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Pathways to Parenthood: A Qualitative Study of Young Puerto Rican Men's Fathering Roles and Attitudes

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Abstract

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By Sarah Divya

Background:

Low-income and Latino communities in the U.S. have higher rates of teen pregnancy, extramarital parenting and blended families than other ethnicities or better-off cohorts. Parenting research in these communities has predominantly focused on women and often depicts men negatively. This analysis takes advantage of a rich qualitative dataset to explore the fathering trajectories of Puerto Rican young men in low-income urban communities.

Methods:

We analyzed sexual and relationship life history interview data from the Philadelphia and Hartford Research on Education and Sexual Health Communication (PHRESH.comm) project. We used thematic analysis to understand the experiences of 18 young adult (18-25) Puerto Rican men who father biological children and/or acted as fathers to their partners' children from a prior union.

Results:

Participants described three different parenting trajectories. Some fathers had biological children with one partner and were still together. A second group of men had biological children in a relationship that ended, and then had biological children with a subsequent partner. The third group had biological children in a relationship that ended, and then re-partnered with a woman with children from a prior relationship; they then went on to have biological children together. The analysis shows that having children strengthens men's relationship with their partners, and highlights that fatherhood is an important part of men's identity. Being a good father meant being able to provide for their children. Their stories also show that men's relationship with children from a prior relationship may be strongly mediated by the child's mother.

Discussion:

These findings echo the literature on young Puerto Rican fathers showing that men gain self-worth from parenting and put importance on providing for their children, but deviate from literature that portrays these men as absent fathers. This is evident in men's description of the "gatekeeping" role that mothers can play between men and their children once a relationship has ended, particularly if the couple was not married. The analysis highlights the importance of promoting programs and policies that enhance men's ability to stay connected with their children from relationships that have ended, especially as the prevalence of blended families increases.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Shifts in social norms in the United States have introduced a wider variety of family structures today and the nuclear family is becoming less normative in many communities. Extramarital parenting has become more acceptable and currently many couples raise children in blended families structures, which consist of biological parents, co-parents and children from previous unions of one or both partners. From 2001 to 2007, the National Child Health Survey (NCHS) estimated that only around 48% of children under the age of 18 resided in nuclear family structures with two married parents, which included adoptive couples as well.² Just over half of the children surveyed were being raised in non-nuclear households, which included single parents, co-parents and external family members. Of the group living in these non-nuclear households, the NCHS cited 16% being in single parent households, with a similar proportion living in a two-parent non-marital or blended household.

Currently, Latino communities face higher rates of young extramarital parenting than other ethnicities in the country.² Although teen pregnancy rates are decreasing across most ethnicities in the United States, Latinos currently experience the highest rate of all groups.¹⁵ Within the Latino community, a portion of early parenting experiences take place in extramarital settings. Research has shown that increases in non-marital parenting among this group have largely been driven by differences in age of sexual initiation and childbearing behaviors as compared to other populations.¹⁵ The NCHS cited that from 2001 to 2007, 41% of Latino children lived in nuclear family households, while 27.6% were in extended-family households and 14.4% were in single parent households. Low-income families have a lower rate of nuclear family structures at 24.6%, and single-mother families account for the difference in prevalence of nuclear family structures at 32.7%.

In order to explore parenting trajectories, this study utilizes qualitative data from the PHRESH.comm study, which was collected in Hartford and Philadelphia over a period of five years. While the original objective of the PHRESH.comm study was not to explore parenting trajectories many of the young adult participants in the study had had children. Thus, the data provided an opportunity to explore these themes within this under-researched population.

Using life history data of young adult Puerto Rican men from Philadelphia and Hartford, the objective of this study is to explore the fathering trajectories of Puerto Rican men in low-income inner city communities. This analysis aims to understand the beliefs that these young Latino men have about fatherhood and the roles and responsibilities they embody as parents. In addition, the study aims to explain the type and quality of relationships men have with their children, and how these unions shift as they parent or co-parent children in subsequent partnerships. Prior research on parenting often focused on motherhood and the relationships women had with their children, while typically neglecting fatherhood or depicting fathers as being absent. This analysis provides a unique exploration into parenting among low-income communities from a male perspective, specifically the experiences of young fathers, which has previously been understudied in the literature.

The family types that this study informs are underrepresented in the literature. According to the definitions used in the National Child Health Survey, the families described here are all non-nuclear, because the parents are not married. They correspond to a relatively small percentage of Latino families in the U.S.: “unmarried biological” (2.4%), “blended” (7.1%), and “cohabiting” (3%). As a result, this study provides a unique opportunity to understand a particularly understudied segment of the Latino population. Two-thirds of the young Puerto Rican men included in the PHRESH.comm study had parented children before the age of 25.

This evidence lends credence to the importance of exploring the parenting trajectories of these men. The young men in this study showed three different types of parenting trajectories including the following:

- 1) Parenting biological children with one partner and remaining in that relationship.
- 2) Having biological children with one relationship which eventually ends and then having more biological children with another partner
- 3) Parenting children from their current partner's previous relationship as well as biological children. Some of these biological children were from men's previous relationships, while others were children they had with their current partner.

Chapter 2: Background

While the PHRESH.comm study was not originally intended to identify themes and trajectories in parenting, almost two thirds of the Puerto Rican male study participants had already had children at some point. Thus, this presented a unique opportunity to look into themes surrounding parenthood among low-income Puerto Rican men, especially since little research in the past has focused on fatherhood. As more couples in the country continue to raise children in blended family structures and extramarital parenting becomes more normative, it is important to understand the pathways men take in fatherhood. These trajectories directly impact their relationships with their children, partners and larger kinship networks. These pathways coupled with other factors, such as little contraception use, may be cyclical and could cause similar parenting experiences in future generations, especially in marginalized communities. Understanding the themes and challenges associated with young low-income fatherhood could help with the creation of social programs that ensure children get the best parenting exposure.

Before reviewing the analysis, it is vital to understand the major parenting research and literature that has already been recorded on the topic. Thus, we will explore how social norms have changed overtime, the impacts of these changes among low-income parents, the prominent parenting themes and experiences discussed in previous literature and the existing gaps surrounding fatherhood among young adults.

Parenting: Motherhood and Fatherhood

When analyzing family structures in low-income Latino populations, it is vital to first distinguish the difference between parenting and motherhood or fatherhood. Motherhood or fatherhood typically refers to the main two parents children have in their lives, while parenting can involve a wider network of people that all contribute in some fashion towards raising a child.

For example, in recent times many couples rely on external support systems, such as family members or friends, to help with the everyday activities related to raising their children. Since more than one third of births in the U.S. currently occur outside of marriage, many couples draw on a variety of people to aid the parenting process.¹ Children can be raised by not only biological parents, but larger kinship networks which include grandparents and/or their parents' subsequent romantic partners. Although our society does promote having a cohesive family unit, children are best raised when adults responsible for them work in a collaborative and cohesive manner. Although mothers and fathers do influence child development, it is important to consider other parent figures that can have an equally powerful impact on children's lives.

Although pregnancy involves men and women, social norms have often equated parenthood to be synonymous with motherhood. For a large part of the twentieth century, women were mainly responsible for childbearing and taking care of the home.¹⁶ Thus, in many communities women are still socially influenced to believe that they must endure the majority of the parenting role in their romantic relationship, based on their gender. Mothers are usually the everyday providers²⁸ and in 2000 a study cited that Latina women head approximately 30 percent of their households in the country.²⁰

In Latino communities, pregnancy provides women with a great sense of pride or source of self-esteem and motherhood is a welcome part of life.¹⁶ Research with both men and women in the country has also indicated that a woman's identity is greatly impacted by parenting and women often feel trivial without motherhood.²⁸ Also, women are believed to gain a greater sense of identity through motherhood than even marriage.¹ Research with low-income single parenting women has revealed that many have children in low quality relationships, due to their desire to become mothers, while they are often unable to achieve the high relational quality linked with

marriage, which is viewed as less of a priority.¹¹ Assuming full responsibility of raising children can be extremely difficult when relationships are not well defined. In order to provide for their children, women have often relied on established kinship networks or “othermothers”, which are comprised of maternal relatives or friends. Consequently, despite the desire and support to bear children, a qualitative study with Latinas in low-income communities who had parented during their teens, found that many of the women believed retrospectively that they had parented too early, since they received very little social support from their community during their teenage years.⁷

Despite the significant amount of research devoted towards motherhood, substantially less has focused on fatherhood. In the literature with Latino fathers, male parenting has been portrayed as a continuum of involvement, but most often negatively as an absent parent.⁵ For instance, past research with poor male fathers that had biological children depicted men to be uninterested in relationships and pregnancy as an unintentional consequence to sex with their romantic partners.¹ Even societal beliefs about gender norms allow many men to take on a relaxed or emotionally detached role in their children’s lives.²⁸ Other research with young parents in the country, has portrayed men as the financial provider for the family, with little intension to nurture or care for their children.²⁸ Although it is undeniable that many women take on a large part of the parenting responsibilities, male involvement can be equally important for the wellbeing of a child. At this point, little research has been focused on male parenting, the pathways they have to fatherhood and the motivations they have to parent.⁵ Even less has been devoted specifically to Latino populations. As gender roles and responsibilities change in work and home settings over time, it is important to explore how men adapt with these evolving family dynamics and their relationships with their children, especially since they are less likely to be the

sole providers for their families.³⁰ Thus, in order to get a comprehensive picture of parenting in low income Latino communities in the country it is vital to recognize the parenting pathways men experience and how parenting impacts their identity.

This analysis is centered on Puerto Rican male populations in low-income neighborhoods in Hartford, Connecticut and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania with high rates of extra marital and teen parenting. These outcomes are the product of a combination of various socio-contextual determinants, such as economic and educational attainment levels, which disproportionately impact certain populations more than others. Thus, the men in these communities face a variety of parenting experiences and pathways, which impact their involvement with their children and overall identity. Due to the lack of focus on male parenting in the literature, specifically in Latino communities, which face higher rates of teen pregnancy, it is essential to understand the pathways or motivators to parenting these men have, since these behaviors will directly influence future generations.

Historical Context

In the last fifty years, several historical events have dramatically affected the social norms of people in the United States, which have directly influenced health behaviors and outcomes. A woman's right to participate in the labor force is one such milestone, which has slowly led to various population and family level changes. As more women have begun to participate in the workforce, they have gained more financial independence and power in society. This has resulted in altered family and parenting dynamics and blended gender roles both within the workforce and at home.³⁰ It is important to consider these events when assessing how romantic and familial relationships currently function on a community level, especially in terms of parenting behavior and sexual and reproductive health outcomes.

Historically, marriage has been a symbolic precursor to childbearing, and in the past extramarital pregnancy was heavily frowned upon. In order to avoid negative societal implications, some unplanned pregnancies among young couples resulted in “shotgun weddings,” and people that parented outside of marriage often experienced excessive stigma.⁷ Over time, extramarital childrearing has become increasingly normative and more couples parent children without getting married beforehand. For instance, in 1970 only 11% of births occurred outside of marriage, while in 2009 40% of pregnancies were non-marital in nature.¹⁹ Also, increased availability of contraceptives has resulted in a reduction of teen pregnancy rates in most communities in the country as well as in other industrialized countries. Non-marital childbearing paired with increased contraceptive availability, has allowed couples more freedom to decide when to have children and get married.⁷ Although the Latino population has experienced declines in unintended pregnancies, this community still experiences higher teen pregnancy and non-marital parenting rates in comparison to other ethnicities in the country.¹⁸ Despite the increased trends of extramarital parenting, unmarried couples and/or teen parents still face significant stigma and external burden while raising their children in many societies.

Teen and Extramarital Pregnancy among Latinos

Although non-marital childbearing is highly prevalent in many communities, research has shown that teen pregnancy is still stigmatized in the American society, for both women and men. Teen pregnancy invokes additional stress during adolescence, a period that is already quite taxing for teens to navigate.¹⁵ Enduring the physical, emotional and relational consequences related with pregnancy can be especially difficult within transient relationships, families that may be more conservative or economically disadvantaged. Thus, the impact teens experience from pregnancy is very context specific.¹⁰ Some populations provide high levels of social

support and care towards teen parents, such as some Latino communities, although not always homogenous in their views.⁵ This illustrates that social and cultural factors shape what is considered normal behavior for community members, and thus each population has differing views about parenting, relationships and health among young adults.

Literature about teen pregnancy usually focuses specifically on addressing young mothers' trajectories and often neglects information about male teen parents. An analysis of teen fathers from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 cohort is one of few studies that focused on exploring parenting trajectories among young fathers in the U.S. The study recorded that most teen fathers were not living with their partner, only 8 percent were married and 26 percent were cohabiting at the birth of their first child.²⁴ The analysis found that over time, 26 percent of teen fathers were married, 28 percent were cohabiting and 46 percent were neither by 22-24 years of age.²⁴ Furthermore, 32 percent of teen fathers had a second child by 22-24 years, while 51 percent only had one by that time.²⁴ Of the teen fathers with one child, 34 percent lived with their children while 17 percent did not.²⁴ Of the 49 percent who had two or more children, 17 percent did not live with any of their children, 18 percent lived in a household with all their children and 14 percent lived in a household with some of their children.²⁴ Among those that had more than one child, only 9 percent of teen fathers had a child with a different partner than their first, suggesting they lived in blended family structures.²⁴ Thus, this analysis illustrated that teen fathers face various parenting trajectories within various family structures as well as the importance of exploring male fertility trends since they directly influence the household structures young children are raised within.

Currently, the Latino population in the United States is the largest growing minority group and teen pregnancy rates within this population are higher than other ethnicities in the country.⁹

The Latino population also experiences elevated levels of drug abuse, incarceration and high school drop out compared to other groups.⁹ These elements can make life more difficult to navigate and increase a person's risk for adverse health outcomes. Despite these risks, Latinos have also been cited to have strong family networks and place high importance on creating a healthy environment to raise children.⁸ Currently, Latino households are more likely to have children at younger ages and are less likely to be married when they parent.²⁰ These factors influence the parenting trajectories Latino couples face and the different types of parenting structures that are prevalent in these communities within the country.

Barriers to Marriage and Outcomes: Extramarital Fertility and Co-parenting

Despite the general desire to have a spouse in the future, there is conflicting research on why young people do or do not marry before having children. Research with low-income men and women that have both parented and co-parented believe they experience high levels of non-marital parenting because their communities disapprove of divorce.¹¹ Another explanation is that childbearing and marriage are not essentially linked in disadvantaged communities, since marriage has a high symbolic value and childbearing is not a sufficient reason to marry.¹¹ Also, research with low-income cohabiting couples with biological children has illustrated that couples desire to be economically stable before marrying.²³ Some state and federal policies are trying to encourage marriage in low-income populations to improve conditions for children, but there is little scientific evidence that this will solve existing social issues.¹¹ Since many couples engage in extra marital sexual relationships, extramarital fertility continues to be a common force that shapes parenting structures in communities around the country.

In the context of extramarital childbearing, children are often raised in non-nuclear familial configurations with single parents, co-parents, and half/step-siblings. In addition, as

more people parent children with more than one partner, they may also act as co-parents for their partners' biological children.¹⁹ Co-parenting refers to, “a centrally important family process for every team of adults working together to socialize, care for, and raise children for whom they share responsibility.”¹⁹ As men may enter into relationships where their partner has had children in a previous relationship, they may follow another pathway to fatherhood as a co-parent. While similar to step-parenting, research that has compared co-parenting and step-parenting relationship among low-income Latino parents, has found that there are differences that make these two family dynamics unique, including the involvement and meaning they take from their parenting relationships.³

Male Desire to Parent

When analyzing parenting among Latino men, it is essential to understand the forces that propel men to become fathers that have been cited in the literature. Parenthood from a male perspective is unique to the processes faced by women within the same cultural group, although both genders do experience similar views toward parenting as well. Recent studies show that men in low-income and lower educational attainment cohorts are more likely to become fathers in their early twenties and have children with multiple partners, in comparison to other groups in the country.¹³ Many men in these communities become fathers during adolescence, a time when they are developing their identities and do not have an innate interest in children.¹⁴ Some research on young fathers with biological children from one or more relationships, suggests that these young men are too immature to parent and thus have difficulty being involved with their children.¹³ One qualitative study among low-income fathers found that participants experienced pregnancy as accidental, “just not thinking”, unplanned but welcome and planned.¹ Thus, although not always planned, for some men pregnancy was an expected part of their normal life

trajectory they faced. Additionally, men may parent children due to their upbringing and relationships with their own parents.

Other research with young fathers with biological children notes that men desire to parent children due to an innate “fatherhood thirst,” which propels them towards childbearing. This research suggests that young men who naturally desire to parent spend little time searching for a compatible romantic partner and do not consistently utilize contraception, which results in pregnancy.¹³ Because they want to provide for the child as a parent, they solidify their relationship with the partner, but the union lacks cohesiveness, and the relationship with the mother often does not last.¹³ Based on this reasoning, this leaves the “fatherhood thirst” unsatisfied or unfulfilled, which usually results in future pregnancies with other women. One study on this belief among young Latino parents suggests that men do not utilize contraception because they are interested in starting a family and strengthening the partnership and love they have with their current partner through a child.²¹

Other research with Latino teen male parents explains that parenting is seen as a natural and accepted part of their life trajectory as they get older. In other words, parenting is a rewarding experience for Latino men and is tied to their identity and self-worth.¹⁸ In past research with young male Latinos, many men expressed excitement when they found out their partners were pregnant, since they had always desired to be parents.¹ Even when these pregnancies were unplanned, the men seemed happy with the situation, as they knew this was a potential result of their romantic relationship.¹ Parenting was considered a positive force in male identity and influenced male behavior since they were concerned about the way their children viewed them. Latino fathers placed a major emphasis on their role as fathers and valued being seen as role models or teachers for their children.^{5,21} Research with incarcerated teen fathers has

shown that Latinos who embraced fatherhood often expressed confidence in their abilities as parents and spoke about the importance of strong bonds between fathers and their children.²² For some Latino fathers, “having children is often the most positive and affirming component of identity that they have.”¹⁶ Men who did not see the importance of fatherhood or thought the responsibilities were beyond their capacity, were more likely to develop negative attitudes about their role as fathers.¹⁵

Other studies have found that Latino young men welcomed their roles as fathers (both biological and co-parenting) due to cultural norms in their communities. Although pregnancies were unintended, the men embraced their fathering role, as children and parenting are valued in their culture.¹ Based on cultural norms and support of fatherhood, parenting allowed these young men in low-income areas to move into a stage of independence and maturity. Men desired children, and saw fatherhood as an opportunity to get their lives together and build a family.¹ Another study of young Puerto Rican fathers found that “children challenged them to act more responsibly in the world—responsibility defined as being there physically, financially and emotionally for their children.”¹⁶ Other research with young Puerto Rican fathers found that men are more likely to be involved if their social network supports them in that role and social institutions do not hinder their fathering capabilities.¹⁴ Social support appears to have a positive impact on parenting for young couples.^{15,20}

The Ideal Latino Male Parent

Recent research has focused on the existing attitudes and beliefs the Latino community has toward fatherhood. Latino men are thought to have strict ideology about what roles characterize an ideal father in their community. These ideas influence how they interact with their children and the behaviors they employ as parents. A qualitative study exploring the

fertility intentions of low-income fathers found that wanted to have children when they were financially sound, had a stable occupation and were able to provide for their children.¹ Other research with young Puerto Rican fathers with biological children showed that planned pregnancies also invoked paternal responsibility to provide for their family.¹⁶ Young Puerto Rican men that had a stable income and were able to support their families financially were more involved in raising their children, since they were meeting their role as fathers¹⁴ and fulfilling their male gender role as the main breadwinner.^{28,30}

Although some men follow gendered scripts when engaging with their children,³ recent research with Latino families has shown that men are not set on being the sole breadwinners and are willing to share parenting responsibilities with their partners.⁹ One qualitative study with low-income Latino fathers found that they were more likely to be involved in raising their children if they shared equal parenting responsibilities or employed blended gender roles.⁹ As couples in this community began to share more financial responsibilities, they also had more equal roles within the home setting. In the same study, fathers that were more involved with the family (and not only financially) were concerned with family rituals and participating in the everyday activities of raising their children.⁹ Another study concluded that fathers that held nontraditional gender roles and equal parenting ideology were more committed to parenthood as well.²⁰ Having more equal financial responsibilities between partners is becoming more common, since more people desire to be financially independent before parenting, which also results in increased partnership equality.¹¹

At the same time, young Latino men in these communities encounter several barriers that can prevent them from fulfilling their roles as fathers. For instance, incarceration may interfere with paternal involvement²² perhaps because it strains romantic relationships and has various

negative consequences for family cohesion.⁶ First, incarcerated fathers have difficulty seeing their children, since visitation schedules are strict and the system is difficult to navigate.²⁵ Fathers may experience prolonged periods where they have no physical contact with their children, which impacts their relationship with their children and their identity as parents. Also, incarceration places a major financial burden on relationships, since there is no financial contribution while men are in jail, and they often have difficulty finding work afterwards.²⁵ Finally, incarceration and drug abuse can be emotionally destructive for young fathers, and lead women or their families to be more skeptical of their roles as parents and may restrict the relationship they have with their children.¹³ On the other hand, one study with Latino fathers, found that incarceration did not impact their contact with their children because their partners made an effort to maintain the relationship these men had with their children.²⁵

Parenting and Co-parenting in Blended Families from the Father Perspective

As more children are being raised in blended family structures around the country, more young people have to navigate between various parenting and co-parenting relationships.⁶ Usually after the dissolution of a romantic relationship, fathers' involvement is dependent on the quality of relationship they have with the child's mother.^{13,27} Their "baby mama" may act as a "gatekeeper" between men and their children and may have the power to dictate the type of contact men will have with their children.¹² This means that despite men's desire to maintain relationships with their children after the relationship end, it may not be entirely dependent on them.

When mothers have custody of children, men may seek subsequent partners who are willing to participate in co-parenting responsibilities.³ Some literature suggests that men have little contact with children after the dissolution of their relationship with the mother and do not

necessarily seek future partners willing to co-parent.³ This coincides with findings from a recent study with young Latino couples which found that 89 percent of women were not interested in partnering with a man where they would have to co-parent his children in some capacity.³ Furthermore, other research with low-income couples found that men who enter partnerships with women who have children from previous relationships try to claim fatherhood in their co-parenting roles, which is usually welcomed by women.¹¹

Some literature suggests that male involvement wanes when fathers establish new relationships, and men “swap families” – replacing their parenting responsibilities from their old family with their new partner and children.³ These new partners may also influence the type of relationship fathers have with their children and try to limit the time men spend with their children.³ This may be in part because past relationships and responsibilities can take financial and physical support away from their current partnership.²⁶ Also, research with Latino parents has found that parental involvement with children from past relationships has the possibility to limit emotional support towards new biological children from the current partner.¹⁰ This could also explain why many men rarely have children in the home or significantly reduce interactions with previous relationships.³ Research with low-income parents in blended families, found that children from previous partners have often received diminished benefits and support in comparison to the children the new couple has parented together subsequently.¹¹ Both partners (previous and current) may feel threatened because it is difficult for a man to strategically divide financial and emotional resources between children he has parented with multiple partners.²⁶

In general, father involvement somewhat declines when either partner enters into a new relationship or has children with new partners.^{12,27} As found in studies with young unmarried couples, this often occurs because both men and women want to immerse themselves in their

new partnership and show competence as a parent, which diminishes interaction with previous children.¹² Co-parenting relationship trajectories may differ between men and women. When women re-partner and have more children, the fathers of their first children tend to have much less interaction with their children. Whereas, when men re-partner and have more children, this phenomenon was not evident.^{3,27} Some literature hypothesizes that this occurs because women are trying to swap fathers for their children in order to consolidate the relationship and feeling more like a typical “family”.²⁶ Other research suggests that this occurs because young men find it difficult to navigate parenting relationships where their baby mama has re-partnered and re-parented with another man.³ In these circumstances, fathers may be less involved in order to avoid conflict.

Exploring the Stereotypes or Ideas about Young Latino Fathers

When addressing fatherhood among young Latino males from low-income communities, it is important to recognize that they have often been portrayed “deadbeat” or “hit and run” fathers when they encountered unplanned pregnancies.^{9,12} These depictions suggested that men lack desire or motivation to get involved in parenting their children largely in order to avoid financial responsibilities.⁵ Recent research with young fathers shows that almost half are still involved with their children when they reach five years of age.^{1,12} Low-income Mexican Americans fathers have been shown to be willing to participate in more maternal or feminine activities within the home in order to raise their children.⁹ Another stereotypical view of Latino fathers as well as men from other ethnicities is that their only involvement with their children is to provide financial support.⁸ While many social and welfare programs do push men to provide monetary child support to their children, young men also interact with their children in many other ways. A qualitative study with young Latino fathers found that beyond their financial

support, men were warm, nurturing and considerate parents to their children.⁵

In some Latino communities and media, parenting is often associated with dichotomized gender roles and scripts, such as the macho man and the submissive woman.²⁰ Historically, Latino fathers were depicted as disciplinarians who rarely exhibited intimacy and instilled fear in their children.⁴ Research with Puerto Rican fathers has shown that there are many misconceptions about “macho” identity, particularly in the focus on negative components of “machismo” and Latino masculinity in the U.S.²⁹ The focus on Latino masculinity as being tied to male dominance and oppression over women discounts more positive aspects of Latino male identity, including paternal responsibility, taking on the role of provider for their children, and a general respect for family.²⁹

Latino fathers in the US take on a variety of roles while raising their children.⁴ Some men may engage in more maternal or feminine roles with their children, while others take a more traditional approach, believing that the relationship with the child is contingent on the relationships with the mother.⁹

Benefits to Children from Father Involvement

Male parenting is beneficial for male identity and self-worth, yet it also has important benefits for their children.⁸ Enhanced male involvement results in increased emotional support as well as improved cognitive or academic skills for children. Additionally, research with Latino parents has shown that paternal involvement is associated with increased competence, reduced stress and better social relationships among children.⁴ The most crucial time male parenting can impact a child’s emotional or cognitive thoughts, as cited in a study with Latino fathers, is during early developmental periods, which has not been prioritized in the literature.⁵ Establishing early support and involvement can affect a child’s future academic capacity.⁸ Ethnographies with

male parents of various ethnicities and their children has shown that engaged and positive parenting by men is an emotionally enriching and essential experience for young children.⁸ Likewise, children of fathers that utilize warm, stimulating and supportive parenting approaches show enhanced reading and math skills.⁸ A study with young Puerto Rican fathers also found that children with involved fathers had enhanced cognitive competence, less stereotypical beliefs, and increased empathy and control.¹⁴ Other longitudinal studies with low-income fathers have found that fathers' human capital is directly associated with a child's cognitive abilities,⁴ and fathers' financial involvement has been shown to be beneficial for children and the family in general.¹⁴ These various studies illustrate the depth and extent of male parenting benefits on a child's life, their cognitive and emotional abilities, and positive implications for future generations.

An Exploration into the Trajectories to Fatherhood

Although more studies have begun to focus on low-income men, there are still major gaps in the literature. This analysis takes advantage of a rich set of qualitative interviews with men who have parented children during early adulthood to explore their experiences with blended family dynamics in Latino communities. This analysis aims to explore the roles men embody as father and the beliefs men have about fatherhood. It also aims to flesh out the relationships men have with their children. Finally, the study tries to further explain how parenting relationships and roles shift as men parent or co-parent children in future partnerships. Essentially, this qualitative analysis specifically investigates fatherhood in low-income Puerto Rican communities in the U.S. to bring more attention to this neglected population.

Chapter 3: Methods

Data

In order to explore fatherhood and the perceptions young men have about these roles, we used data from the Philadelphia and Hartford Research and Education on Sexual Health and Communication Study, also known as the PHRESH.comm project. This mixed methods project ran from 2004 to 2008 in Hartford, Connecticut and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The project was funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) through Cooperative Agreements with researchers from the University of Connecticut and the Family Planning Council in Pennsylvania (U58/CCU323064 and U58/CCU323065). This project aimed to understand how the socio-economic and community contexts of African American and Puerto Rican young adults shaped decision-making, partner communication, behaviors and beliefs surrounding condom and/or contraception use, parenting, pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). The target population for this study included sexually active African American and Puerto Rican men and women between the ages of 18 and 25 from neighborhoods in Hartford and Philadelphia with high rates of teen pregnancy and STIs prevalence. The Institutional Review Boards of all the collaborating organizations approved the PHRESH.comm study.

Design

Over the five-year period, the PHRESH.comm project utilized six different data collection strategies, which included both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. These research strategies built off one another over the course of the project in order to gain a comprehensive picture of the issues the young adult population faced in both study sites. The analysis presented here used the Sexual Relationship Life History Interviews (SRLHI), which

collected sexual and reproductive health information from participants from both communities. The target study population included self-identified Puerto Rican or African American women and men, born in either the United States or Puerto Rico, who had been sexually active during the past 30 days. Participants were recruited through a combination of active and convenience strategies, which included fliers, news advertisements, street or community outreach near colleges and libraries and word of mouth referrals. The project used purposive sampling to ensure that the study included equal numbers of participants from both ethnicities and genders. In total, the project collected 121 SRLHIs, evenly distributed across the two sites, males and females, and African American and Puerto Rican participants.

Once enrolled in the study, participants completed a semi-structured interview with research staff. There were four interviewers in both Philadelphia and Hartford, who were all white, Hispanic or African American women, with training and experience in qualitative interviewing and research strategies. Using an interview guide that included the main questions and probes to be covered with each participant, the interviewers chronicled the five or six most significant romantic relationships each respondent had overtime. Interviewers began the interview with the participant's earliest relationship and discussed all subsequent significant relationships until they reached the most recent or current partner. Interviewers tried to get an in-depth perspective on the nature and characteristics of each relationship during the session. Thus, the content of the interview varied somewhat based on the participant's experiences and the interviewer's style. The SRLHI interviewers were fully trained on the specific domains that needed to be covered in each semi-structured interview. For each relationship discussed, these domains included relationship type and quality, sexual activity, condom and contraception use, pregnancy and children, monogamy and exclusivity, and relationship end or current status.

On average, these interviews usually lasted around one hour, but were dependent on the number of relationships or responsiveness of each participant. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. In Hartford, the four interviewers or other project staff members transcribed all the interviews, while in Philadelphia an external transcription company transcribed the material. In order to ensure validity, transcripts were checked against the recordings to identify errors and guarantee consistency. The interviews that were conducted in Spanish were translated into English concurrently during the transcription process. Each interview was de-identified after transcription in order to protect the participants' privacy and maintain confidentiality. This included removing any personal identifiers including names, specific residence or work locations, or other personal information that could allow others to identify the participant.

The de-identified transcriptions were coded using ATLAS.ti software based on a thematic codebook. Initial code definitions were developed and a subset of transcript codes by three independent coders. The coders discussed coding disagreements by reviewing transcripts concurrently, in order to improve code definitions over the course of four rounds of coding. After finalizing the codebook, two coders coded each transcript and coding discrepancies were reconciled by a senior analyst for the first 81 transcripts; the remaining 40 transcripts were coded by one coder due to time limitations. PHRESH.comm researchers also wrote short summaries for each participant in the dataset, which included demographic information and an overview of the relationships and themes each participant discussed in their interviews.

Analysis

For this analysis, we focused only on the Sexual Relationship Life History Interviews data collected with Puerto Rican men. Since we were assessing the perceptions surrounding

fathering and pathways to fatherhood, only male study participants with children were included in the analysis. Eighteen of the 30 Puerto Rican young men interviewed had children.

This analysis focused on two project codes: pregnancy/children and baby mama/baby daddy. After reading through each transcript and reviewing the relevant coded segments, patterns were identified in the fathering trajectories that the young men experienced. There were three patterns observed in the data:

1. Parenting biological children with one partner and remaining in a relationship with that partner.
2. Parenting biological children within one relationship that ended and then parenting more biological children in another relationship.
3. Parenting children from their current partner's previous relationship as well as biological children. Some of these biological children were from men's previous relationships, while others were children they had with their current partner.

The thematic analysis then proceeded to examine similarities and differences within and across each group in order to understand the perceptions and trajectories of Puerto Rican men in this study in their experience of fatherhood.

Chapter 4: Results

Description of the Data

Out of the 30 Puerto Rican young men interviewed in Hartford and Philadelphia, 18 had children. Most of the men had one or two children; four participants had more than two children. All 18 participants were unmarried and currently in relationships. Most had children residing in their home, while two men did not.

At the time of the interview, seven participants were parenting biological children they had with their current partner (group 1), while five had biological children in relationships with two different partners (group 2). None of these participants still lived with or interacted with the child/children from their first parenting relationship. Finally, six participants both co-parented their partner's children and parented biological children as well. At the time of the interviews, four of the six participants in this third group were living with both co-parented and biological children, while the other two men were not residing with any of their children. Three of these men had children with a previous partner and then only co-parented in the later relationship, whereas three men had children within a previous relationship and then went on to both co-parent and have more biological children in the later relationship. The three groups all had similar age ranges and an average age of 22-23.

After thorough analysis of all the male transcripts, we documented three clear themes that emerged among more than half of the participants: 1) Men wanted to assume fathering responsibilities for their children, 2) Parenting strengthened their relationship with their partners and 3) The importance of the Father Role. Another notable theme that emerged among a third of the men in this study sample was 4) Having ideas about what makes up a father. These themes highlight the ways in which men in these communities face fatherhood, the roles they embody as fathers and the type and quality of the relationships they have with their children.

Planned Pregnancies

Juan met Sonia, his current “wifey,” in the neighborhood; they were really good friends for about a year and half before becoming more. One day after a neighborhood family party, they had sex for the first time and have been a couple ever since. They used condoms until one day one broke and they decided to stop entirely. She is currently pregnant with their child and Juan is very excited to be a father. He described how “our jaws dropped” when they saw the positive pregnancy test, but they “gotta do what we gotta do.” He said that they both had to “step up” to their responsibilities once they found out. Sonia is taking care of her nephew regularly and watching parenting videos. Juan was trying to get a better job so he could provide for his child, since it was his responsibility. Juan and Sonia are committed to each other, want to live together and raise their child together. He said that he and Sonia support each other and they plan to marry in the future.

Of the 18 male participants in the study sample, only four planned their first pregnancies.

One participant said that both he and his partner were financially sound and one day “We was talking about it and I was the one that was like, ‘I would like to be a father,’” and his partner agreed (3150, 93)¹. Two participants stated that they stopped using contraception since they had a good relationship and were financially ready to become parents, although different partners originally brought up the discussions:

P: She stopped taking the shot because we wanted to have a baby.

I: Ok, you talked about having a baby?

P: Mhmm.

I: And?

P: We discussed it and we both came to the conclusion that we wanted it. At the time, I was making good money. She was working three jobs. She was making really good money, so we had enough money to do that and support a kid (9196, 265-269).

¹ (Participant number, paragraph number from the transcript)

She was like, 'yeah, I think I'm ready for it.' I was like, 'are you sure?' And we just did it that one night. Bang came out my daughter (3164, 196-204)

These quotes illustrate that these four men all had at least tentative conversations with their partners about their desire to have children together.

Unintended Pregnancies

Antonio met Sofia on a phone dating service; she lived about an hour away. They talked on the phone for almost four months before Sofia came down to visit him in person. They decided to have sex for the first time the subsequent week, but did not use condoms. After they were together for some time, she found out she was pregnant, which was unexpected, but a welcome surprise. At the moment, Antonio is happy to be a father and in his relationship with Sofia. He does not want to get married at this moment, but does care about her very much. Mostly, he is thankful because she gave him his daughter, who he says he is in love with, and knows that without Sofia he would not have had this experience. Antonio said that they are actively using two forms of contraception, the "depo" shot and condoms, because he is not ready to have more children at this point. He is content with his life and would consider having more children when his daughter is older.

Across all three groups, the majority of participants had unintended pregnancies. When describing their experiences, they welcomed their upcoming role as a father and were willing to take on their responsibilities. When faced with an unplanned pregnancy, over half of the young men (10 in 18) explicitly said that they were ready to assume their roles as *fathers*. For most of these young men, this meant that they would provide for their families financially. For some, fatherhood meant a significant change in their lifestyle once they had children.

These young men assumed responsibility for their children by embracing serious shifts in their daily routine and lifestyles. One said he had to "step up" to new roles and assume new responsibilities. Another said it made him realize that he had to be "a lot more serious [...] I can't act like a grown up kid anymore" (9156, 216). One young man described how assuming responsibility as a father made him reassess his lifestyle in this way:

She was like, 'wow, I'm about to have a kid,' and that changed everything in the relationship. She was pregnant now and we had to think about the future, like we had to think about you know, like we were – the lifestyle that we were living like going out partying, clubbing (9300, 175-178).

For some of these young men, this meant a relatively drastic change in lifestyle. In one case, a participant stated that his relationship with his children motivated him to stop abusing drugs, since he thought his kids were “gonna suffer if I relapse on that stuff again. I don't want them to suffer, and I don't want them to see me actually being different” (9214, 89). These changes were also reflected by these men's change in mentality. For example, one participant said that a responsible father knew when to say, “I'm not ready... I'd just rather right now, stay with one,” if he was unable to take on the fathering role completely (3147, 128-136). Furthermore, two participants described how a man would ideally want to reach certain milestones before having children. One participant stated that “I got engaged...we did it because we thought the relationship would last longer” and he believed he needed to further establish his relationship before having children, since “we were planning to have a baby together” (3200, 40). Finally, another participant statement exemplified this theme, by adopting certain roles for the benefit of his child,

When I found out she was pregnant I did. I cared about her, but I didn't want my kid to grow up without a father. Most kids, you be there, but you can't be there when you're separated [...] With a baby on the way it was more the thought that, yeah, we have to stay together, even if it's not to be married, at least long enough that the baby knows it has a dad. (3200, 148)

Assuming the responsibilities of fatherhood make these men rethink their existing habits. They took their lifestyle changes seriously and took on new responsibilities in stride, particularly in terms of financial support.

I pay child support with my kid that's mine right now and the one that's coming on the way, I'm paying -. I gonna pay child support for him, too. I take care of my kids. You know what I'm saying? I don't leave my kids flat. (9294, 582)

Thus, these men illustrated that in order to be ideal fathers it was essential that they understand the responsibilities attached with parenting and be financially prepared to support their children.

The young men described their financial commitments in a number of ways. One participant said he “put off all the things I wanted to buy” and didn’t “spend so much money cause I got things to pay” for his children (9156, 216). Another stated that he maintained his financial responsibilities by sending money each week “for Pampers or whatever she needed it for.” He said he also arranged for his mother and aunt “to do a money order and send it to her” (3340, 993-1000). Another participant said that he assumed responsibility as a parent by paying, “you know, whatever I got to pay... I pay my child support” (9294, 847) Another man described the importance of maintaining a good income as keeping a “well-paying job that will supply our child’s needs [...] in every point in time until she gets older [...] and can start her life” (9301, 218).

About a third of the men described how an “ideal father” should be prepared to financially support his children. One participant stated that that he felt ready to have children because “at the time the lifestyle that I was living [...] money wasn’t a problem” and at the time he felt he could adequately uphold on his father role, since “financially it wasn’t a problem” (3321, 214-222). Another participant stated that his children did not “need no money [...] they

need things,” which he was prepared to provide as father (9297, 264). When faced with an unintended pregnancy, these young men also discussed the importance of an emotional investment towards their children. This was exemplified by these men’s desire to build a relationship with their children and in some cases grow their families further,

RD: What about PARTNER 3? Does she want to have more kids in the future too?

P: Mhmm.

RD: Is that something you guys talk about?

P: Mhmm.

RD: Yeah?

P: All the time. (9297, 455-461)

One man illustrated his emotional attachment to his children, when he stated that he wanted to “take care of my daughter the rest of her life,” when the mother was being irresponsible and he was concerned for his child’s wellbeing (9300, 464). Four participants described enjoying spending time with their children and being willing to prioritize their kids over their own desires.

I used to just be with her all the time. I didn’t hardly hang out anymore, like stay home more, help a job. I was playing my part you know, I was doing what I supposed to do. (3321, 187)

These quotes illustrate the emotional connections these men had to their children through expressions of love, happiness and contentment.

Fundamentally, the responsibilities of fatherhood translated to responsibilities toward their partners as well:

I: So how important is this relationship for you?

R: Oh, it’s very important. She’s the mother of my kids. I got to make sure she’s doing

good just as well as my kids.

I: Do you love her?

R: Yeah, I love her to death (3164, 163-166)

For male participants who were in stable relationships, the majority noted that pregnancy and parenting strengthened their relationship with their partners. Men felt more attached to their partners after they had children together, and developed a sense of admiration for them as mothers. Parenting also motivated them to improve their relationships. One said having children,

made our relationship more closer, because we both had somebody to worry about every day. [Parenting] united us, like brought us together more. She has my back and I have hers (3150, 96-97).

Finally, another participant said that having children made him think of his partner more fondly,

So it's beautiful and I don't wanna to break this beautiful relationship that we're having now. Plus we got kids together. We got two kids together now, three with our oldest (9214, line 89).

Another said that parenting enhanced his appreciation for his partner: “she’s a good person [...] responsible, out-going, somebody honest” and said he “couldn’t ask for better in my life” (3321, 527). Another participant said that he still cared for his child’s mother, even after their relationship ended.

Yeah. Yeah, I do. I did love her. And, like, I still do. She’s, you know, but not on the same level, but I still have love for her. And also, she’s the mother of my child, so that’s a special thing. That’s something that I have with her that’s unique from any other – all the other relationships.” (3307, 211)

For men in more tenuous relationships, parenting raised the stakes and highlighted the importance of investing in their partnership for the sake of their children. One father stated how parenting enhanced his relationship and his communication with his partner: “We sure do talk a lot more [...] like anything on our minds, if, you know we’re stressed or sort of buggin’” (9156, 220) Parenthood gave his young man more desire to work with his partners and “learn from one another.” Another man described how parenting “made his relationship even better” and said that his son “was helping them both” to be better partners (3158, 251-262).

Moving On

Jaime described how he had very little parental guidance and support during his childhood. His mother allowed him to start using drugs and have sex when he was very young. He had a rough childhood and was eventually emancipated during his teens, since he did not like the influence his parents had on his life. In order to support himself, he sold drugs. He also had minor run-ins with the law. Jaime has been with Ana for almost 10 years. She helped him stop abusing drugs and he says he owes his sobriety to her. Ana has one son from a previous relationship. Her son’s father lives in the neighborhood and has come by a few times, but Jaime considers the child his own. Jaime and Ana have two sons of their own, whom he adores. Jaime stated that neither pregnancy was planned, but he is committed to providing for his children. Jaime said he finds his current lifestyle funny because he was always against the idea of having children.

Although parenting did strengthen the relationships men had with their partners, 11 of the 18 participants’ initial relationships did not work out and they went on to have more children with other women, and the majority expressed their desire to parent. Of the men that went on to establish new relationships, there was a divide in their willingness to partner with women who had children from a prior relationship. Three men stated that they were not interested in having children with a woman who already had children. For instance, one man illustrated why he avoids parenting with women who already have children:

I: And she doesn't have kids from anybody else?

P: No, I wouldn't be with her?

RD: What do you mean, you wouldn't be with her?

P: I wouldn't want to support somebody else's kid. I couldn't deal with it.

RD: Why not?

P: Because I'm dealing with mines. I'm not going to deal with nobody else kid.

RD: It has nothing to do with the fact that it's somebody else's kid but more just the finances of it?

P: Yeah, also yeah, financing, but it's the man in it. 'Cause he's still—if the baby father want to be involved, he got to be coming in the relationship. [...] I can't handle that. I couldn't (9297, 466-472).

About half of these men, however, were willing to re-partner with women who had children from a prior relationship. One participant stated that he took on the role of father, even when the child “belonged to her baby father” (9294). Two participants said that they cared for their partner’s child as their own. For example, one father described his love for both children,

I: And how was it like? Because she had someone else's baby before she had yours.

So...how was that for you?

P: Wasn't my problem.

I: It wasn't -. You didn't think of it as...?

P: Don't concern me.

I: It didn't concern you at all?

P: I love that kid, like he's mine. You know what I'm saying? It don't concern me at all” (9294, 685-690).

Among these participants, fatherhood was not confined to biological children and men gained meaning from their roles as fathers to co-parented children.

Most men who re-partnered with women who had children from a previous union went on to have more biological children (8 in 11). Fatherhood was an important part of who they were, and the men described the joy they experienced when they were with their children, and the pain they felt when they were apart. Their roles as fathers shaped their decision-making on the nature of their relationships. One participant ended his relationship with his partner and “went behind her back, went to the court and took custody away from her” because he believed she was not a fit mother (9300, 455). He said that he took his child away from her after she repeatedly made risky health decisions and “from there on [...] took care of the child myself” (9300, 465). Two other participants expressed that their decisions to stay with their partners were motivated by their intentions to maintain their fathering role. One had been pursuing two different women during a period of incarceration, but chose to stay with his child’s mother since “she was there for me the whole time and the mother of my kid” (9214, 90-91). In these cases, maintaining their role as fathers was a strong motivation for partnering decisions.

Some men expressed their role as a father by making sacrifices they made for their children. For instance, when faced with the possibility of having his children taken away by social services due to his drug habits, one man surrendered to law enforcement to protect his children. The children had been removed once before, after a drug raid on his house. “I used to go to see them like one hour every Friday, so it was kind of hard” (3340, 941). Others described simpler forms of sacrifice, placing their children’s financial needs above their own and investing in their children’s lives.

I told my kids for Christmas...I give everything they got [...] You know what I'm saying?

It's just...that's my first Christmas out so I want -. I want to spoil them. (9294, 686)

Another said simply, "it's not your life, period. It's the child's life." participant exemplified his sacrifice for his children, when he stated, "it's not your life, period. It's the child's life."

He began dating Angela, who he describes as his "wifey," when he was about 17. She actively supported him through drug treatment and into sobriety. Angela had a child from a previous relationship who Manuel said he considered to be his own child. After dating for some time, they had a child together as well. Soon afterwards Manuel was incarcerated for almost four years and was unable to see his children regularly. He proudly spoke of the commitment Angela had towards their relationship and how she remained faithful, despite the circumstances. Manuel talked about how difficult it was to be an incarcerated parent, since he was unable to interact with his children. He was overcome with emotion when he got to see them when he was released. He now says he owes this to the effort Angela made to keep their relationship intact and how having children brought them even closer together during such a difficult time. Recently, Manuel and Angela had another child; he said they hope to have more in the future.

For the two participants who experienced incarceration, being absent during their child's formative years was difficult. It "affected me a lot...emotionally, mentally a lot" that he had to miss important moments, like his twins' first birthday (3340, 1011).

P: I was waiting for that moment so much that I didn't even cry. That's how happy I was, I didn't even cry when I first met him, saw him outside and I actually got to hug him and kiss him. I was so happy like I said, so happy I couldn't even cry. The tears didn't come out. It was a feeling that I could never describe. It was so emotional that your heart wanna pumps out, your heart wanna come out of your chest. You got butterflies stomach, you know. It's good, nice feeling, nice feeling. (9214, 132)

Another participant who was separated from his family due to his drug addiction stated that being away from his children, "bothers me and I really hate myself for it" (9196, 288-300). He

was, “very, very hurt” and cites that his separation from his children is “why I think I’m using still because I don’t want to think about anything” (9196, 288-300).

Maternal “Gatekeeping”

Pablo and Maria had an on and off relationship for almost two years. Pablo said that they initially used condoms diligently, but that soon tapered away and she got pregnant with his son. After their son was born, they both lived with his family, but after some time problems arose between her and his parents. Eventually, Maria and the baby moved to her parents’ home nearby. This made it difficult for Pablo to spend time with his child, since Maria’s family did not accept their relationship. He said that they sometimes did not let him enter the home or would monitor his actions closely, although he “showered him with gifts and money.” Soon after, he and his mother moved to a different neighborhood - he said because of the stress from his breakup with Maria. He continued to try to visit his son, but eventually stopped after Maria began a new relationship. He later began a relationship with Julia, who he had known since grade school. She soon became pregnant with his second son, and they started preparing for the child by both getting jobs and becoming more responsible. Pablo is happy with Julia and wants to have more children in the future—he jokingly said he wants to have more than his mother, which would be at least six children.

At the time of the interviews, none of the men that had children in a relationship that ended had any interaction with the child from their first relationship. Four men stated that they were unable to maintain a relationship with their children because of problems with their “baby mamas.” Their former partners took on a “gatekeeping” role between these men and their children. One said his relationship ended “not too long after the baby was born,” and he rarely had any contact with his child (3307, 60-64). His relationship with his baby mama was indicative of his relationship with his child. Another man said his child’s mother monitored all of his interactions with his child and “would try to pull him inside the house like I was about to kill him,” when he tried to see his son because “I needed love” (9297, 264). This participant explained how she gradually reduced his interaction with his child and eventually ended their relationship:

P: She didn't even trust me to take him around the block. Her and her family. [...] I was like, man, just let me take him. And I was already working, you know, let me take him to the store. Every time I went, she had to go with me. Come on, sometimes I need that bond with him by myself, so I let him, just stay right here and we'll go in the backyard. You stay here and then you just walk with him, [...] So that I used to take him, I had him for a while; I had her father and her mom watching me. You know what I mean. Binding out too. And her family, by looking at me all the time, take him. My own son. I did that for a while. Then, I ended up moving and then she told me she couldn't be with me (9297, 254)

Despite these men's desire to maintain a relationship with their children after ending the relationship with their mothers, many were unable to do so. They said they would "gladly take care of my kids" but were prevented from interacting with their children by their "baby mamas" (9300, 71).

Chapter 5: Discussion and Recommendations

Themes among Young Fathers

The results of this study are not consistent with literature or popular images of young Puerto Rican absent fathers. In this study, the evidence showed that male participants deeply cared about being fathers and this role brought them a sense of self-worth. The majority of the participants illustrated that parenting was a significant milestone in their lifetime.

Although men did not actively plan to have children, the majority described how becoming a father was welcome and pushed them to take on new responsibilities for their children. This goes against some past research suggesting that young men welcome fatherhood due to an innate “fatherhood thirst,” which propels them to have children with their romantic partners, even if these relationships are not well defined at the start.¹³ In this analysis, only four participants planned to have children, while the rest experienced surprise unintended pregnancies, which they accepted with happiness and “stepped up” to their new roles.

Within many low-income and less-educated populations, early parenting is common.¹³ All of the men had at least one child before the age of 24, which could be due to cultural acceptance of early fatherhood and the positive association linked to parenting among men and women in Latino communities.^{1,16} Men in these communities may have had strong social support networks and acceptance from their families to parent due to cultural norms in these areas, which supports prior research about the positive association placed on parenting.

Finally, the importance of taking on their parenting responsibilities in this analysis supports ideas recorded in past literature with young fathers. In previous qualitative studies with Latino fathers, researchers have found that men value taking on the role of mentors to their children, since it gives them the ability to enact the responsibilities associated with parenting.^{5,21}

The men in our study said it was ideal to be financially stable before having children; their pregnancies came before they were prepared, but they were willing to “step up.” These men are trying to be good fathers; more research needs to be devoted to understanding young fatherhood trajectories in communities with high rates of early parenting.

Maternal Role in Male Parenting Outcomes

The relationship men had with their children were sometimes dependent on the wishes of their partners—previous and/or current. Men that ended the relationship with their “baby mama” stated that they had little interaction with their child from that relationship. In this study, men described situations where women had power over the interactions they had with their children.

Several studies conducted with Latino men in low-income communities around the country have noted the power women have over the type and strength of relationship men have with their children.^{13,27} Qualitative research studies with young Latino fathers, have observed that father involvement is essentially a “package deal,” where a man’s involvement with his children is directly influenced by the quality of relationship he has with the child’s mother.^{12,26,27} While male involvement is often dependent on their partner, this is not frequently observed for female parenting. An observational study of Puerto Rican couples found that father-infant interaction clearly matched the quality of interaction a man had with the mother of the child, which was not observed for women in the study.¹⁴ Other mothers in the same study limited father interaction, since these men did not follow the boundaries or rules they put forth.¹⁴ Men with tenuous relationships with their “baby mamas” may have increased difficulty maintaining a strong parenting relationship with their children. In some cases, these men can be barred entirely from developing a relationship with their children and may reject parenting altogether since they are not given a chance.²² However, men that believe their relationship with the mother is

positive, warm or supportive, usually have more parental involvement with their children.^{14,22} Male involvement in parenting may not be entirely in their hands.

In many circumstances, women gain physical custody of the children when a relationship dissolves, which could also explain why fathers are less involved. Parenting studies have shown that physical proximity greatly shapes parenting, and children that do not live with fathers receive less paternal support.¹⁶ In this study, none of the men who had children with a previous partner and then re-partnered with another woman were still involved in the lives of those children. Children that are parented within already unsteady or undefined relationships rarely have consistent father involvement throughout childhood and adolescence.¹² Additionally, some men who are unable to maintain a relationship with their children, due to problems with their “baby mama,” have stated they want to be a better provider with other partners in the future.²² Studies with these young fathers suggest that this lack of ability to parent their children due to maternal restrictions results in strong desires to parent children in subsequent relationships.¹² In other words, this new parenting chance allows them to enact the “package deal” within a new partnership and could help explain why children from previous relationships are often left with little paternal support.¹² Parenting children with new partners gives men the chance to fulfill their father role and succeed at fatherhood, when they may not have done in past relationships.¹²

Latino parental involvement is not only dependent on the relationship men have with their child’s mother, but is further complicated by the support and beliefs of her family as well. A young father that is well liked and respected by his previous partner’s family, specifically the partner’s mother, will most likely have a better relationship with his children and be able to stay involved.²² In previous studies with young Latino fathers, some stated that the mother’s family was a large barrier for men to establish strong relationships with their children, especially if they

were deemed unfit or unable to provide financially.¹⁴ In general, young couples had better relational outcomes and less parenting dysfunction when they had better relationships with their parents while raising their children.¹⁵ Therefore, Latino young fathers were more likely to be involved with their children if they had a positive relationship with the mother, received emotional support from the family, and had their current partner's support for their relationship with children from previous relationships.^{13,15,25} This highlights that men are not always at fault for the little involvement they may have with the children; their parenting behavior may be dependent on the attitudes and actions of other people in the parenting network.

With the rising incidence of blended families, both men and women face complicated parenting relationships with their children. Particularly in the case of young unmarried parents, men may not have legal parental rights if they are not listed on their child's birth certificate. Where former partners hinder their access to their children, they may not have any legal recourse. Past studies have shown that parental involvement is beneficial for a child and their future health outcomes. Thus, it is essential to create programs and policies that give men power over their relationships with their children, upon separation from their romantic partner, especially if they had children out of wedlock. In order to avoid non-marital parenting as a hindrance to parental involvement, establishing policies or local programs that enhance the parenting rights young fathers have may be beneficial.

Men Not Actively Trying to Parent Children with Multiple Partners

Eleven men in this study had children within blended family structures and/or with more than one partner. While previous literature has cited that men in low-income communities often face elevated rates of blended family structures³ this may not be something that men desire or seek. In this study, it seemed that almost none of the participants had an inclination to have

children with multiple partners; they simply “stepped up” when faced with an unintended pregnancy, even within relationships that were somewhat tenuous. Those who had an unplanned pregnancy within a strong relationship desired to strengthen their bond with their partners by having children with them, which was also an expected and welcome role in their communities and culture.

The men in this study were unable to parent their children once their relationship dissolved, which could further explain why they had children with a couple partners. In the literature, many men described how this “gatekeeping” role by their “baby mamas” prevented them from developing a relationship with their children and could also explain why men in this study and in previous literature often face parenting in blended families.^{12,26,27} Therefore, although the literature cites that these communities face high levels of blended families, it does not seem that they actively pursue this role. Rather, it seems that these men desire to be fathers and strengthen their relationship with their partners by having children with them, which sometimes results in having children with more than one woman.

It is evident in this analysis and prior research with young fathers that they desire to have a relationship with their children. More research is needed on young fathers, especially in low-income communities, to understand how to improve parenting outcomes in this country. Programs and/or policies need to be designed to improve the relationship between young fathers and their children in blended families. This research should specifically address parenting issues, beliefs and experiences that young men face in these low-income communities. Also, we need to gain more insight into their recommendations about how to improve their parenting role with their children and target the issues that they inherently want to see change. This research should also target key stakeholders in these communities, such as healthcare providers and social

workers, in order to understand their perspectives on fathering roles and trajectories. They may have more knowledge about how these issues can be targeted, the most beneficial programs for young children and how to get these communities engaged.

Additionally, more research needs to be conducted with young mothers in blended families to understand why they may limit the interaction between their “baby daddies” and children and/or how they believe these parenting situations can be improved for the overall benefit of their children.

Desire to Provide as Fathers

The men in this study had the desire to assume responsibility for their children and families and provide for them. Although some men did state that they wanted to be there for their children emotionally as well, there was an overwhelming notion that in order to uphold their role as a father they had to be financially available for their family. This is evident in the literature as well, since research with young parents in the country has cited that men are usually seen as the financial providers for their families.²⁸ Additionally, other research with low-income fathers has shown that children rely heavily on the financial provisions supplied by their fathers, which is difficult for children that have fathers who have parented with several partners since they receive less financial aid.⁶

Although there seemed to be more focus on men taking on the main financial role, literature states that more couples have begun to share emotional and financial responsibilities related to parenting.¹⁶ In this study, men noted that they did have a desire to be involved in their children’s lives, as well as avoid risky behavior that would prevent them from being involved parents. There was also evidence that parenting was a transformative experience in their lives. This idea was also seen in the literature, in a study with Puerto Rican young fathers, which found

that parenting allowed men to transform their lifestyles and be more physically and emotionally involved with their children.¹⁶ Thus, as gender norms continue to shift and more couples face parenting in blended families, the idea of what qualities and responsibilities make up an ideal parent may change as well.

Limitations of the Analysis

One limitation within our analysis was that the interview data only included men that were in their late teens and early twenties, and there was no follow-up with these participants after their in-depth interview or after the study had ended. It is unknown how many of these men went on to parent more children with their current or subsequent partners, which could have enhanced the analysis's account of fatherhood trajectories.

Another limitation was that the PHRESH.comm project did not focus on parenting as a primary objective. Although the study included many men who had parented, it was not originally intended to get a comprehensive account of fatherhood trajectories, parenting roles and the relationships Puerto Rican low-income young men have with their children. All the parenting information we explored in this analysis was based on the things men shared on their own account during their interviews.

Strengths of the Analysis

After analyzing only 18 transcripts from the dataset, we started to see distinct patterns in the fathering trajectories that participants experienced. Data from Hartford and Philadelphia indicated that men described similar themes about fatherhood, the challenges they faced as young fathers within blended families, and the type or quality of their relationships with their

children. In the future, it may be interesting to compare how other racial/ethnic groups experience these issues.

Recommendations

After conducting a thematic analysis about the parenting trajectories in this population, there were two clear ideas that need to be addressed in the future. First, it is evident that there needs to be an increased focus on male parenting trajectories. In the past, there has been extensive research conducted with young, low-income and/or minority women to understand their roles as mothers. More research with male populations is especially important as unmarried couples are having children, are utilizing a more egalitarian approach to raising their children and blended families are becoming more normative in our society. For the development of social programs that work with blended family structures or young parents, more community-based research needs to be devoted to male parenting perspectives. This research needs to focus on both young men and women to understand current parenting relationships, what issues need to be focused on and how these young adults believe their relationships with their partners and children can be improved.

Future studies could also look into the implications of creating and implementing policies or programs targeted specifically at improving the relationships between men that have parented outside of a marital union and their children. Currently, it seems women take on the main responsibilities to parenting their children, and men may have little agency over these relationships. Policies or programs that give men rights and ownership over their relationships with their children may be beneficial to their role as parents, but also for the health and well being of their children.

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