



## The experience of repeated fatherhood during adolescence

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** to examine how adolescent fathers experience recurring parenthood.

**Design:** qualitative study with a social phenomenological focus.

**Participants:** five fathers between 16 and 19 years of age, each with two children.

**Findings:** the participants perceived themselves as mature, responsible, worried about the care and education of their children, and desiring a secure future life. These factors made them seek employment, their own home, marital stability, construction of a family and return to school. They experienced the ambivalence of desiring one reality and living another, given that, as adolescent parents, they regretted the loss of their freedom.

**Key conclusions:** recurring parenthood in adolescence is a complex phenomenon, with many possible perceptions. The diverse experiences depend on the social context that is defined by the wishes, plans, possibilities and meanings of each distinct social class.

**Implications for practice:** care delivery to these adolescents should consider not only theoretical and chronobiological aspects, but also the experiences of these young people and the psychosocial and cultural factors involved in their fatherhood.

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### Introduction

The period of adolescence is characterised by the development of psychological processes and role identification with adults. During this period, childhood behaviour and patterns are questioned and re-elaborated to facilitate the teenager's entrance into the adult world. As such, the adolescent must construct his own identity, including the development of emotional, sexual and professional characteristics. During this phase of development, parenthood only adds new conflicts to the search for identity, and can potentially result in the destructuring of the personality.

According to the Organización Panamericana de Salud (1992), the news of a teenage pregnancy is generally received with a negative reaction by the partner, the family and within the adolescent's social milieu (work and school). In a study involving 28 adolescent fathers, 21 declared that procreation had occurred earlier than they had planned (Westney et al., 1986). The results showed lack of preparation for fatherhood and lack of readiness, which had a negative influence on the adolescent's initial reaction to the news about the pregnancy.

In the state of São Paulo, Brazil, a total of 45,000 adolescents gave birth to their third baby (Cotes et al., 2004). A recent study by Bocardi (2003) reported that 40% of adolescents became pregnant again within 36 months of their first pregnancy. Full understanding of recurring pregnancy among adolescents requires the analysis of a range of contributing factors, at various levels of analysis and by diverse professional fields. In its most elementary form, an understanding of recurring adolescent pregnancy resides in the social transformations that have taken place within the past decades, as well as associated psychosocial factors.

In the light of such diverse contributing factors, Carvalho and Barros (2004) investigated 100 individuals, aged 12–19 years, and reported rates of 14% and 5% for second pregnancies and third pregnancies, respectively, during adolescence. According to Almeida et al. (2003), pregnancy in adolescence is a serious challenge that must be faced head-on. Their study revealed that 24% of 140 adolescents interviewed in the state of São Paulo were already in their second, third, fourth or fifth pregnancy, and 10% had had at least one abortion. A recent study by Gomes (2004) performed at a charitable maternity hospital in the city of São Paulo suggested a recurrence rate for adolescent pregnancy of 30.4%, and Bello and Pinto e Silva (2004) reported a recurrence rate (two or more pregnancies) of 22.2%.

A recent study in the USA identified various determining factors associated with recurrent pregnancies among adolescents,

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including poor parent–child relationship, inconsistent and conflicting ideas of the roles expected of the adolescent mother, social pressures which limit an effective paternal role, and limited access to social services for all family members. According to Marsiglio (1993), the majority of studies on adolescent pregnancy and parenthood address the subject from the perspective of the adolescent, utilising a positivistic approach and based on objective and causal facts rather than the experience lived by the individuals. The partner of the adolescent mother is, in most cases, also an adolescent or a very young adult, with similar educational and professional profiles and social class as the mother. Commonly, such pregnancies are not planned and force the adolescent into the labour market into underpaid positions, and into an earlier than expected marriage in which sexual activity, without the use of contraceptive methods, results in a large number of children (Carvalho and Merighi, 2004).

Typically, the focus is on the consequences to the mother, whereas the father is forgotten (Marsiglio, 1993; Bull and Hogue, 1998; Fonseca, 2001; Levandowski, 2001; Medrado and Lira, 2006). However, the current study focused on adolescent fathers. Fatherhood in this age group can be seen as an affirmation of virility. As such, young adolescents, realising that they are responsible for an early pregnancy, are less likely to use or encourage the use of contraceptives, compared with young adults who have never made anyone pregnant. The former individuals typically relate a feeling of ‘pleasure’ associated with parenthood, as well as a perceived emphasis of their masculinity (Marsiglio, 1993).

The aim of the current study was to identify and improve understanding of the perception of adolescent fathers regarding parenthood during adolescence in order to address the lack of knowledge on this topic in the current literature. It is hoped that the results of this study will facilitate the work of treating adolescents, and contribute to future research and development of social programmes directed at adolescents.

## Methods

The current study utilised a qualitative phenomenological perspective, based on the work of Alfred Schütz. In the process of reflecting on the subject of recurrent pregnancies during adolescence, the authors sought to understand the experiences of becoming an adolescent father and the causes of recurring parenthood in this age group. In addition, the focus was not solely on the action of one individual, but rather on the significance and the effects of the action on all those concerned. In this manner, social phenomenology facilitates the investigation of individual behaviour, and also permits the understanding of the experiences felt by a social group, within a specific situation.

Schütz’s motivation theory was used to analyse the impulses that led these adolescents to act in the way they did (Schütz, 1974). To the philosopher, people’s actions are a function of their motivations for their future, their ‘in-order-to motives’. At times, their actions are rooted in past experiences and in the personality type developed during their life, i.e. their ‘because motives’.

Schütz established that the individual’s action originates in the conscious mind, is voluntary and is directed towards the future. Its temporal structure is integrally related with the planned ‘project’ at hand. In this manner, human or social action is a behaviour directed at the realisation of a specific action or act—the ‘in-order-to motive’—which can only be interpreted subjectively by the individual, for only he can define his action project, or plan, and the manner in which he functions in society.

Among the questions highlighted during the interview, the authors focused on the individual’s expectations, so as to understand

his plans, objectives and actions; in other words, his ‘in-order-to motives’. In the process of analysing the descriptions of each individual’s experiences, the authors tried to understand his ‘because motives’ in order to place the action into context.

The interviews were held by one of the authors (male). They were tape-recorded and transcribed by the interviewer. The adolescents’ parents or legal representatives gave their legal consent but were not present at the time of the interviews.

Six adolescent fathers aged 16–19 years were interviewed, but the discourse of only five of them was used for data analysis as their meaning was richer. The number of participants in the study was not previously determined, but was based on the descriptions obtained from the questionnaires. In this manner, the authors decided to stop data collection once the responses began to repeat themselves and show signs of a specific phenomenon. Inclusion criteria were: being an adolescent and having more than one child.

Subjects were initially contacted at the Gynaecology and Obstetrics Outpatient Clinic of the Ipiranga Hospital, São Paulo, following approval of the study by the hospital review board. In order to increase the number of possible study candidates, those initially contacted were asked to refer other adolescents in the same situation. Examples of questions asked during the interview included: ‘How did you feel being a parent for the first time?’, ‘How did the birth of the other child come about?’, ‘What is it like to be a parent, more than once, during adolescence?’ and ‘What do you look forward to for your future while being such a young parent?’ The questions were not asked in any specific order. In this manner, the adolescents were able to express themselves freely based on their personal experiences. Particular care was taken to ensure that adolescents had the freedom to relate their experiences spontaneously in an unrestricted manner, so as to be able to describe their experiences and expectations for the future more precisely.

This study followed the guidelines of Resolution 196/96 of the National Health Council relating to research involving human subjects. Prior to the interview, the participants were informed about the objectives of the study, and they were given and signed the appropriate consent forms. Given that the participants were adolescents, the consent form was also signed by a witness or by the person legally responsible for the adolescent. Pseudonyms were used in the study in order to protect the identity of the participants. The study was also reviewed and approved by the Ethics in Research Committee of the Nursing School at the University of São Paulo.

Specific ‘life experience types’ were identified, relative to recurring parenthood during adolescence, based on the different categories that emerged from the ‘in-order-to motives’ and the ‘because motives’.

## Comprehensive analysis

Before starting the study analysis, a brief characterisation of the participants is needed: Jacinto, 16 years old, two children; Crisólito, 18 years old, two children; Ônix, 18 years old, two children; Topázio, 19 years old, two children; and Diamante, 19 years old, two children and his new girlfriend is expecting his third child.

The ‘life experience type’ is a construct based on life experiences in their most common sense and within a defined social context. As such, the comprehensive analysis of the responses given was based on their social behaviour with respect to their motives, the intentions guiding their actions, and the meaning of their behaviour to them.

The adolescents perceived themselves as mature, responsible, worried about the care and education of their children, and desiring a secure future life. These factors made them seek employment, their own home, marital stability, construction of a family and return to school. They experienced the ambivalence of desiring one reality and living another, given that, as adolescent parents, they regretted the loss of their freedom.

The comprehensive analysis included all interviews as a single set. Attentive and detailed reading of each report was undertaken to identify the global meaning of the experience. In subsequent readings, converging themes were grouped, i.e. aspects related to the same subject. These themes were analysed according to Schütz's phenomenological thinking.

Responses to questions were analysed based on the percept of Schütz, resulting in five different thematic categories: (1) the contextualisation of the perception of being an adolescent father or mother, which contained two subcategories: being a parent for the first time and being a recurring parent; (2) the feeling or experience of loss; (3) the feeling or experience of gain, also with two subcategories: perceiving oneself as mature/responsible and expressing satisfaction with parenthood; (4) the search for security for the future; and (5) the feeling of ambivalence. The first three categories were related to the 'because motive', i.e. related to the reality that the study participants experienced, and the last two categories were related to 'in-order-to motives', i.e. related to the action, projects or plans that the participant expected to achieve.

In the category 'contextualisation of the perception of being an adolescent father or mother', participants expressed astonishment, enchantment, surprise and satisfaction with respect to the birth of their first child:

...When the first one was born, it was a surprise, you know, that moment that you see the child, you know, in the nursery, you kind of can't explain it, you know? My heart started to beat faster, tears began to fall, it's such an extraordinary emotion... (Topázio)

The experiences and transformations of the adolescents were individual experiences and should be understood in the context of their 'own world', and within what was, to them, a 'natural attitude', relative to their biographic situation, and not the generalised chronobiological concept so commonly found in the current literature regarding pregnancy during adolescence. Schütz (1972, 1974) stated that, even though society tends to standardise all social action, each individual situates himself in life in his own personalised manner, known as the 'biographic situation'.

There seems to be a search for stability by adolescents, as noted in the perception of the son as something 'owned'. This perception may be associated with an attempt to become autonomous, to reach maturity and realise their own capabilities by being able to care for the child. Sometimes, the adolescents' discourse expressed feelings of surprise and strangeness due to the difficulty of the situation, or even hate and solitude:

...At first I thought it was strange. But later I got used to it. But we planned to have him, there was no problem... First I thought it was strange, then I got used to it... it's good, I don't think it's bad, not bad. I think I am a good father, yea... I help to take care of him, change the diapers, bathe him... (Jacinto)

The figure of the mother, particularly the adolescent's own mother, is an important reference to the adolescents in terms of transmitting information to the next generation. The pregnancy and early parenthood of the adolescent mother has a strong intergenerational influence on the sexual and reproductive

behaviour of the children, especially in female children. This type of environment seems to promote repetition of the pregnancy–parenthood cycle (Vitalle and Amancio, 2006). This influence was observed in the discourse of some of the adolescents whose mother or father was also an adolescent parent:

...my mother also married when she was young... she was 12... she had my sister when she was 13 and me at 14... For me, age really has nothing to do with it as long as we like each other and are willing to assume the child, it doesn't make a difference... (Jacinto)

...My parents had a lot of children... five... and they were young (my mother had her first when she was 17) (Topázio)

For Schütz (1974), accumulated past experiences facilitate the planning of actions related to the present-day experience. In this manner, people orient themselves in present-day life, utilising these experiences to create codes used to interpret present and past experiences. Faced with parenthood, and recurring parenthood, adolescents adapt; they make the changes they think are necessary to adapt and, consequently, the arrival of the second child is not perceived with strangeness or surprise:

...Ah! I was a bit scared, he wasn't planned so, in the beginning, I was kind of... I don't know... but then you get used to it, get used to it and, if he is able to get an education, like the other one, he will be fine, he will get the same education, just like the other one... (Crisólito)

In the category 'experiencing loss', the data suggested that parenthood made the adolescents assume new responsibilities, resulting in less time to participate in recreational activities. Additionally, they were forced to discontinue their studies, or stop studying altogether, and, in the case of the adolescent men, to look for employment. The birth of the children, particularly the second child, prohibited the adolescents from maintaining the same level of social activities to which they were accustomed. Their life changed from one in which they had an active night life, with frequent parties and other socialising activities, which are quite necessary for adolescents when their adult identity is still in formation, to one that was mostly homebound, as exemplified below.

In the category 'experiencing gains', the discourse demonstrates that, for many, parenthood also resulted in gains. The experience of gain was associated with becoming mature, being responsible and the satisfaction associated with being a parent and perceiving themselves as a woman/mother or man/father:

...I think that, for me, it was good, it was very good because I matured more quickly. I got new responsibilities. I became more responsible. Everything I do, I'm more conscious of everything I do because of my children. I think it was good for me, I have them now and it is good for me... how can I say it... becoming more mature, I matured more quickly than normal... (Diamante)

...Becoming a father changes a lot of things in our lives... we mature a lot. A lot of things changed for me, the way I am, that is, I used to be very stubborn, hard headed. But now I know that things have changed... (Ônix)

The discourse revealed that parenthood seems to force these adolescents into the adult world. In terms of the male adolescents, assuming responsibility for their actions was considered an attribute of virility, which is part of the masculine ideal. It is

noteworthy, however, that assuming responsibility was difficult without the support of the family or social support. The data suggested that, although the pregnancy was not planned, the experience was not undesired as the adolescents related a feeling of satisfaction with the birth of their children.

Thus, further analysis is needed regarding whether the difficulties faced by the adolescents were not so much associated with age, but with economic difficulties and lack of social services, family support and necessary resources, all of which contributed to feelings of loss and frustration in being a parent, potentially resulting in unsatisfactory performance as a parent.

The category 'search for security in the future' was based on three subcategories in which the adolescents expressed a certain apprehension related to their ability to care for their children, search for work, own a home, return to school, build a family and have a stable life as a couple. Difficulties in finding solutions associated with the future were clearly related to the present conditions in which the adolescents found themselves. The magnitude of the problems they faced in their day-to-day life related to food, housing, clothing, caring for the family, etc., together with the lack of resources and alternatives to solve problems, made it difficult to plan or think about the future, particularly given the little control they had over their own lives. One of the constant themes they expressed was the resources necessary to raise and educate a child, as well as their desire to have their own home, as exemplified by the following comments:

...To have a good future, that is... take care of them... Ah... I think like this... to give them the best, teach them right from wrong... (Crisólito)

...I hope they are really dedicated to studying, that they graduate... I don't know... Each one will choose his own profession but I really hope they finish their studies, and, ah! ... that they are well. That each one has a solid well-structured life and that they follow the right path and be honest people and that they work and not be misled or led on the wrong path like drugs and stealing... things like that... (Diamante)

The data revealed that many of the study participants, similar to other adolescents in the same situation, lived with one or both parents. This study also suggested that, frequently, family members assumed a very important role in care for the child, permitting the adolescents to be able to deal with the stresses involved in early parenthood more easily. During the interview, various adolescents commented on the help given by family members, while also pointing out that they themselves took care of the child.

Some of the discourse included the difficulties associated with establishing or maintaining affective relationships. A 17-year-old father went so far as to use the expression 'fight for' when describing his desire to stay with his second partner and second son:

...I think it is essential that the father stays with the child... do you understand? I wasn't able to stay with the mother of my first son, because we didn't fight for it. Now, with the second, I'm going to fight to stay with her. I'm going to be a better father... fight for this... I am going to fight to stay with her... (Ônix)

It was noteworthy that the choice of the couple to stay together and/or assume the child altered not only the adolescent's perception of the pregnancy/maternity, but also the perception of the entire family, which began to have a more positive view of the event.

The consequences of parenthood could have both positive and negative effects on the conjugal life of the adolescents. On one hand, the couple could become more united by the decision to live together, promoting the growth of both and a positive affective relationship, with benefits for the child (children) as well. On the other hand, the birth of the child and the decision to live together could undo the couple's initial state of 'being in love', resulting in conjugal problems and/or separations (Maldonado, 2000):

...I plan to get married...but only when I'm 18 years old. (Jacinto)

...but when you have a family you think... gotta work really hard, right? To give them a better future...teach them right from wrong... (Crisólito)

Cause my future is the future of my children. This is my project, give my best, have a structured family. I'm putting all my trust and hope into this new relationship... (Ônix)

In trying to understand recurring pregnancy in adolescence, it was remarkable that, in the category 'expressing a situation of ambivalence', the discourse revealed feelings of existential ambivalence, as the adolescents faced vital experiences and events lived through during such an important phase in their life cycle.

This category highlighted the differences between what the adolescents hoped for and the reality of the experience they were going through. Examples of their ambivalent feelings include the following: the desire to be a parent vs. not wanting to have more children; the opinion that it is good to be a father/mother at a young age, while not recommending that others should do so; and the opinion that parenthood makes them more responsible and mature, but also takes away their freedom, youth and ability to continue studying:

...OK, having a child early is not... well... but if it comes you've gotta take care like normal, right... the child doesn't take away the freedom... it doesn't. If you've got feeling, you do the right thing... like me. For me, there's nothing bad about being a young father... for other people, maybe there is, right? Not for me! Nor for her... (Crisólito)

The process of pregnancy, as well as parenthood, causes emotional and interpersonal changes, among others. The perception of the act of conception is associated with emotional ambivalence—the oscillation between desiring and not desiring the pregnancy, wanting and not wanting to have the child. According to Maldonado (2000), there is no complete acceptance or rejection of the pregnancy, but the opposite feeling is never fully absent. This is a natural phenomenon that is also characteristic of other interpersonal relationships, given that the complexity of human relationships permits the co-existence of the most diverse types of feelings.

One of the causes of conflict and existential ambivalence is that adolescent parenthood goes against the plans or objectives that society has for individuals, such as school activities, professional preparation, obtaining a good remunerated job, the establishment of a stable, lasting and loving relationship and, only then, reproduction within the ties of matrimony. When life situations do not occur more or less within this defined order, this can result in problems for adolescents.

Ambivalence is one of the characteristics of man's existence and is based on situations of tension that both unite and isolate him. The large majority of adolescents became recurring parents



during one of the periods of greatest conflict and human ambivalence—when they are forming their identity and trying to find a place in society. During this vital period, there is a need to establish oneself as a woman/mother or a man/father.

According to Sarmiento (2001), the desire to have a child during adolescence entails strong components, associated with feelings of ambivalence related to becoming independent from their parents. It is important to note that feelings of ambivalence also exist in adults. However, in the adolescent, they are more intense and more marked given that transformations are experienced during this period of life. However, it is precisely the condition of being an adolescent and the social reality they live that differentiates adolescent parenthood from adult parenthood.

## Conclusion

This comprehensive analysis based on Schütz's social phenomenology revealed an experience lived by adolescents who were recurring parents which had not been revealed previously through other types of research. The experience of this phenomenon, and the reasons and motives for this experience were based on values and beliefs that were acquired socially. The homogeneous description given in much of the current literature regarding pregnancy during adolescence was not reflected in the discourse of the adolescents in the current study. These data demonstrated that, in fact, adolescent parents form social groups that are much more heterogeneous than described previously. In this manner, the frequency with which adolescents procreate turns the event, as well as its repetition, into 'natural' phenomena.

The data also suggested that adolescents associated becoming a father with good feelings, grand emotions, dreams, surprises, expectations and strangeness. The experience was perceived as a novel experience of new ways to express affection, as well as the pre-occupation with what might happen. There was a co-existence of various feelings. The majority of the adolescent parents expressed satisfaction with being a parent, demonstrating true affection towards their children, despite the fact that the event resulted in an increase in responsibilities, sometimes considered positive, as well as a loss of freedom.

These data demonstrated that care given to adolescents should take into consideration not only theoretical and chronobiological aspects, but also the psychosocial and cultural factors related to parenthood in this social group. The experiences that these adolescents go through should also be considered, as only those that have experienced the action taken can fully understand the meaning that is attached to it. Therefore, it is essential that care programmes also incorporate the views of those being assisted.

The discourse revealed that early parenthood forced the adolescents into the adult world. Adolescent fathers, in particular, related virility or the masculine ideal to taking responsibility for their actions. In this respect, becoming a father promoted a rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood and the hope for a better future, particularly when other alternatives were difficult to choose from within their social milieu, such as lack of good education, lack of quality health services, and lack or inexistence of employment opportunities. Eventually, this was reflected in these adolescents' choice for a better future for their children, different from what they had experienced.

Moreover, the discourse revealed that, regardless of the difficulties that the adolescents experienced, efforts were made to re-organise their lives by means of projects, expectations, desires and dreams; the basis of their 'in-order-to motives'.

An extensive review of the literature revealed that the actions of conceiving and raising children are mainly presented as female

cultural experiences, ignoring the participation, desires and feelings of male partners. Additionally, when included in studies, the involvement of males is analysed from the female perspective, re-inforcing the notion that procreation and caring for children is inherent to females. The role of the father, after impregnating the female, has been generally disregarded.

Consequently, it is essential to create a place in society for the father, particularly the adolescent father. It is important to remember that pregnancy during adolescence is not solely a female event, and that the situation will certainly not be resolved without giving greater attention to the involvement of males. The consideration of adolescent fatherhood in scientific literature during the last two decades has facilitated new perspectives on motherhood, from which, slowly and apprehensively, a sharing of sexual and reproductive responsibility, previously only centred on the female, is emerging. The authors fully appreciate the importance of educational actions that are based on the experiences of the male parent. There is a need to present experiences to adolescents from the male perspective, regarding issues such as prenatal care, preparation for parenthood, baby care and family planning, by means of practical activities, explaining essentials relative to the prevention of unwanted pregnancies or how to stimulate a good relationship during parenthood.

Multiple factors are involved in the causes of adolescent pregnancy and parenthood, and this exemplifies the need for society to invest in the human being per se, particularly in the area of education. Adolescents will be more responsible in relation to sexual behaviour and the use of contraceptives if they are better prepared emotionally, cognitively and behaviourally to face the emotions and the situations they experience on a daily basis. There is a need for an interdisciplinary approach when dealing with this subject, given the complexity and multiplicity of implications related to it. The subject should not be restricted to a biomedical discussion. In this sense, the experience and vision of the teaching community, together with a new perspective on the subject, will help to strengthen and extend the ties between teaching and research—primary goals that characterise academic life. This research sheds light on a new method to deliver care to and teach adolescent parents, utilising a human/existential dimension, as well as the understanding that it is no longer possible to ignore the experiences that other people go through.

From the phenomenological perspective, the meaning of an experience is not something finished, as phenomena are not exhausted in one single perspective but change with every look.

It should also be taken into account that Brazil, due to its huge territorial dimension, includes different socio-economic and cultural realities. This fact constitutes another study limitation. In addition, it is known that in some cultures, especially those of indigenous origin, parenthood in adolescence represents a standard.

Thus, the authors believe that this phenomenon has not been exhaustively treated and demands further research.

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