data. In particular, we focus on participants' talk of battling dual identities alongside the acknowledgement of their new role as fathers.

Analysis

Participants draw on a discourse of dual identities to position themselves as caught between two disparate identities, which at times are in conflict. The identities are those of an adolescent and of someone with the adult responsibilities of fatherhood. The discourse was utilised to explain the stress participants experienced as they attempted to reconcile themselves to these two different positions, and to account for the developing identity of father. The types of linguistic resources participants draw upon to construct this

discourse are readily identifiable, for example, "manhood", "childhood", "adult", "kid", "father, and "young". Participants talk of trying to stay 'a kid'; of the flexibility and difficulties incurred when trying to reconcile dual identities; and the constraints imposed through the quick shift to adulthood.

Dual Identities: Staying as a 'kid'

Below Sam provides an account of his attempts to remain "still a kid" despite having become a father at 14. The impetus for his passage from "a kid" to "a father" is provided by the disparity between having a partner, and the apparent difference between him and his school-mates. Although Sam does not explicate exactly what a father is or does, by describing the behavior of its antithesis (being "a kid") he implicitly outlines it. Below, Sam reflects on these two identities and in his final statement implicitly suggests the incompatibility of these positions.

I tried staying in school but I think I was just staying in school to just to, orr I reckon, let myself know I was still a kid, sort of thing. I was just still young. But yeah like I was saying before I always knew I was a father in the back of my head. All my friends knew. I sort of got touchy when friends and that would bring it up. Ummm, yeah, just because that wasn't what I really wanted to think about at the time. Yeah. Cause I was at school, I just wanted to arrr, to be, to be a kid, yeah. I didn't mind it at first but after a while I was only 14 when she got pregnant. Ummm, and I still had a lot of things I was still doing like I was still normal things hanging out with friends all that kind of business. I was, I think I was in the band at that time as well. That took a lot of my time and, she knew I liked doing it but I think a lot of arguments stemmed from me being with my mates. I think we argued more though. It was about basically cause I wanted to go and hang out for a bit with my mates, she didn't like it, she didn't like me ummm. She, she didn't like me drinking orrr, stuff like that. Yeah, basically it was mainly about me being in, I was a bit of an arsehole there.

His initial reference to himself as a "kid" could seem unflattering when applied to a 14-year-old teen, with a notable amount of independence. It has connotations of being an unfettered child still under parental provision. Sam's use of this self-reference functions to concentrate his identity as someone who is clearly not an adult, despite his fatherhood status. This attempt to retain his identity as a "kid", serves to negate the looming duties of fatherhood; Sam has some knowledge of this, but only "in the back of my head". He constructs himself as a father attempting to remember he is only 14, rather than a 14 year old trying to remember he is a father ("let myself know I was still a kid...I was just still young"). The overbearing nature of that "father" identity is clear, and Sam censures himself for failing to conduct himself as a dutiful father. He clarifies his pastimes as "normal things", that presumably any kid would do, but that, as time went by, were not necessarily appropriate for a kid who was also a father. In hindsight for Sam, being a "kid" also denotes his pastimes as "kids" stuff, when compared with the duties of fatherhood.

With a focus on his activities, this excerpt concludes that to preserve the identity of "kid" constitutes being "an arsehole". Sam's description of his "kid" like activity is unremarkable, "hang[ing] out with mates", "being in the band" and "drinking". Amongst his peer group this was "normal" behavior. At a wider level there is nothing anti-social or deleterious about such activity. However, when Sam takes up the position of a father, his "kid" like behavior becomes inappropriate, and Sam is positioned as a father who is an "arsehole". He concedes that positioning himself as a father, is something he preferred not to do at times, "I sort of got touchy when friends and that would bring it up [] that wasn't what I really wanted to think about at the time".

Retaining the identity or position of "kid" grants Sam license to pursue adolescent interests without incurring dissonance. His statement "I didn't mind it at first but after a while" suggests some transition in his thoughts about being a father. He possibly

learned that being a father, and doing fatherhood, are not the same things.

Sam constructs himself as having a preoccupation with “kid” like activities in this early period of having a child. This preoccupation diverts attention from other possible issues, for example, Sam’s performance as a father and relationship with his child, specific mention of whom is absent. Rather than considering any neglect of paternal duties, his narration focuses on this reluctance to abandon the pursuits of a kid which is an interesting rhetorical move. Developmentally, the pursuits and desires he outlines are to be expected of a 14-year-old. A listener would likely empathise with this account, even knowing that during this part of his life Sam is a new father. It is understandable that a young adolescent could struggle with such a responsibility.

Talking about his commitment to fathering could have the opposite effect; it could be damning of Sam’s initial period of parenthood. The narration would be of a period when he chose to “hang with mates” and go “drinking”, rather than tend to his partner and child. However, rather than simply claiming dual identities, thus positioning his struggle as reasonable, expected, and therefore forgivable, Sam, as father, takes responsibility for this past behaviour. He makes an unreserved admission that attempting to maintain his “kid” identity was reprehensible, through identifying his partner’s requests as reasonable, and himself as an “arsehole”. His admission engenders both respect and empathy and suggests that now, Sam is a responsible father able to appropriately judge past behaviour.

Through the construction of this narrative, Sam invites a look at what appears to be a full account of his early parenthood. As a rhetorical tool, it appears a complete version of events. This obviates the need for greater inquiry and avoids the issue of examining Sam’s parental neglect. Preserving the identity of a “kid” seems less reprehensible than failing to attend to one’s paternal duties.

Dual Identities: As not incurring change

Jed talks below of his experience as a 16-year-old father and of being positioned amongst several competing identities. He suggests that he has not really changed, yet his narrative suggests some struggle between reconciling a shift from child to adult status.

Well probably at that stage [prior parenthood] I was just still out and about doing my own thing and umm probably felt the baby was going to tie me down from all those things, and not really give me a chance to finish what I was umm teenage years provide you. Actually I haven’t really changed, I’m still fricken wild when I want to be, and ummm, at the same time I am still providing, I say more than enough for my son, so. Don’t really think I have changed at all even though that adult thing seems to have come into it but, I know I am an adult now and, and, being a father. Still inside I am still a little kid...I don’t see that I’ve gone completely out of childhood, ummm, I still, as I say I haven’t changed anything, so basically I’ve become a father I s’pose that’s manhood I s’pose, but um, my childhood is still there and I’m still living it like I think I would if I didn’t have Kyle there.

Jed does a lot of work in this extract as he juggles maintaining his adolescent identity with the identities of fatherhood and adult. He appears flexible about the various identities he experiences, but this might be indicative of his apparent struggle to integrate the role of father. At the outset he positions himself within a period of teenage years prior to the birth of his son with a clear notion of the pastimes prevalent to adolescence and to life without the responsibilities of fatherhood. He considers being “tied down”, and “unable to finish” because of “the baby”. He seems unwilling to concede that the arrival of his child might have fettered his own “wildness”, which perhaps is an important part of his adolescent status. Yet, interestingly, he includes the proviso that he is “still providing”, and not just providing, but providing “more

than enough”, thus claiming the right to remain unchanged and uncensored, as clearly he is more than adequately supporting his child.

Reiterating a lack of change he names adulthood as “that adult thing”. It is possible that the “thing” has limited reference in this context and refers exclusively to the duties of fatherhood. Naming it in this way gives the impression that Jed has no present relationship with this adult identity; it is as though it is an object that has come into his periphery; that has somehow attached itself to him, or that he has bumped into. He refers to the adult thing as “come[ing] into it”; its presence warrants some consideration, but it has not really affected him, he is still unchanged, and his identity remains essentially that of an adolescent. This is immediately contrasted with clarity around his adult status and confirmation that this also means fatherhood, rather than fatherhood conferring adult status.

It seems that ‘the adult thing’ brings forth adult status and included in this is “being a father”. Even though Jed claims adulthood here he still seems to be unsure about his status as father. His claim to fatherhood is tagged unconvincingly onto his knowledge of adult identity and almost disclaimed through his quick assertion that “inside I am still a little kid”. This is a new claim and it is the antithesis of adult fatherhood. Jed himself is a kid, and as a little kid one would hardly expect him to be able to maintain fathering duties, yet we already know that he does provide. What we don’t know is whether or not the meaning of fathering for Jed, at this stage, goes beyond provision. He has quite an investment in maintaining some vestige of childhood and of remaining unchanged. Yet, clearly the permanence of his new son is present as he almost surprisingly supposes that he is a father after all and that perhaps this confers him with the status of a man, as in his reference to “manhood”. His equation of fatherhood with manhood positions fatherhood as something men do, not teenagers or children. Jed’s use of “suppose” suggests that he is considering this possibility, that he might be a man, but that he is not

yet ready to claim this knowledge as his identity status. This is evident from his follow-up where he again claims association with his childhood and negates the presence of his son as affecting anything in his life.

In this account, Jed variously positions himself as an adult, an adolescent and sometimes a child. His rhetorical arrangement constructs parenthood as something adults do and by doing parenthood, one self-constructs as an adult. The position of adulthood acts as an overlay upon one's identity, in Jed's case, that of being an adolescent.

At the time of this account, Jed's son was three months old. As the duties of being a provider become a regular activity, Jed's capacity to "do his own thing" may become constrained and it would be interesting to observe his rhetorical management of future identity status. His account provides a snapshot of the nascency of a father identity. Aged 16, and in mid-adolescence, fatherhood of a three month old son positions Jed with some major adult responsibilities. To expect the transition from a primarily adolescent identity to an adult identity to be a clear-cut one is unreasonable. Jed's account illustrates how the conflicting identities of "childhood" and "adult[hood]" can be negotiated in this initial period of fatherhood.

Dual Identities: Shooting yourself in the foot

In this next extract, Newman constructs his identity dichotomously, suggesting that he now has two competing personalities, that of 'kid', and that of 'man'. Whereas Sam chastised himself for his investment in the identity of a kid, and Jed asserted that parenthood failed to impede his identification with being a kid, Newman laments the constraints adulthood places on adolescence pursuits. He constructs the impact of these constraints as akin to "shooting yourself in the foot".

But now, life is like shut off. Like I'm not allowed out and about with the world. Like I got to stay home and do what I've got to do. Changed a lot. You're stupid alright cause ... your whole life is revolving around kids when

you are still a kid and you don't want that. Cause you're still a kid and you want to go out and do the things kids do. Experiment, learn things, go to parties and stuff. It's all gone once you had kids ... Like I shot myself in the foot and it's not gonna go away ... You know I got, I reckon I got two personalities aye. Like I'm still a kid and I know that, or as a boy. But it changes you know. I'm a man when I want to be ... Really I know I should be staying home with my family, cause you know, I made it that way. But, I, it's just something inside me doesn't want me to stay home all the time everyday. You know I just go, feel like I got no space or something, no freedom.

Like Sam and Jed, Newman uses the term "kid" to describe himself at 16. He selects this term rather than others such as 'teenager', 'youth' or 'adolescent'. Rhetorically the more extreme term 'kid', makes the contrast with his status as a father more powerful. It highlights the incompatibility of these two identities and to some extent resists reconciliation between the two. Fatherhood and youth, teenager, or adolescent, are more compatible, despite suggesting untimeliness, whereas it is not expected that 'kids' have children of their own. Unlike Jed for whom fatherhood and kid(hood) are mutually exclusive, Newman uses the term "kid" to emphasize the dissonance of being both kid and father.

Use of the term also contrasts the preoccupation of each identity. Compared to doing fatherhood, the activities of kids are 'childs-play'; having fun and experimenting, playing and being irresponsible. Fatherhood involves ensuring the welfare of small children, providing for them and maybe other family members; the antithesis of a kid's egocentrism. It is across this gulf of difference that Newman constructs himself.

Newman constitutes fatherhood at 16 as "shooting [yourself] in the foot" which acts to terminate ("shut off") the freedom of adolescence, situating the father with a myriad of responsibilities that cannot be ignored. Newman uses the term "stupid" to decry his actions in putting himself

in this position. His great lament is that the liberty adolescence afforded him has been irrevocably lost, as the duties he must perform are enduring. However, Newman is able to construct this lament only because he has a sense of duty to his child ("I got to stay home and do what I've got to do"). Were he unconcerned, parenthood would fail to impinge upon him doing "things kids do" and he would not necessarily admonish his actions. His construction is indicative of the strength of his "man" (paternal) identity, and his understanding of its endurance.

"Going out" is highlighted in Newman's construction of adolescence. This is what kids do, socializing and behaving without hindrance. In contrast, being a father involves "staying home with my family". Newman constructs himself as "still a kid" to support his rationale for missing out on his desire to engage in adolescent pursuits. The age appropriate behaviour that he should be engaging in is 'going out'. He uses an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) to position the alternative as an unreasonable demand for a 16 year old, that is, "stay[ing] home all the time everyday" (emphasis added).

Newman constructs himself as having "two personalities". From each position Newman chastises himself for his behaviour. From the position of "kid" Newman, again applies an extreme formulation, rebuking himself for having affected the responsibilities of an adult, that is "it's all gone once you had kids" (emphasis added). From the adult position he censures himself when he does "go out" saying "I just feel guilty" and that he "should be staying at home with my family". Interestingly, each of these positions hovers in the extremes, there is no middle ground for Newman, his choices are either black or white and always punitive. As a kid he is "not allowed out" and he has "got to stay home"; as a father he must take up his responsibilities because he "made it that way". These extreme positions are neither about compromise or options, which leaves Newman feeling as though he has "no space" and "no freedom". This extreme lack is attributed to "something inside" Newman that, at the time of this account, is producing considerable

turmoil with Newman's attempt to move into a new place of equilibrium.

The aggravation evident in Newman's account appears to be oriented around the tussle he is having with his conflicting identities. Unlike Sam, Newman has not reconciled himself to fatherhood as a new and specific identity. It is likely that, at this time, to do so would construct the behaviour of the other identity as untenable. "*Shooting [oneself] in the foot*" is an apt description. Newman limps within both identities, unable to be fully "man" due to his "kid" desires and unable to be fully "kid" due to his adult responsibilities.

Discussion

Contrary to popular mythology, the talk of adolescent fathers in this study suggests that they have a significant investment in their changing identity. Strug and Wilmore-Schaeffer (2003) conclude that many adolescent fathers care deeply about their offspring and participate actively in their care. The current study extends this through a discursive examination that suggests an active engagement in a process of change that illustrates their management of new responsibilities. They begin to relocate their understanding of themselves as fathers, not necessarily smoothly, but certainly with intent, which arguably makes a difference in being able to have an attitude of mastery in their lives, instead of the ineffectiveness suggested by stereotyping.

The discourse of dual identities is emblematic of adolescent fatherhood. The young father is positioned between the lure of independence and the duties of parenthood. It is the ability to choose to take up those duties which most often fuels public concern over adolescent fatherhood. These accounts illustrate the ways that adolescent fathers utilise the same discourse to construct their identity struggle as they attempt to meet the complex duties and stresses of parenthood (Miller, 1997). Despite their disequilibrium it is clear that each of these fathers is fully aware of their new role and, however difficult, they are actively engaging with the transition to parenthood. None of these young men have abandoned their children, even though they might, from time to time,

engage in behaviour more appropriate to boys who are unencumbered.

For these boys, fatherhood has acted as a catalyst that has activated a deep sense of responsibility and duty, which is sometimes hard to imagine in teenage boys. Fatherhood invokes a metamorphosis in all men involving behaviour and identity. The change is not necessarily smooth or complete at any age. For adolescents, analysis of the dual identities discourse illustrates the formidable task of confronting a swift and unexpected transformation, at a crucial developmental stage. The adolescents in this study were aware of a need to be dutiful fathers. Initially, for all of them, the recency of their unencumbered adolescence attenuated their best wishes to father appropriately, but each engaged in the struggle to ascertain an identity as father.

Doing fatherhood in adolescence is about accelerated development, putting oneself second even while lamenting lost opportunities. The phrase 'finding themselves fathers' has some poignancy when considering that none of these boys deliberately embarked on fatherhood. Although this analysis looks only at the ways that these boys manage and make meaning of their identity transition each reported during their interviews that, emotionally, they did not regret for an instant their new-found status. Within their logic, however, they were clear they would never recommend such a life course.

Negative stereotypes cast adolescent fathers as distant, aloof and disinterested. The accounts of Sam, Jed and Newman suggest worlds colliding, but not indifference. As fathers they engage fully with the process of transitioning to their new identity. Of course this study has interviewed a small group of fathers and their motivation for taking part is not clear. It is possible that the adolescents interviewed are those who are actively engaging with their children and who have an invested interest in sharing their struggle. We have not considered contextual differences, such as ethnicity, family culture, and other life experiences, that may well influence the rhetoric and ability to engage in transition. It would be useful to compare the accounts of these boys with those of more mature to see how those in

different developmental phases make sense of transitioning to fatherhood.

This study has highlighted the degree to which fatherhood has a profound impact on these new fathers. The analysis shows a pattern of language use highlighting dramatic changes. Compared with their peers, these young fathers are engaged with cutting ties with former activities, activities with which their peers still engage. The findings suggest the experience of fatherhood has a powerful influence and these young men are far from disinterested.

A defining feature of adolescent fatherhood is its occurrence when the father may be least prepared to meet its demands and this argues for the needs of young fathers to be considered by practitioners. This suggestion is consistent with the recommendations of Lehr and MacMillan (2001) who urge practitioners to make more effort to engage young fathers in their practice. A direct practical implication is the extent to which these young fathers fully acknowledge the stresses and difficulties they face. The practical implication being that adolescent fathers, themselves, need professional support, not only in the areas of child development and parenting, but more generally in attending to the sources of psychological stress, such as identity crisis, that the father may be dealing with.

Being young and arguably ill-prepared for fatherhood does not necessarily imply any erosion in the importance of the role that a father might play in the life of his children. Consistent with Rains, Davies and McKinnon (2004) we would urge professionals dealing with adolescent fathers to define them by their relationships with their children, since this is how they see themselves - as young fathers.

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