

“WANTING TO BE A GOOD FATHER”: EXPERIENCES OF ADOLESCENT FATHERS OF MEXICAN DESCENT IN A TEEN FATHERS PROGRAM

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Adolescent fatherhood has received limited attention in research and clinical practice. This article describes the design and implementation of a parenting program for adolescent fathers, largely minority, involved in the juvenile justice system. In the teen fathers groups, adolescent fathers were exposed to therapeutic (e.g., family-of-origin) as well as psychoeducational (e.g., child development and parenting) interventions. Findings from a descriptive phenomenological study with six former group participants indicate that the program is an effective way of assisting teen fathers in increasing their commitment as fathers as well as their involvement with their children.

The United States has the highest rate of teen pregnancy in the industrialized world (Singh & Darroch, 2000). Children of teenage mothers are at greater risk of suffering a variety of health, social, and economic disadvantages as compared with children born to older women (Hofferth & Reid, 2002). Even though extensive research and a variety of intervention programs have been carried out with teen mothers (Rozie-Battle, 2003), research and public policies focused on teenage fatherhood remain minimal (Marsiglio & Cohan, 1997).

One of the limitations of the existing research on young fathers is that teen fatherhood has been approached as a part of teen motherhood phenomena, ignoring important differences between the experiences of teen mothers and teen fathers (Thornberry, Smith, & Howard, 1997). This limitation is reflected not only in the way in which teen fatherhood has been conceptualized but also in the way in which research has been conducted (Mazza, 2002).

Teen fathers are considered to be a high-risk group based on the number of challenges they face: financial difficulties, educational barriers, relationship instability, increased likelihood of involvement in deviant behavior, and lack of developmental maturity (Marsiglio & Cohan, 1997). Because adolescence by itself is a particularly challenging stage of human development, the experience of becoming a father

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is likely to be much more stressful for adolescents than for older fathers (Kiselica, 1999). In addition, adolescent fathers who have experienced challenging family backgrounds of violence, poverty, and/or substance abuse are at increased risk of continuing patterns of abuse and neglect with their own children and subsequent generations (Wark, Kruczek, & Boley, 2003). Because the primary purpose of this study was to explore the usefulness of a parenting intervention designed for Latino adolescent fathers, and particularly for those of Mexican descent, the next section will contain a brief review of the research conducted with these populations.

FATHERHOOD RESEARCH IN LATINO POPULATIONS

There is substantial consensus that “fathers’ emotional investment in, attachment to, and provision of resources for their children are all associated with the well-being, cognitive development, and social competence of young children” (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000, p. 128). In addition, fatherhood research has also produced a vast body of knowledge concerning diverse expressions of paternal behavior, factors that influence father involvement, and the ways in which fathers interact with their children (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2003; Roggman, Fitzgerald, Bradley, & Raikes, 2002). However, and despite the fact that Latino(a)s constitute the largest ethnic minority group in the United States (US Census Bureau, 2000), research on Latino fathers continues to be limited (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000). Particularly scarce are studies focused on the parenting experiences of Latino adolescent fathers, including those of Mexican descent (Lesser, Tello, Koniak-Griffin, Kappos, & Rhys, 2001).

Research focused on Latino fathers needs to take into consideration the social, economic, cultural, and familial influences that surround their fathering experiences (Coltrane, Parke, & Adams, 2004; Mirandé, 1997). In addition, it is important to become aware of traditional stereotypes assigned to Latino men and the way in which such perceptions can be misleading (Hernandez, 2002). For instance, even though Latino masculinity is often associated with negative images (e.g., *machismo*) that depict Latino men as controlling and domineering (Falicov, 1998), Latino fathers also perceive *machismo* as an indicator of a man’s willingness to overcome extreme challenges to become a nurturing father, a compassionate family man, and a responsible provider (Baca Zinn, 1982; Neff, 2001; Torres, Solberg, & Carlstrom, 2002). This conception of *machismo* goes in line with *familismo*, which is a Latino value that emphasizes the importance of being rooted in the family and ensuring that one’s actions contribute to the welfare of all family members (Falicov, 1998).

Research conducted with Latino fathers has also demonstrated the importance that fathers place on promoting family harmony as well as being involved in caregiving activities (Toth & Xu, 1999). Such findings call into question perceptions of Latino fathers as authoritarian and uninvolved (Parke et al., 2004). Finally, Latino fathers’ desire to teach their children the value of maintaining harmony in relationships outside the home (Parke et al., 2004) is a reflection of the value of *personalismo*, which highlights the importance of establishing meaningful interpersonal relationships in a variety of social contexts (Falicov, 1998).

In addition to cultural values, issues such as financial stability and contextual factors constitute an important influence on Latino father involvement. For instance, research has indicated that higher family income is associated with increased father involvement (Fagan, 1998). Such findings have been confirmed by studies conducted in Mexico and the US indicating that fathers who are perceived to have a stable income by their partners tend to be more involved in child care responsibilities and household work (Garcia & Oliveira, 2005). In contrast, adverse contextual environments are detrimental to father involvement, based on the negative effects associated with poverty, social oppression, and violence (Lesser et al., 2001).

Research and Interventions Focused on Adolescent Latino Fathers

Although intervention programs for Anglo and African American teen fathers have demonstrated promising results in assisting young fathers to stay connected with their children and become involved in parenting practices (Kiselica, 1999), programs of research and intervention focused on Latino teen fathers continue to be limited (NICHD, 2005).

Because Latinos represent heterogeneous people from diverse cultures (Umaña-Taylor & Bámaca, 2004), researchers have highlighted the need for reaching a better understanding of the parenting experiences of specific Latino subgroups (Parke et al., 2004). Expanding such knowledge may also contribute to the creation of conceptual frameworks that correspond to the unique life experiences of diverse populations (Dilworth-Anderson & Burton, 1996). Of particular importance when integrating such theoretical frameworks is to become aware of the negative effects of stereotypes that tend to depict minority fathers as irresponsible, violent, or oversexed (King, Harris, & Heard, 2004).

The Need for Research with Adolescent Fathers of Mexican Descent

Exploratory research has provided evidence against negative stereotypes depicting Mexican American fathers as authoritarian and uninvolved (Coltrane, Parke, & Adams, 2004). Studies have also indicated that despite the multiple challenges experienced by Mexican American fathers, they are committed to remain involved in the lives of their children and families (Parke et al., 2004). Unfortunately, even though Latina adolescents of Mexican descent have the highest rate of adolescent pregnancies in the US (Martin et al., 2004), research focused on the experiences of adolescent fathers of Mexican descent is particularly scarce (Hernandez, 2002).

METHODS

Purpose of the study

Based on the above-mentioned shortcomings in research, this study constitutes an effort to respond to such a gap in knowledge and service to Latino(a)s facing issues with teen pregnancies.

In addition to offering to the community a parenting intervention especially designed for adolescent fathers of Mexican descent, we considered that such an intervention had to be responsive to the needs expressed by participants. Therefore, we decided that the most appropriate way to assess the effectiveness of the parenting program was by asking teen fathers who completed the group curriculum to describe their experiences as group participants, as well as the ways in which the group process influenced their experiences as fathers.

The purpose of this article is twofold: (a) to describe the design and implementation of a parenting program for teen fathers involved in the justice system and (b) to report findings from a qualitative study conducted with adolescent fathers of Mexican descent who were interviewed regarding their experiences as group participants.

It was particularly important for us to privilege the voices of participants in order to understand their hopes and motivations as young fathers. Their life stories constitute a challenge to the damaging and oppressive stereotypes often associated with teen fathers that depict them as negligent and irresponsible (Winstanley, Meyers, & Florsheim, 2002).

Design and Implementation of the Group Intervention

The Parent Empowerment Project (PEP) is a state-funded program implemented in a Latino(a) community in the Southwest US to strengthen high-risk families. Based on the needs identified in the community, the first author developed a parenting program especially designed for adolescent fathers involved in the juvenile justice system. The goals of this parenting program were both therapeutic and psychoeducational: (a) to increase the adolescent father's understanding of his own issues about becoming a father as a reflection of his experiences as a son; (b) to offer him resources to cope with issues between himself and the child's mother; (c) to increase his involvement with his children through increased comfort in taking care of a young infant/child; and (d) to teach the adolescent father fundamental principles of infant care, child development, and parenting skills. Prior to the recruitment of participants and the implementation of the groups, appropriate procedures to ensure the protection of human subjects were approved by the university Institutional Review Board (IRB).

The Teen Fathers Group Experience

Participants were teen fathers who had been placed on probation for various offenses such as burglary, possession and use of illegal substances, or assault with deadly weapon. A total of 14 adolescent fathers participated in one of four groups that were implemented over a period of 18 months. At the time of group implementation, the age of participants ranged from 13 to 17 years old. Twelve participants had only one child, usually younger than 2 years old. Two participants had two children each. The educational level of participants ranged from 8th to 11th grade, with one participant having obtained his GED. Twelve participants were living with their own biological mothers and two with their stepmothers. In contrast, father absence was widespread—only six of the 14 participants were living with their biological fathers, three adolescents lived with their stepfathers, and five participants reported that their fathers or stepfathers maintained only sporadic contact with them. Finally, the majority of teen fathers were involved in a relationship with the mother of their children. Three participants lived with their partners, five attempted to maintain a romantic relationship with them, and the rest were not interested in maintaining a romantic relationship with their former partners, although they were interested in establishing a co-parenting arrangement that would allow them to remain in contact with their children.

Once a group was formed and a first meeting held, group membership was closed. There were six group sessions, each lasting 2 hours. Participants were paid \$15.00 for each session they attended. The number of participants in each group was limited to no more than four to ensure that the necessary time and attention were devoted to each adolescent. The groups were led by the first author (Mexican male marriage and family therapy [MFT] graduate student) and one of two parent educators (mature Latinas from the community served by PEP). Parent educators had received extensive training in the Parent Management Training model (PMT; Patterson, 1982). The participation of women as co-leaders was valuable because they shared their experiences as mothers and Latinas.

Participants were advised regarding attendance rules, and the group leaders emphasized that respect for each person in the group was a first priority of the group process. Because trust is a key element for a successful group experience (Yalom, 1995), ground rules were established at the first group session to protect participants' confidentiality. The first three sessions of each group were focused on family-of-origin issues, exploration of their commitment as fathers, and processing issues related to personal responsibility. In these sessions, each participant was exposed to intense emotional work and invited to tell his story as a young father. Each teen father was advised of his right to disclose only those experiences that he wanted to share. Participants were told that if they chose not to participate verbally, they were still required to remain attentive and respectful when others shared their stories.

Teen fathers typically did not know each other at the beginning of the group. As the group progressed, they began trusting other participants as well as group leaders and became emotionally vulnerable, willing to share their personal struggles in depth. In addition to group discussions and presentations, participants were required to write three letters in order to process their family-of-origin experiences. Because group participants reported intense struggles in the relationships with their fathers, teen fathers wrote a first letter addressed to their fathers. Participants were assured that they were going to decide what they wanted to do with the letters. In this context of choice, participants wrote letters expressing a variety of emotions associated with the relationship with their fathers ranging from intense sadness to frustration and anger. The second letter was addressed to the participants themselves, by themselves, pretending that they were their own fathers. Adolescents were asked to write about what they wished their fathers had said to them. Finally, the third letter was addressed to their children. Teen fathers were particularly descriptive about the love they felt for their children and the ways in which they were committed to and wanted to remain involved with them. Letters were read to the group only if the teen father expressed his willingness to do so. It is noteworthy that by the sixth session, all teen fathers had shared their letters.

The program provided a safe context for teen fathers to share their losses, fears, and conflicts, as well as their hopes and dreams. In addition, the leaders actively encouraged them to be accountable for their actions. Themes such as personal responsibility, the commitment of being a father, and moral development were emphasized and discussed. The psychoeducational component of the group curriculum, provided during the last three sessions, included infant care, child development, prevention of abuse and neglect, and fundamental parenting skills.

Group Curriculum

Group participants were exposed to the following topics:

1. *Family-of-origin issues.* Family-of-origin issues were addressed first. Because of the critical influence that family of origin and experiences of attachment have on parental commitment and parenting behavior (Cowan, Cohn, Cowan, & Pearson, 1996), participants were encouraged to look at their family relationships, especially the father–son relationship. In the context of ambiguous loss theory (Boss, 1999), the teen father was asked to write a letter to his father and later, a second letter to himself as if it had come from his father. Thus, a strong component of the group curriculum was the emotional work addressing issues of relationships and father loss. Participants also processed the ways in which such experiences influenced them as teen fathers. The first draft of the letter to their fathers was often brief and vague. With prompting, the letters became more personal and emotional. Group members heard these often angry and sad letters with rapt attention and offered support and understanding beyond that of the group leaders.
2. *Personal responsibility.* Throughout group sessions, participants were invited to become responsible for their actions. Special attention was given to clarify the ways in which responsibility is associated with being a father. Addressing this theme was a challenging phase of the group experience because of the tendency in most participants to attribute responsibility for their actions to people or factors outside their control (e.g., blaming the mother of their child for “seducing” them). The presence of the female parent educator was particularly important at this point. She was able to challenge the adolescent males’ descriptions of their partners. “What would you do to someone who called your mother or your sister a bitch?” “Why would you talk that way about someone who loves your baby as much as you do?” Participants also became highly emotional when reflecting on the ways in which their irresponsible behaviors were a form of “getting away” from the conflicts and emotional struggles that they were experiencing at home.
3. *The meaning of being a father.* Participants were encouraged to reflect on their identity and commitment as fathers. Each participant was asked to verbalize his personal understanding of what it meant to him to be a father and the way in which he would achieve this goal. The third letter, to their child, and written after the two “father” letters was often full of promises of the love and support that they felt had been denied to them by their own fathers.
4. *Prevention of abuse and neglect.* Definitions, examples, and information about frequency of abuse and neglect were presented to participants, followed by discussions of potential scenarios their children might face in the future that would put them at risk of being abused or neglected. Teen fathers often expressed anger at the thought that someone might hurt their child as well as disbelief and outrage at the idea that their child might be sexually abused. The leaders used these occasions to remind the fathers of their responsibility to help protect their children by staying involved in their lives no matter what.
5. *Child development and child care.* Participants were given handouts describing the stages of physical development and expected developmental milestones (e.g., talking, walking, etc.) accomplished by infants and toddlers. They were also given booklets offering detailed explanations of the ways in which babies think and feel, including descriptions of cognitive development. This information was discussed in group. The naïveté about such information was exemplified by one teen father when he said, “My girlfriend’s family all speak Spanish and I only speak English. My child will be born speaking Spanish and won’t be able to understand me.”
6. *Fundamental parenting and discipline skills.* Adolescents were invited to reflect on the relevance of developing adequate parenting skills (Patterson & Yoerger, 2002). Concepts of parenting derived from social learning principles were taught to participants (Patterson & Forgatch, 1987) and methods of discipline (e.g., time out) were role-played by leaders and participants and followed by group discussions. Teen fathers were especially attentive to alternative discipline strategies (e.g., 5-minute chores, time-out) and admitted that the only discipline methods they knew were physical punishments or verbal attacks and belittling.

QUALITATIVE STUDY

The first author conducted a series of three interviews with six of the participants in a phenomenological qualitative study to evaluate the usefulness of the parenting program. An additional purpose of the study was to describe the experiences of teen fathers who had completed the program.

Study Design and Implementation

After implementing four groups over a period of 18 months, former group participants who had completed both the therapeutic and psychoeducational components of the group curriculum were recruited for follow-up interviews. Because IRB approval was obtained prior to the implementation of the parenting groups, an addendum describing the purpose of follow-up interviews was added to the original submission.

Eight of 14 participants completed both components of the parenting intervention. Two participants had moved following the group and their contact information was not available. Six participants failed to complete the group curriculum because they were rearrested and placed in a residential facility while the group was in process. Thus, six teen fathers participated in the interviews. The adolescent fathers were of Mexican descent and their ages ranged from 15 to 17 years old at the time of the interviews. Each participant was interviewed three times. Seventeen of the 18 semi-structured interviews were completed face-to-face over the course of 2 months. Three of the participants had a drug relapse, thus violating their probation terms. These adolescents were mandated by the juvenile court to enter residential treatment. The residential facilities included a local adolescent drug treatment program, a drug treatment program run by the state, and a long-term residential facility (the last two locations were 300 miles and 200 miles away from the city in which the program was originally implemented). The third interview for the participant in the remote drug treatment facility was conducted by phone. Fourteen months after the initial interviews, participants who had been referred to these facilities had all been released based on completion of treatment.

The descriptive phenomenological tradition guided this study because the purpose of phenomenology is to describe experience as it is lived and understood by people (Husserl, 1970). The guidelines developed by Porter (1994, 1995) were followed because she created a methodology that combines methodological rigor with philosophical inspiration based on phenomenological principles (Porter, 1998). Multiple interviews offered the opportunity for participants to reflect on their experiences and the content of each interview and to confirm or modify the initial input. This process resulted in increased data reliability (Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992; Porter, 1994). Interviews began with the following grand tour question: "What was it like for you to be a participant in the teen fathers' group?"

Bracketing and Self of the Researcher

Bracketing consists of setting aside preconceived ideas and biases in order to participate in the collection and analysis of data with an open mind (Porter, 1998). Such an activity promotes a process of reflexivity in which investigators explore the connections between their lives and the production and interpretation of their research (Taylor, 1998). The following description of the bracketing process refers to the first author because he conducted the interviews and carried out the primary analysis of the data.

The first step in bracketing was achieved by identifying major themes that arose as a result of conducting a literature review on teen fatherhood. In addition, the principal investigator reviewed videotapes of past sessions of the parenting group in which he was a co-facilitator. He kept notes of the reactions, emotions, and thoughts that he experienced as he reviewed such sessions. Observing the tapes also allowed him to recollect reactions that he experienced at different times of the group implementation. After reflecting on these experiences, he wrote a narrative describing the ways in which this study affected him at a personal level. Such narrative was shared with researchers involved in this study.

In his narrative, the principal investigator emphasized the way in which by "writing the other, we write the self" (Warren et al., 2000, p. 190), because he realized that major themes of his life were addressed by many of the issues addressed by the teen fathers. Such themes were related to family-of-origin experiences,

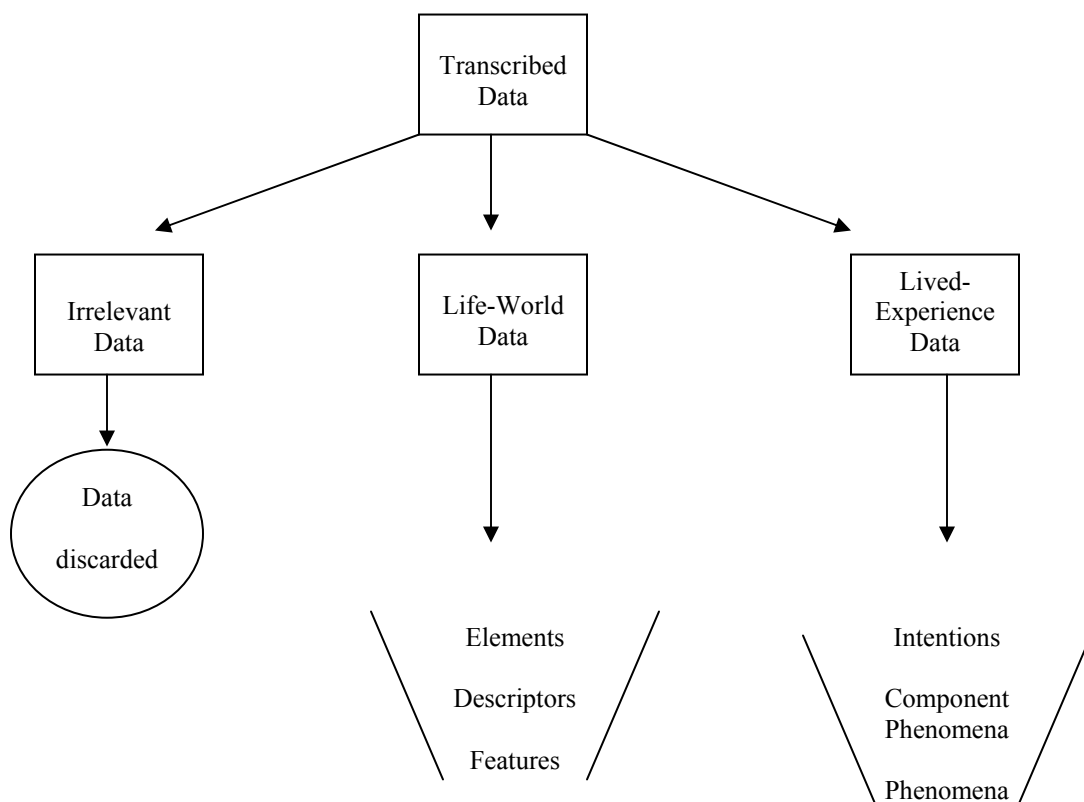


Figure 1. Process of analysis.

gender scripts, and most importantly, to his emotional reactions as participants were incarcerated or were successful in completing the program. This process was shared and discussed in numerous conversations with the research team, who assisted the primary investigator in avoiding a “tunnel vision” throughout the course of the investigation. This was particularly important when the first author experienced the struggle of hearing what he did not want to hear (e.g., “I like to do drugs because it is fun and I feel good”), in contrast to listening to statements he hoped to hear (e.g., “I want to be a good father”). In addition to writing the personal narrative, the reflections that resulted from conversations with other researchers were recorded in a personal journal, which integrated the diverse reactions that the first author experienced throughout the process of research.

Data Analysis

After transcribing audiotaped interviews, the first author coded data using NVivo qualitative data management software (Bazeley & Richards, 2000). Each distinct idea or thought was a unit of analysis (Porter, 1994), and was categorized as irrelevant data, life-world data, or lived experience data (See Figure 1). Irrelevant data were ideas or thoughts that were not relevant to being a participant in the teen fathers group and thus were not used in the analysis.

Life-world context refers to the “often taken-for-granted social norms and messages that the informant receives from various entities within the context in which he [or she] lives” (Bordere, 2003, p. 26). For example, when talking about their perception of group leaders, a teen father expressed, “Somebody is there who I can talk to.” This unit of analysis was considered life-world data because the role of the adolescent in this statement is primarily receptive. Ideas indicating a receptive role on the part of participants were considered life-world data and were coded accordingly. Finally, following guidelines set by Porter (1995), initial units of analysis were grouped together into descriptors, and similar descriptors were grouped

together into features of the life-world context.

Data related to lived experience refers to “the way that the informant makes sense of his [her] experiences” (Bordere, 2003, p. 27). Porter (1994) suggests analyzing experience by grouping data into three levels which are intentions, component phenomena, and phenomena of the lived experience.

Prior to engaging in data analysis informed by phenomenological principles, it is critical to understand that such an activity needs to employ the strategies of describing, comparing, distinguishing, presupposing, and inferring (Husserl, 1913/1962; Porter, 1994). Embedded in this process is a permanent exploration of the participants’ intentionality in reference to their experiences. Therefore, researchers must consistently ask themselves: “What are participants trying to do with their experience?” (Porter, 1998).

Having established this tone of reflexivity, researchers can proceed to analysis and categorization of the data. The first level consists of identification of intentions, which are the most basic unit of analysis of the lived experience. For example, the phrase expressed by one participant, “I told in group things that I would never say in front of people,” refers to lived experience data because such a phrase refers to a personal experience closely related to being a teen father. Embedded in such an expression is also the participant’s intentionality. Thus, this phrase seems to be an indication that this teen father is willing to be proactive about his participation in the parenting group by being willing to show vulnerability to other teen fathers, and by trusting them and sharing with them experiences that he had never disclosed.

After analyzing each participant’s intentions and comparing intentions across participants, similar intentions were grouped into component phenomena, and similar component phenomena into phenomena. It is important to clarify that although such a process might appear to be exclusively an activity of grouping similar themes, the unique characteristic of phenomenological research refers to the fact that the researcher engages in a process in which phenomena are the result of identifying dominant indicators of participants’ intentionality. To achieve this goal, the principal investigator arranged initial categories of lived experience data (i.e., 270 intentions grouped in 23 categories) into a visual format that allowed him to have a “first broad impression” of the dominant intentions informing the lives of teen fathers. Next, he wrote in his journal his personal reactions resulting from this activity, and took with him a notepad as he engaged in activities unrelated to the process of data analysis (e.g., seeing clients, attending class). However, and because he consistently asked himself, “What are the participants trying to do with their experience?,” unexpected insights regarding teen fathers’ intentionality came to mind at different times of the day and in different contexts. In such moments, he would write down such thoughts. This process of reflexivity led to four different drafts of data related to lived experiences, resulting in a better differentiation of component phenomena and phenomena. Figure 1 is a visual depiction of the process of analysis.

Trustworthiness of the Findings

Lincoln and Guba (1985) consider that qualitative research must achieve credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability. Credibility refers to the requirement that findings should clearly reflect the experience of participants. As Porter (1994) has indicated, an important benefit of having multiple interviews and a small number of participants, as was done in this study, is achieving a rich and deep description of the participants’ lives. Multiple interviews also enhance the process of validation of analyses by confirming preliminary results in subsequent interviews. Participants were asked to review the researchers’ findings from the first and second interviews in the third interview. There was good agreement among the participants as to the life-world context features and lived-experience phenomena.

Dependability and confirmability are interrelated concepts and refer to ensuring that findings are reasonable as a result of implementing adequate methodology. To accomplish this goal, throughout this study, researchers engaged in numerous conversations and triangulated transcripts and coding sheets. Finally, the first author kept an audit trail (Rodgers & Cowles, 1993) with methodological and analytical notes. Transferability requires researchers to achieve a “degree of similarity between sending and receiving contexts” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316). Because the major task in achieving transferability resides in providing data that make transferability judgments possible, journaling by the first author included a detailed description of the context in which the meanings were created as well as the way in which such

contexts influenced the process of gathering and analyzing data.

Studies guided by descriptive phenomenology typically have a small number of participants to ensure a rich description of experience (Porter, 1994). Capturing these experiences was enhanced by the cultural experiences of the authors. The first author is a Mexican native with extensive experience working with Mexican and Mexican American youth. The second author has 15 years of experience implementing community programs with Mexican American juveniles and their families involved in the justice system. The third author, trained by Porter in descriptive phenomenology, ensured that the research process was always conducive to the capture and transmittal of the experiences of participants as described by them.

RESULTS

Results will be presented in two major categories: (a) life-world context data and (b) lived experience data related to being a participant in the teen parenting program as well as being a teen father. This categorization is consistent with the guidelines established by Porter (1994, 1995).

The reader should also be aware that the names of the subcategories were first selected based on the researchers' perceptions of the themes that seem to better reflect the experiences of participants. However, as the process of data analysis and reflexivity evolved, the original names of subcategories were gradually modified and labeled in accordance with the words and phrases that participants repeatedly used when describing their lived experiences.

We considered it critical to clarify the process by which the names of categories were defined, because rather than considering that categories simply emerge from the data, we acknowledge that "categories are created, and meanings are attributed by researchers who, wittingly or unwittingly, embrace a particular configuration of analytical preferences" (Constas, 1992, p. 254).

Life-World Context Phenomena

Features of the life-world context indicated that participants reported feeling supported by group leaders and group members. Teen fathers perceived that group leaders cared about them because they offered them encouragement, companionship, and guidance regarding how to be better fathers.

Regarding the experience of group as a safe place where he could express his struggles and emotions, a participant said: "If you don't have anyone else to talk to . . . like, if you don't have your baby's mom to talk to, if you can't talk to your parents like that, your brothers, your friends, whoever . . . the group is the place to do it."

Teen fathers also felt supported by group leaders as the leaders provided information and encouragement. One adolescent said:

[Group] teaches us like things we don't know and different things about what a child will go through and what we could go through. . . . What we can do to be better people. . . . You also put plans and goals ahead of us, which was completing something in order to get what we wanted."

One teen father especially valued what he learned from the female group leaders:

Like when those ladies came in . . . I liked that and paid attention to it. . . . About what not to do and how to do it . . . and what was going to happen when kids get older and stages you are going to go through, and controlling your temper. . . . That helped me a lot. . . . They always told us not to give up. . . . Every time they came, they told us not to give up. . . . When they came, they told us. . . . When they left, they told us again.

Finally, teen fathers expressed how helpful it was to know that the group was especially designed to meet their needs as teen fathers, because they felt the community offered no similar resource. One participant elaborated on this:

I don't know, there's a lot of people to help the mom with the kid because she was the one that had the baby, but like, the group . . . it helps to think that a child needs his father just as much as he

needs his mother. . . . I mean, like there isn't a lot of things out there for teenage fathers. . . . It's all about the mothers . . . all about the mothers. . . . It's like . . . the perfect opportunity to learn more about how you can develop a better relationship with your child.

Experience of Being in Group

Entering the group ("Talking myself into group"). The teen fathers were initially reluctant to participate in the group and listen to feedback from group leaders, reflecting the fact that they were required to attend group by their probation officers. One participant described his reaction, commonly experienced by other teen fathers, "At first I thought it was going to suck, you know, I was like 'Why do I want to spend my time like this,' but of course, that's what I thought at first . . . like it was just a waste of my time." Another teen father reflected on his reluctance to participate in group:

And then you introduced this teen father thing and I was like "Man, this is dumb. . . . I ain't going to this. . . . This is dumb, I won't participate." . . . "Man, this is a goofy little thing." . . . I was already getting enough, like from my parents, "Oh, you should do this." . . . So, I was already getting enough, so I thought like "Man, forget these dudes, I don't want to know anything about that. . . . I want to go drink. . . . I want to go smoke." . . . I wanted to do my own thing. . . . I could care less about how other people thought about me.

Despite the initial reaction, teen fathers later recognized the importance of hearing what they were struggling not to hear. One participant said regarding this issue, "In the beginning in group you were like 'Ahh. . . . I don't want to hear' but then you started to be open . . . and then I heard more and be like open minded."

Liking and trusting. Slowly, teen fathers began trusting other teen fathers and group leaders and became more open regarding the importance of group. Teen fathers were able to trust group leaders because they felt respected and because the group leaders were nonjudgmental. After being asked what it was about the group leaders that helped him to open up in group, a teen father answered, "It was like 'We are not going to be mad at you or think less of you.' . . . 'We are not going to push you to the side because you didn't want to do this.'" Another teen father expressed, "We talked more, we communicated more. . . . Like I said, we learned to trust you, and we just trusted you more and more as we were seeing you. . . . and that's when we started talking."

Teen fathers also reported that they enjoyed spending time in group. One teen father shared that attending group was an opportunity for him to be connected with the person he wanted to be:

I started going and I started liking it because it kept me out of trouble and it kept me in touch with the person I should be. . . . And it got me to tell the person I want to be. . . . Group gave me a chance to say what I wanted to do, it gave me a chance to think what every child goes through. . . . It got me to be different than what I used to be instead of being so self-centered.

Realizing group is important in redirecting my life. Experiencing a change in their attitude regarding group was a common experience described by teen fathers. This process was characterized by a realization that group could be a source of support in becoming a better father. One teen father expressed a reaction shared by other participants:

Like if you are down . . . and you barely got to group and you are mad about something and you walk in the group mad. . . . Man, they'd understand what I felt. . . . Like they understand more and you feel like "Man, maybe this is right. . . . I should talk more and start to make a change for me and my daughter."

Realizing I am not the only one. Prior to participating in group, many teen fathers reported feeling isolated and embarrassed, thinking that there were no other fathers of their same age. One teen father shared the realization that he was not the "only one" after attending the first group session:

When my girlfriend told me she was pregnant, I was like "Man, I'm going to be the only one that is so young and has a kid." . . . So, I felt like the only one who had a kid this young. . . . But when

I came here, there were others like me.

After being asked what was helpful about group, one participant answered, “Just knowing that I wasn’t the only one going through this. . . . That there were other boys out there going through the same thing.”

Letting feelings out. The experience of getting to know other teen fathers who were facing the same struggles helped participants disclose a variety of feelings associated with their experiences of fatherhood in group. They described this experience not only as an act of talking to each other, but also as a process of letting their feelings out. A teen father shared the confidence he experienced in letting his feelings out while feeling assured that everybody in group would be receptive and respectful of what he had to say:

Like I never had anyone to express myself to, but the group was like, they were willing to listen . . . and I knew nobody would laugh or be mad at me because of the way I felt about things. . . . It was like the comfort feeling. . . . It helped me to express myself and just talk.”

Regarding his struggles with his father, one teen father said, “I feel better because I expressed my feelings. . . . I mean, I don’t have them inside no more.” In a similar manner, another teen father said, “It took a lot out of me . . . just talking about the relationship with my father.”

Valuing the bond. A unique experience reported by teen fathers was the process of developing a bond with other teen fathers in the group. Such a bond consisted not only in knowing that they could share their experiences in group, but also about the special type of connection that resulted from sharing their experiences with each other. A teen father commented on the importance of the group approach in contrast to an individual type of intervention, “There’s something about talking to a group of folks that makes you stronger. . . . It makes it stronger of what you are talking about . . . more ideas of what you can do. . . . It feels a whole lot better.”

When referring to the “bond,” another participant expressed, “It was just that in group . . . you know, that little bond. . . . It wasn’t like ‘Man, I love you,’ but it was like a group of males going through the same thing . . . you know, being there, done that.”

Hearing it from group leaders. As a result of trusting group leaders, teen fathers also became open to hearing challenging feedback from group leaders. A teen father labeled as “hearing the truth” the experience of being challenged about personal responsibility in becoming a father and the importance of taking care of his baby, “But you hear the truth . . . and you would be like, ‘Man, that’s truth!’ . . . and they would give you real tips about the real stuff, like this class taught me about how to be a better father.” A teen father described the most important factor that helped him become active in connecting with group leaders:

Yesterday after we talked, I felt really good because I was able to express myself and it made me feel good . . . and for the people that will be running the groups. . . . just let them know that they can be understanding. . . . That’s what we are looking for . . . and not trying to put down.

Of particular relevance was that teen fathers were open to being questioned by group leaders regarding their rigid gender roles. This was particularly important when issues of emotional vulnerability were addressed. A teen father commented about the possibility of modifying his beliefs related to this issue:

I know how it feels to feel disrespected if you cry. . . . I don’t know . . . like if my father would’ve told me that it’s all right for dudes to cry, that dudes can have feelings. . . . If my dad said it, that it is ok to cry, that we have some rough times. . . . I’d probably cried a long time ago.

What is interesting about the preceding reflection is that this teen father considered modifying his beliefs related to emotional vulnerability only if his father was the person who would tell him that it is acceptable to cry. Such a process of thought was common among participants and reflected the idea that a grown man who says that crying is acceptable must have dealt successfully with the criticism of other men who might have considered him as “weak.”

Deciding to write about my struggles. Several teen fathers reflected on the experience of relief they felt as a result of writing letters to their fathers. They had had challenging father–son relationships as a result

of years of emotional and/or physical distance and emotional/physical abuse. One teen father said, "When we wrote to our dads . . . man, I was scared. . . . I was like 'I don't feel like writing him . . . he hasn't done anything for me.' . . . But once you got it out, you are like, 'Man, I really got them feelings out!'" Another participant commented:

Writing letters was helpful because I wrote a letter to my dad and it was about how I felt that he wasn't there for me. . . . And I felt like I needed someone and I wished that he was there for me. . . . It felt better to get that feeling out, because you hold on to it for so long, after 13, 14 years.

Wanting to be a good father. A critical moment in group was when participants disclosed their desire to be good fathers for their children. After addressing their struggles related to fatherhood, teen fathers shared the desire to be present for their children and expressed their love for them. To transform this desire into reality, teen fathers understood the importance of moving away from their lifestyle and starting to change for their children. An example of such change is that participants became accountable for their illegal behaviors and accepted that they were heading in the wrong direction. A teen father described this experience:

I can't be pissed off at what my caseworker does because it's about what I do upon myself. . . . I brought this upon myself, they didn't. . . . They didn't tell me to get into fights because somebody disrespected me. . . . They didn't tell me to bring drugs. . . . I'm the one that did it, not them.

Recognizing the ways in which they could become more responsible for the direction of their lives was associated with their desire to be good fathers for their children. Such desire was expressed in numerous and powerful ways by participants. One teen father told of his love for his daughter in a touching fashion, "My child . . . she's not my heart, she's the top of my heart. . . . She's making it keep beating you know?"

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to design, implement, and evaluate a parenting program for teen fathers of Mexican descent involved in the juvenile justice system. Participants provided useful feedback regarding their experiences as group participants in the teen fathers group. The feedback provided by participants represents additional evidence indicating that the implementation of parenting groups especially designed for adolescent fathers can offer important benefits for teen fathers, their children, and their families.

Teen fathers in this study reported an initial defensiveness against participating in group as well as struggles in accepting their role and responsibilities as fathers. However, participants also stated that their interactions with group leaders and fellow group participants were important factors facilitating the disclosure of personal experiences in group and in challenging their views of their role as fathers.

The program provided a variety of topics ranging from family-of-origin issues, parental responsibility, child development, prevention of abuse, to basic parenting skills. In addition, themes such as the importance of being a responsible man that are important in the Mexican American culture were addressed (Parke et al., 2004).

The value of this program model, as reported by the teen fathers themselves, lies in three domains: emotional, behavioral, and cognitive. Each of the teen fathers had serious father-son issues, ranging from abandonment to physical abuse by the father. Therefore, the first step in the program was to help the teen father recognize and begin to deal with his own father-son issues. This process required time and energy because the teen fathers had walled off that hurt and were understandably reluctant to reopen the issue. Once they did, they were able to describe what had happened to them in their relationship with their own father and found support from the group members and leaders. The move to open up about the relationship, express their hurt and anger ("get it out of my chest"), and find group support also allowed them to address their relationship with their own child. The group was a safe place for the young men to express their longing to be a good father and their commitment to give their child the love and attention their own fathers failed to provide.

The behavioral and cognitive domains were also important. It does little to help the teen father if he is not given tools to become a father in deed as well as intent (Marsiglio & Cohan, 1997). The teen fathers' interest in knowing more about child development, expectable behaviors, and discipline strategies was remarkably strong. Coming into the group, most teen fathers had either avoided spending time with their child or had involved their own mother to handle any visits with the child. Further, most participants had little or no comprehension of child development, behavior and language development, and discipline strategies.

The extent of involvement in taking care of their children was also influenced by the gender roles that the teen fathers observed as they were growing up. Most participants grew up seeing that their mothers had the primary responsibility for taking care of the children, whereas their fathers or father figures (if present) were usually associated with the provider and extreme disciplinarian roles. Implementation of discipline was a particularly critical area for the teen fathers because, for many of them, experiences such as spanking, beating, screaming, or belittling, were common in their own lives. The idea that child behavior could be controlled by nonviolent and nonabusive means was new to group participants. By the time they reached this point in the program, they had already expressed their love and commitment to their child, and the idea of discipline that was not painful to a child was attractive.

This study also provided valuable information regarding the importance of considering the role of larger social systems in the lives of teen fathers and their involvement with their children (Thornberry et al., 1997). Issues related to social constructions of gender were repeatedly addressed throughout the group. Participants described the ways in which they had been socialized to associate emotional vulnerability with weakness as well as their tendency to raise their children according to these beliefs. However, the group process allowed teen fathers to reflect on the critical role that they could have in teaching their children the importance of emotional vulnerability, warmth, respect, and commitment in relationships (Spielberg, 1999).

In contrast to literature indicating the potential iatrogenic effect of group interventions for adolescents who have engaged in delinquent activities (Reid & Eddy, 2002), the group experience proved to be particularly effective for teen fathers because participants were able to come in close contact with other adolescents facing the challenge of fatherhood at an early age. In addition to realizing that they were not "the only ones," teen fathers developed a special bond with each other by feeling mutually respected. Furthermore, they were able to process unfinished business from their family of origin with one another. All these experiences are important characteristics that ensure a productive group experience (Yalom, 1995).

Even though Latino masculinity is stereotypically associated with negative qualities, such as *machismo*, Latino fathers have also associated *machismo* with becoming a nurturing father, a compassionate family man (Neff, 2001), and a responsible provider (Torres et al., 2002). As one teen father reflected on the importance of being a man, "Being a man is about taking care of your responsibility and not making cowardly moves. . . . Like I know my kids need me just as I need them. . . . We need each other." Another participant reflected on the way in which being a man would inform him when facing challenges in life, "By being a man, I'll be able to take care of the situation you know, rather than going out and being on drugs, and drinking."

The data were limited to experiences of the six Mexican American participants who completed the teen fathers group. However, the depth and quality of the information are such that subsequent studies can confirm or deny the generalizability of the results to other teen fathers with different characteristics. The rapport that the first author established with participants was important in developing trust as reflected in detailed and very personal descriptions of their experiences. However, because of that relationship, participants might also have been reluctant to express more critical feedback regarding negative aspects of the group experience.

Improvements to the Teen Fathers Group and Future Directions

Participants reported that they found every topic addressed in the group curriculum to be beneficial. They also said that it was important and relevant to continue to include such material in future groups. The

major recommendation given by participants regarding the improvement of the group experience referred to issues of length of services. According to them, they wanted to continue attending a support group for teen fathers. In addition to offering them the possibility of processing their experiences on an ongoing basis, a continuing support group would offer them the time and space to interact with other adolescents living similar experiences as fathers. Such a recommendation is in line with literature indicating the need to establish permanent community programs capable of offering ongoing services to teen fathers, rather than time-limited interventions (Kiselica, 1995).

Based on the multiple challenges reported by teen fathers, broader systemic interventions are needed to provide career and employment counseling to teen fathers, as well as developing ways to include other family members who are relevant in the lives of teen fathers (Kiselica, 1999). Of particular importance is the possibility of integrating services with the mothers of the babies to promote co-parenting arrangements aimed at ensuring the welfare of the children (Futris & Dean, 2003). Such services would not replace the male-only teen fathers groups, but would assist in developing more functional co-parenting arrangements, regardless of the relationship between the parents.

Because an important goal of the parenting group was to increase the level of responsibility of the adolescent father to the child as well as the promotion of a prosocial lifestyle, we consider that future groups should include a multimethod and multiagent measurement strategy. Although the groups offered us a number of indicators of the ways in which fathers improved the relationship with their children (e.g., informal reports from parents and probation officers, home visits to participants' homes and observation of the quality of interaction with their babies), the measurement of the group objectives should be increased in quality and specificity. Therefore, we consider that it is critical to include observational data of father-child interactions at different points in time, as well as assessments of fathers' functioning completed by teen fathers and by people closely involved in their lives such as parents, partners, and probation officers.

The group process that resulted from this intervention led to outcomes similar to those obtained in the implementation of parenting programs with non-Latino adolescent fathers (Kiselica, 1999). Such outcomes consisted of a reduced sense of isolation associated with being a teen father, the creation of a supportive environment in which teen fathers can share their unique fathering experiences, and finally a process of supportive mentoring and guidance which assists participants with their parenting responsibilities.

In addition to such outcomes, this study offers important information regarding the unique role of culture. First, participants addressed issues of masculinity that have a parallel to alternative conceptions of *machismo* (Torres et al., 2002). For instance, participants expressed that being a man refers to being a responsible provider, a compassionate family man, and a good father to their children.

Finally, the cultural values of *personalismo* and *familismo* seemed to be associated with the experiences lived in the group meetings. Participants expressed the importance of maintaining meaningful relationships with other group members and described how such bonding experiences led to an increasing willingness and capacity to trust other teen fathers when disclosing personal experiences. Such reflection goes in line with *personalismo*, which is a Latino value that emphasizes the importance of establishing meaningful interpersonal relationships in a variety of social contexts (Falicov, 1998). Finally, the value of *familismo* seemed to be associated with the numerous accounts of participants expressing their strong desire to be compassionate family men and good fathers to their children.

Even though the present group curriculum addressed topics that are important in the Latino(a) culture, such as the importance of being a responsible man, findings from this study indicate the need to offer participants with more opportunities to address the ways in which additional cultural values have an influence on their experiences as fathers (e.g., *familismo*, *personalismo*).

CONCLUSION

The teen fathers group offers an important way of supporting Latino teen fathers. Powerful insights shared by participants present clear challenges to popular stereotypes depicting Latino(a) youth as violently criminal, emotionally shallow, and oversexed (Hernandez, 2002). In the group, these Latino teen fathers shared painful emotional experiences and struggled to find new meaning in their lives. They took the risk of becoming vulnerable to their own issues. Further, they were able to express their deep love and

concern for their children. Considering their stories of delinquency, violence, and substance abuse, such depth of expression violates social stereotypes of these youth. Support for ethnic minority youth must go hand-in-hand with changes in the belief system of our society that guides our expectations for such teen fathers. It is also important to challenge the popular myth of “free will” and “free choice” that considers that the power to make individual changes in behavior solely depends on individual motivation and decision making (Warheit & Gil, 1998).

Ultimately, teen fathers and their families need to make critical decisions for themselves and their children. However, the process of making such decisions should incorporate a call for accountability for the ways in which, as a society, we have created a reality of isolation for people considered “defective” (Kozol, 1992). After having an opportunity to share his struggles in group, one teen father expressed, “I felt somebody was there to help me out. . . . I knew someone was always going to be there.” Having expressed his emotional struggles, the same adolescent described his motivation in life as a young father:

There’s nothing like I love my son. . . . I mean, it is just like a heart warming feeling. . . . That is something I don’t want to lose . . . like creating a bond with my son. . . . I don’t want to lose that. . . . We are going to be in each other’s lives for the rest of our lives.

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