

## **HOPES, CHALLENGES, BARRIERS AND ENABLING FACTORS: THE COMPLEXITIES OF BEING AN IMPOVERISHED YOUNG FATHER**

Swartz, S & Bhana, A (2009) **Teenage tata: Voices of young fathers in South Africa**. Cape Town: HSRC Press. ISBN 978-007969-2287-8 pbk; ISBN 978-0-7969-2288-5 pdf download. Pages xiv + 121.

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In this book, Swartz and Bhana foreground an underexplored topic in the area of adolescent sexual and reproduction health: teen-aged fathers. Given the recent interest by the Departments of Basic Education and Health in teen-aged pregnancies (see reviews by Panday et al [2009], Department Health [2009]), this is a timely book that highlights a number of important issues in relation to young men and fatherhood.

The book provides an in-depth view of a group of teen-aged fathers in two sites, one in KwaZulu-Natal and one in the Western Cape. Swartz and Bhana use a range of data collection techniques, including interviews with young African and Coloured fathers, an interactive social mapping exercise with these young men, and social network interviews conducted by the young men. A debriefing and consultation workshop was conducted with participants in the Western Cape at the end of the process. The stated aims of the workshop include the young men providing support networks to each other, addressing any feelings of distress, with possible referral to appropriate support services, and providing the opportunity for participants to comment on the researchers' analysis. These aims are illustrative of the sensitive manner in which the researchers approached their research and their interaction with the participants. Disappointingly, however, the data obtained in the consultation workshop are not made central to the analysis.

In Part 1 (Chapters 1 and 2) Swartz and Bhana carefully describe the background to the study, the methodology, data collection and demographics of the participants. In Part 2 (entitled "The voices of young fathers") they provide an interesting and in-depth discussion of the results. Extended excerpts, which allow the stories told by these young men to come alive, are interspersed with analytical work that brings the main themes together. In Chapter 3, which deals with coming to terms with being a young father, they talk to how the young men understand responsibility in relation to fatherhood, their (the young men's) stated reasons for their early parenthood, and the impact of being a parent on their lives. Chapter 4 relates how young fathers understand what it *means* to be a good father and what it *takes* to be a good father, as well as

fathering in the context of the young men's own fathers being absent. Chapter 5 traces influences, practices and relationships in the life of a young father, specifically the role of the young fathers' mothers, the young fathers' relationship with the child's mother and her family, and cultural practices that act as obstacles to involvement with their children. The last chapter in Part 2, Chapter 6, looks at the meaning of sexual health for these young men.

In the final part, Part 3, Swartz and Bhana draw their findings together, highlighting ten factors that either hinder or encourage sexual health amongst these young men as well as their participation in the fathering of their children. These ten factors, which I shall not repeat here, provide a useful overall picture of the work and highlight the central issues.

Despite the obvious strengths of the book in terms of providing a rich picture of the hopes and challenges, barriers and enabling factors reported by these young men, there are a few areas in which I was disappointed. Because only the teen-aged fathers are interviewed and involved in the other data collection techniques, the voices of the child's mother, the family of origin or extended family of the young fathers are absent. These were supposedly covered by the social network interviewing conducted by the young men. However, the data from these sources are not extensively used and the one that is featured indicates that these interviews, as least in my view, yielded rather poor data. The absence of voice beyond the young fathers has led, I think, to Swartz and Bhana providing a soft and sympathetic reading of these young men's actions. For example, they argue that "many use this adversity [absent own father] as motivation for being intentionally present to their own children ... these young .... fathers ... have not absented themselves from the lives of their children even if they are no longer romantically involved with the mother of their child" (p 54). Indeed, this may be true, but for this to be firm claim, I would have liked to have heard the child's mother's account of the father's involvement and/or some observational data of how the young man interacts with the child. Some triangulation of data may have introduced a nuancing of some of the claims made.

Swartz and Bhana state their theoretical framework upfront, this being "a qualitative voice-centred and interpretivist approach that used semi-structured phenomenological interviewing" and "an ecological framework" (p 7). This explication is useful; however, the embedding of these theories within the actual analysis was not always clear. In addition, given the rich work that has been done in the area of masculinities and gender studies in South Africa (and elsewhere), the lack of reference to this work is disappointing. I found myself thinking on a number of occasions that had this literature been made more central, the analysis would have been richer and more incisive. For example, the authors could have discussed the gendered implication of the term "spare wheel" (a term used by participants in the context of multiple concurrent partnerships: if your girlfriend breaks up with you, you have a "spare wheel"). In addition, although patriarchal arrangements are mentioned in passing, there could have been a more sustained analysis of patriarchal arrangements impacting on these men's lives.

The title of book is, possibly, misleading. As indicated, the authors wish to provide an "in-depth portrait of the experiences of impoverished young men in the South African

context who became fathers as teenagers” (p ix). Perhaps, given this, the sub-title would more suitably be “voices of impoverished young fathers”.

Despite these limitations, this is very useful book that should be read by students and lecturers in a range of disciplines, including public health, nursing, education, health psychology, medical sociology, and medical anthropology. It opens the window on an understudied area in adolescent sexual and reproductive health, and provides a range of excellent insights that should be considered in educational and health interventions with regard to young people who parent.

## **REFERENCES.**

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