“YOU GOTTA MAN UP AND TAKE CARE OF IT”: MASCULINITY, RESPONSIBILITY, AND TEEN FATHERHOOD

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For Nathan, Trenton, and Lucas – I love you the most in this whole, wide world.
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ABSTRACT

Drawing on in-depth interviews, I analyze how teen fathers talk about their experiences of teen fatherhood, how they actively construct their identities as “good dads” but also as “good men”. Specifically, I explore the ways in which teen fathers utilize norms of masculinity as resource for making sense of their experiences as teen fathers. Notions of youth, masculinity, and social class, can all offer competing concerns that these men must negotiate if they are to successfully present an identity, a self that is both “good” and acceptable. Hence, for the men in this study, masculinity, social class, and youth serve as powerful resources for making sense of their identities and their responsibilities as teen fathers; but, these same resources can also create additional problems which also require further negotiation. Drawing on stereotypical norms of masculinity and youth, for example, can work to successfully negotiate responsibility while also signifying themselves as men; however, these same discourses can also work to stigmatize them as the wrong kind of men. In short, teen fathers are not only negotiating their identities and responsibilities as young dads, they are also negotiating their identities as men.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Levi appears tall and slender, but his height manages to downplay his stoutness. He’s wearing athletic shorts and a t-shirt advertising an annual football camp held at one of the state universities. He’s quiet and there’s a general somberness that surrounds him. Excitement peeks through when he talks about football, but for the most part he has a tiredness about him. He plays defensive end and has high hopes of going to college on a football scholarship. He’s 18 years old; a senior in high school. He’s an honor roll student. And he’s also the father of a 4-month old baby girl.

Daniel is also eighteen. His daughter is 6 months old, and he and his girlfriend recently found out that she is pregnant again. His face brightens when he talks about his little girl, which he does frequently. His life has been much less stable than Levi’s. Daniel has spent most of his teen years as a transient, moving between friends’ and family members’ couches, constantly aware of never “overstaying his welcome.” He recently completed his GED, an accomplishment he credits largely to his probation officer: “I guess she saw something in me,” he says.

Marlin is sixteen with a daughter who has just turned one. He has another baby on the way, and he tells me that there is a third woman who is claiming that he is the father of her daughter – a prospect which seems to generate little concern. Marlin started dealing drugs when he was 12 (“no crack then, just weed”) and has spent a significant portion of his youth in and out of the Juvenile Detention Center (JDC) – a storyline that
repeats itself over and over again throughout our conversation. He talks largely of drugs, “doin’ time”, and dodging bullets.

Marlin’s story is the one most commonly propagated through media portrayals and the everyday tales shared on the front porch or by the lockers at school. The assumption is that teen fathers are a fickle, if not predatory lot, having sex for the thrill of it, with multiple partners, and with little concern for the consequences. Popular shows like 16 and Pregnant and Teen Mom reiterate these stereotypical storylines, repeatedly reminding young women that to be a teen mom is to be a single mom (Weber and Schatz 2013). But, of the young fathers I met, this stereotype was hardly the norm, or at the very least, it’s much more complicated than this typecast caricature would lead us to believe.

This project is about teen fathers, about men like Levi, Daniel, and Marlin. But, more than that, this study is about masculinity – about how teen fathers accomplish and construct masculinity. This project explores the ways in which masculinity is often used as a resource for these men in dealing with and making sense of their experiences as teen fathers.

Research and literature on teen pregnancy and teen mothers abounds in a variety of fields; but the stories of teen fathers, their “sides”, their experiences, are largely invisible. An important factor in this absence is that they are a difficult population to access. According to a 2011 study conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics, the birth rate for men ages 15-19 was 18.2 per 1,000 (Martin et al. 2011). However, data about men involved in pregnancies are often inaccurate. Birth certificates serve as the primary source of data for information on fathers; but fathers are least likely
to be listed for children born to unwed mothers under the age of 20 (Abma et al. 2010; Kimball 2004; Martin et al. 2011; see also Thornberry et al. 1997).

Beyond documentation, though, the absence of teen fathers within academic and lay discussions of teen pregnancy is still linked to the fact that women are viewed as the central subjects. Relative to teen mothers, teen fathers are, in fact, less visible. It is the women who carry the baby for nine months, and who are easily seen and identified in offices and hospitals for prenatal care and delivery. Teen mothers are also the ones largely targeted by teen pregnancy/parenting classes in schools, as well as larger policy programs such as welfare reform. However, as Kristin Luker (1996) argues: “…a rather threadbare set of categories is shaping our views of early pregnancy. These categories induce us to label one sex or the other as the main participant in early pregnancy and childbearing, and we forget that pregnancy results from a dynamic that includes two people…we again fail to note the effects of the interaction between individuals and their context (p. 39).” Assumptions of responsibility – for birth control or pregnancy prevention, for childcare, and for financial provision among many others – run throughout our cultural portrayals and discussions of teen pregnancy. And these assumptions do not exist in isolation. They are contextual – located within historical, cultural, and moral boundaries. Notions of teen pregnancy as a social problem, notions of what it means to be a teen parent (and/or a parent, generally) are deeply rooted in structures of gender, social class, and youth/adulthood.

The teen fathers in this project want to be seen as “good dads” and also as “good guys”. That can mean different things – and it often does, as I demonstrate in later
chapters. But, these young men are tied to assumptions and expectations that often come from different directions. Notions of youth, masculinity, and social class, can all offer competing concerns that these men must negotiate if they are to successfully present an identity, a self that is both “good” and acceptable. The ways in which these young men respond to, challenge, and reaffirm the norms, experiences, and stigmas of adolescent fatherhood require the strategic negotiation of boundaries of gender, class, and youth. As Wilkins’ (2008) argues “Gender, race, and class fashion the constraints and contradictions young people face, but they also provide resources for solving them (p. 2)”. Similarly, for the men in this study, masculinity, social class, and youth offer resources for them to make sense of their experiences as teen fathers; but these same resources can also create additional problems which also require further negotiation. For the men in this project, teen pregnancy serves as a key site where masculinity, social class, and youth collide. Using their stories of early fatherhood, I explore the ways in which these young men negotiate the stigmas and expectations of teen pregnancy, responsibility, and fatherhood within the culturally deemed appropriate bounds of masculinity, social class, and youth.

This project is most centrally about masculinity – a theme that proves constant throughout many of their stories. At times, masculinity serves as a powerful resource in which to make sense of their identities and experiences as young fathers. This resource can play out in simple ways – for example, teen fathers have the ability to navigate their public identities as dads in ways altogether different from teen moms – including the ability to ultimately deny paternity. But, more often than not, their construction and
utilization of masculinity plays out in much more complex ways. And, while norms of masculinity can work as a narrative resource for constructing a respectable identity as a “good guy”, these same expectations can also constrain the ways in which they can do fatherhood and masculinity, often reinforcing stereotypes that they are “bad boys” or “bad dads”. Moreover, their respective locations in the middle-class, working-class, or lower-class further complicate the ways in which they draw on and/or respond to cultural norms of masculinity. This is not to suggest that all of these identity strategies are thoughtful and measured. Indeed, some of them are deliberate, some are perhaps less conscious. But, intended or not, these strategies can reap important benefits, but they can also have unforeseen consequences – and these consequences require delicate negotiation if they are to maintain their identities as “good fathers” and also as “good guys”.

Background: The “problem” of teen pregnancy

As a social problem, teen pregnancy has been generating concern primarily since the 1960’s. Although early childbearing has never been that unusual in the U.S., prior to the social changes that came during the decade of social and political upheaval, most teen pregnancies were “legitimized” by early marriage (Furstenberg 2007; Luker 1996; Luttrell 2003). By the end of the 1960’s, early marriage, especially as a way of managing the risks associated with premarital sexual activity, was beginning to diminish (Furstenberg 2007). At the same time cultural shifts in attitudes, specifically decreasing stigma associated with premarital sex, were also taking root. The combination of these
two factors – fewer teens getting married and more of them participating in sexual activity – created the “perfect formula for producing a rapid increase in rates of nonmarital pregnancies and births (Furstenberg 2007, p. 12).” However, as several social scientists have argued, the epidemic – as it has often been called – was occurring at a time when total birthrates for teens were actually declining (Furstenberg 2007; Luker 1996).

Despite this decline, teen pregnancy was still viewed as an important social and moral problem that warranted immediate political attention. The consequence was that teen pregnancy, and teen mothers specifically, became the central focus of a cultural and political backlash concerned with what was perceived as a destruction of family values (Furstenberg 2007; Luker 1996; Luttrell 2003; Nathanson 1991). In contrast to media portrayals, though, delayed marriage and social acceptance of premarital sexual activity were not isolated to teen parents, but were representative of larger cultural changes in family formation that were taking place across the U.S. (Furstenberg 2007; Luker 1996; see also Edin & Kefalas 2005). Still, teen pregnancy became the scapegoat for an entire list of social ills, including poverty, violence, decreased educational attainment, and huge economic costs to the U.S. population in the form of welfare and other social services (Furstenberg 2007; Luker 1996; Luttrell 2003; Geronimous 2003).

The concern over teen pregnancy is not a thing of the past, however. Recent estimates suggest that 750,000 women aged 15-19 become pregnant in the United States every year (Guttmacher Institute 2011). Social anxieties about “babies having babies” are at the heart of several contemporary social movements and policy shifts (e.g.
abstinence-only education, welfare reform, and battles over abortion and access to emergency contraception). All of this despite the fact that only 10% of all births in the U.S. are to women aged 19 or younger, and two-thirds of these pregnancies are to women between 18-19 years of age (Guttmacher Institute 2011).

The fears surrounding adolescent childbearing are about more than age, however. Assumptions of gender, race, and class are deeply embedded in the various claims that teen pregnancy is linked to, or results in, the destruction of family values. As previously stated, young women have historically bore the brunt of the social stigma assigned to teen pregnancy. Black women in particular, though, have often been singled out as the primary source of the problem. Indeed, according to the Guttmacher Institute (2011), Black and Hispanic women have the highest teen pregnancy rates: 126 per 1,000 and 127 per 1,000 for women aged 15-19, respectively; whereas white women have the lowest rates (44 per 1,000). On top of this, poverty rates for Blacks and Hispanics greatly exceed the national average. In 2010, 27.4 percent of blacks and 26.6 percent of Hispanics were poor, compared to 9.9 percent of non-Hispanic whites (National Poverty Center, 2012). The combination of these factors have made it easy to single out young Black women as the primary source of a whole string of social problems, including lifelong reliance on social services, increased crime, and decreased educational attainment for themselves and their children (DeParle, 2005; Furstenberg 2007; Kiselica 2008; Luker 1996; Paschal 2006; see also Edin & Kafalas 2005; Mollborn 2011; Mollborn & Lovegrove 2011). However, these consequences are as much associated with poverty as they are with adolescent childbearing. According to Frank Furstenburg (2007),
“…teenage childbearing is more a consequence than a cause of economic and social
disadvantage (p. 51).” Still, teen parents (especially teen mothers) have shouldered the
brunt of societal blame for a whole host of social problems and cultural shifts.

*Teen fathers and Masculinity*

Many of these problems are also blamed on absent fathers, although their role in
the blame game is less central. Part of this stems from their social and academic
invisibility, a consequence emerging largely from cultural assumptions that presume teen
pregnancy and motherhood to be women’s issues. But, as mentioned above, teen fathers
are a difficult population to access. Consequently, in terms of the knowledge that we do
have about teen fathers, much of it is constrained by this limited access. For example,
research suggests that teenagers of color are more likely to father a child than white teens
(Thornberry et al 1997). However, as Coleman & Dennison (1998) argue, because most
studies about teen fathers in the United States focus solely on Blacks this also allows for
a greater focus to be placed on Black men, forcing them to bear the brunt of stereotypes
and stigmas.

Existing research also suggests that young fathers tend to come from low
socioeconomic backgrounds (Bunting & McAuley 2004; Klein 2005; Thornberry et al
1997). Jonathan Klein and the Committee on Adolescence (2005) suggest that
approximately 83% of teen parents are from poor to low-income families. Similarly,
other authors suggest that young fathers are three times more likely than same-age non-
fathers to come from families that frequently experience economic hardship, and that teen

Teen fatherhood is often another risk set alongside other risky and deviant behaviors. For example, Thornberry, et al (1997) and Miller-Johnson, et al (2004) report a link between teen fatherhood and involvement in other deviant behaviors such as gang membership and drug use. And, Bunting & McAuley (2004) find a relationship between teen fatherhood and a preexisting history of delinquent behaviors, such as fighting and underage/illega substance use. Helen Glikman (2004) shows that not only do teen dads tend to complete fewer grades, but that all of her respondents reported behavioral and academic difficulties while in school (see also Bunting & McAuley 2004; Klein 2005; Thornberry et al 1997; Xie, et al 2001). Thus, pregnancy seems but one issue amongst other social, behavioral, and academic difficulties facing teen fathers.

Akin to previous studies, the teen fathers I interviewed also faced and/or engaged in a whole host of risky behaviors: sex, drugs, underage drinking, violence/fighting, absent fathers, poverty, and poor academic engagement. The importance of these issues notwithstanding, they tell us little about how the men see themselves, how they make sense of their identities as young men, and as fathers. Indeed, many of the men are well-aware of the challenges these sorts of behaviors and factors create in their attempts to be successful, or to just “make it.” Still, assumptions of risk rely on assumptions of loss – that the risks these men take will ultimately cost them valuable opportunities in the present, or down the line. These assumptions fail to consider how the men, themselves, make sense of their choices and opportunities, the risks, consequences, and rewards. As I
demonstrate in the following chapters – sometimes these risks can create problems, but sometimes those problems can also offer solutions.

A handful of studies do attempt to consider the role of masculinity in shaping the experiences and challenges of teen fathers. However, these analyses are still wrought with difficulties since they tend to locate the nexus of masculinity solely in the role of financial provider (Kiselica 2008; Paschal 2006). And, as the breadth of research and theorizing demonstrates, the relationships between masculinity, social class, and youth are much more complex than that. On the one hand, the ability to provide financially (or not) certainly sets up formidable barriers to being a “good dad”. But, the ways in which these men negotiate this seemingly simple expectation is much more complex than either doing it or not doing it. As I explore in a later chapter, the complexity of the breadwinner norm requires strategic negotiation. We also can’t assume the story ends there.

R. W. Connell (1995) defines hegemonic masculinity as a set of cultural ideals or dominant notions about what it means to be a “real man,” that is, behaviors and processes that privilege certain forms of masculinity over (and against) femininity and other subordinated or marginalized masculinities (Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Pascoe 2007; Richardson 2010; Wilkins 2009). This perspective of plural masculinities suggests that most men will perform hegemonic masculinity to the best of their ability given the tools and opportunities available to them. These opportunities, however, are limited by numerous structural constraints, including race, class, and age. Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) provide a powerful critique, suggesting that while the multiple masculinities perspective may provide a useful frame for recognizing differences
and inequalities among men, it also complicates our ability to see what these varying masculinities have in common. For example, strength, toughness, emotional stoicism and heterosexuality have been identified in numerous studies as central components of masculinity, across age, race and class lines. (Kimmel 2008; Pascoe 2007; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009; Thorne 1993; Wilkins 2012a). Many men may be unable to achieve, or may even reject, some aspects of the hegemonic ideal (e.g., gay men); however, their acceptance and enactment of other facets (e.g., sexual risk taking) still reflect the power of the hegemonic ideal (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). Similarly, few (if any) of the teen fathers in this study would be considered hegemonically masculine, given their age, social class, and/or race, but they are still able to enact or emphasize different aspects of the hegemonic ideal. To dismiss these young men as less masculine, or even hyper-masculine, overlooks the ways in which they utilize and manipulate hegemonic norms of masculinity to construct a self that is recognizably masculine (Pascoe 2003).

We must also recognize that to identify fatherhood solely in terms of “the breadwinner” carries both consequences and benefits. In other words, the breadwinner norm can work as a powerful advantage to be utilized in doing important identity work – in constructing themselves as fathers and as men. But, it can also create additional, perhaps unforeseen, problems that ultimately challenge the very identity that this “resource” works to maintain. To be sure, the teen fathers I came to know were concerned largely with masculinity, with being “real men” and “good guys.” But, they tended to engage in aspects of masculinity that were much less overt, more taken-for-granted than just being able to financially support their children. Indeed, having fathered
children does offer some practical evidence of their manhood (e.g. their heterosexual prowess); but, it also brings to the forefront their failures as men. As previously mentioned, existing research argues that masculinity (fatherhood, as well) is linked primarily to providing financial support. This issue becomes especially problematic given the limited job availability for young fathers, stemming from factors such as age, social class, lower educational attainment, and decreased skill sets.

As such, their roles and identities as young men and as fathers locate them in a unique juxtaposition of empowerment and powerlessness. Unlike teen mothers, they are able to claim all of the benefits and privileges that masculinity has to offer. However, gender is not the only structural influence these men must navigate. And, of course, masculinity does not result in direct privilege to all men, in all contexts. Their identities and experiences are also anchored to social class and age. In other words, the experiences and consequences of a teen pregnancy are felt and understood differently based on the man’s location within hierarchies of gender, class, and youth.

_Telling their Stories_

Utilizing in-depth interviews with 26 teen fathers, I explore the narratives of masculinity, responsibility, and fatherhood that these young men employ in talking about their experiences of teen pregnancy. I conducted my research in a midwest city I call “Greenlawn.” As stated earlier, the ability to document the lived experiences of teen fathers is made more difficult by the challenges of simply locating them for research. For
this reason, I relied on convenience sampling, drawing on a variety of gatekeepers (teachers, principals, and other members of the community). I also utilized snowball sampling, relying on the fathers themselves, to access additional respondents. This method proved to be extremely beneficial since this range of connections each provided a unique form access, providing entrée into several different networks of teen fathers. All names, places, and other potentially identifiable information have been changed to maintain anonymity of the participants.

The young men I interviewed came from varying backgrounds. Fifteen of the men identified as white, while 11 identified as Black or biracial. Their ages ranged from 16 to 21, but they all fathered their children within their teens (19 or younger). The majority of the fathers (19 of the 26) were between the ages of 16 and 19 at the time of the interview.

Most are working-class, but individuals from the middle- or upper-middle classes, and some whose families would be classified as living below the poverty line, are also present. Determining social class was done in more interpretive ways. While class categories are often defined in terms of income or occupation, class belonging is also symbolic – signified by factors that extend beyond money and jobs (Kefalas 2003; Lareau 2011; Stuber 2006). And, for these young men, an awareness of their parents’ occupations and income was often limited. Hence, my understanding of their class location (self-identified or otherwise) stem from other symbolic notions of class: where they live, neighborhood locations, the schools they attend, whether their family rents or
owns their dwelling, jobs their parents hold (or don’t), level of parents’ education, as well as language and self-made descriptions and identifications.

Two additional points deserve mention at the onset. First, all of the men in my study claim their paternal identity. In other words, all of the pregnancies were carried to term, and the men identify as fathers, openly claiming and/or parenting their children. Men involved in a pregnancy that resulted in abortion, miscarriage, or adoption are not included in my sample. Second, men of different races and ethnicities used the same processes and explanations for the variety of phenomena that the following chapters explore. So, while race plays out in important ways in other aspects of my research on teen fathers, within this immediate project there were no discernible differences. I revisit this point in the discussion chapter.

Portraying Greenlawn

Greenlawn is, in most ways, ordinary and unremarkable. It’s forgettable. Throughout my research, I’ve come across many people who’ve been to Greenlawn, or been through it on the interstate, but it doesn’t make for memories as much as afterthoughts. The city’s drab, tumbledown existence isn’t depressing so much as sobering. Its lack of historic architecture – since the majority of notable buildings have deteriorated or been demolished – lends itself to the sense of ambiguity that the town seems to emanate. Its history seems as uncertain as its future.

Like many cities, Greenlawn’s past is marked by rises and falls. But, the reality is, its gains rarely made up for the losses. Similar to other industrial cities of the Midwest
and northeast, Greenlawn experienced the typical boom and bust during the twentieth
century. But, the 1980s and 1990s proved particularly difficult for the town. Between
1981 and 1995, four large corporations closed their doors resulting in a loss of nearly
10,000 jobs. As a result Greenlawn lost more than 10% of its residents between 1990 and
2000. Despite an increase in service industry positions over the last two decades,
including healthcare and education, Greenlawn’s economy is still strongly linked to
industry and manufacturing. And, as a result, their market fluctuates quite predictably
with the national recessions.

Greenlawn has a population of about 38,000, however when the areas
immediately surrounding Greenlawn are taken into account (since most Greenlawn
residents actually live outside of the city limits), the population jumps to nearly 85,000.
Demographically, the city is about 85 percent white and 12 percent black, with the
remaining 3 percent being comprised of Hispanic or Latino, Asian, and American Indian.
The median household income in 2010 was nearly $26,000, with approximately 14
percent of persons living below the poverty line. Eighty-two percent of residents are high
school graduates, but only 13 percent have a bachelor’s degree or higher.

The teen birth rates for the Greenlawn metro area are significantly higher than
state and national averages. In 2010, the teen birth rates for Greenlawn and the
surrounding area were 33.6 per 1,000 for women 15-17 years of age (compared to 19.7
for the entire state and 20.1 nationally), and 95.5 per 1,000 for women 18-19 years of age
(75.7 for the state, 66.2 nationally).
These statistics were mirrored in a common response from many of the local townspeople when I explained my research goal of studying teen parents: “well, you’ve come to the right place,” they said.

The stories of the men in this project are stubbornly tied to their existence and location in Greenlawn. Although many talked of their hopes to “get out” someday, they were also largely aware of the ways in which a place like Greenlawn prevents you from leaving. The reality of “hard living” is not only visible, its palpable (Bettie 2003; Howell 1973). Unlike “settled living”, which is characterized by more or less secure employment, better pay, health benefits, home ownership, and a general sense of predictability; “hard living”, on the other hand, is characterized by less stable, low paying jobs, a lack of health care benefits, lack of home-ownership, and an overall pattern of chaos. Frequently, these young men talked about the contagiousness of instability (my words, not theirs); the ways in which job loss, for example, might lead to drug use and further family instability. But, this volatility, especially in a town like Greenlawn, works as a type of social adhesive, cementing their reliance on and support of family and friends, thereby preventing any real “escape”.

To portray Greenlawn as entirely glum or sullen isn’t altogether true, either. Many of the adults or older residents spoke nostalgically and proudly of the town. And, often they spoke in response to the declarations of teens and young adults that they were “getting out” someday. The “older folks” are very aware of the “kids”’ general aversion to Greenlawn – a common topic of debate amongst a variety of residents. Still, the town does seem to be moving forward in some ways, or in some parts of town. The two
hospitals are always growing, it seems. And the local universities are getting bigger, boasting larger and larger enrollments every year. But, even in the face of this expansion, the industrial heritage is still highly visible. The number one program at the local college is auto mechanics and while it can certainly be argued that auto mechanics have the potential to make decent money in certain locations, in Greenlawn, many argue that this degree means little to nothing – “car mechanics are a dime ‘a dozen around here”, said one resident.

Choosing Greenlawn as the location to conduct my research seemed, for lack of a better word, natural. Reminiscent of my own hometown and upbringing, I felt at ease in Greenlawn, comfortable amidst the older cars and run-down buildings, perhaps even more so than I do in the upper-middle-class, academic hub that I now call home. The constant worry over money and local jobs, the boredom of youth that comes along with growing up in a town with few resources, the immersion in lives of family and friends – all were familiar storylines, just with different characters. I could relate to these men, their childhoods, their general outlooks and opportunities, and the pressing desire to escape while also realizing that staying was probably inevitable. This connection was undoubtedly useful in helping me to build rapport with my respondents, as well as with the residents of Greenlawn – many of whom served as invaluable gatekeepers into the varying networks of teen fathers.
Methods and Methodologies

I conducted the interviews during the summer and fall of 2010. Each interview lasted between one and two hours and took place in homes, restaurants, coffee shops, and offices. The interviews were taped and transcribed, and field notes were taken immediately before and after meetings. Each of the men received a $20 gift card to a local discount store in exchange for his time. An interview guide provided loose topical direction, but each conversation took a different form as constructed by the participants. Of course, meaning is contextual, arising out of interaction between people (Holstein and Gubrium 1995; Riessman 1993). I was in my early thirties during the year of my fieldwork, although I was often told I looked younger. I was a new mom – a fact that proved to be more useful than I had anticipated. I never lied about the extent of my education, or other personal facts of my life, but I didn’t reveal much unless requested. My affiliation with a university seemed to signify to them that I was a college student – very few asked or noticed, or even seemed to care that I was working on my PhD. All of them were generally familiar (to different extents) with notion of college (however basic) or school and homework. So, as it seemed, to them I was just doing a school project. And, often, unless they questioned otherwise, I just left it at that. Still, the fact that I am an adult and a woman certainly altered the ways in which they constructed their narratives. The stories in this project are their stories as they were told to me; they might have taken a different form if someone else were the listener (Riessman 1993).

As such, I was not so much interested in the truth-telling of their stories, but the ways in which they told those stories, how they constructed their identities as teen fathers.
and as young men within the contexts of the interview. Patterns within their narratives that speak to larger cultural discourses and shared experiences become clear as the men “talk themselves into being” (Gubrium 2006).

My use of narrative analysis is rooted in a larger understanding that the “small stories” these men tell are strategic, that they tell us more than just biographical particulars (Gubrium 2006). As Riessman (1993) states:

[This] methodological approach examines the informant’s story and analyzes how it was put together, the linguistic and cultural resources it draws on, and how it persuades the listener of authenticity (p. 2).

Focusing on the “how’s” of their stories – how these men create order within an array of experiences and events – allows us to see narratives as a performance, as a tool for making sense of those experiences (Gubrium 2006; Riessman 1993). And, again, these narratives are not just stories about their lives; rather they are powerful ways to do identity work, to tell us who they “are”. Drawing on the narratives of teen fathers allows for insight into the ways in which these young men see themselves – not only as fathers, but also as men. As Charlotte Linde argues, narratives serve as “…important social resources for creating and maintaining personal identity” (1993, 98). In addition to creating a private sense of self, narratives also help us in conveying and negotiating that self with others (Linde 1993). These young men do not exist in isolation, though. In constructing personal narratives, they draw on resources, such as cultural discourses, to navigate various norms, to portray themselves as “good guys” – and masculinity serves as one such resource. These men use narrative to strategically (although not necessarily
intentional or conscious) to situate themselves as particular types of fathers and particular types of men. It is these stories and strategies that I investigate here.

**What Lies Ahead**

The following chapters explore the various ways in which teen fathers construct and accomplish masculinity in the stories they tell about being teen fathers. As I demonstrate throughout, masculinity can serve as a powerful and unique resource for dealing with and making sense of teen pregnancy and fatherhood; but it can also produce potentially unintended consequences that require additional negotiation if they are to maintain their identities as “good guys.”

In Chapter 2, I explore the narratives of responsibility that these young men employ when talking about how the pregnancy came about. Chapter 3 focuses on the ways in which they talk about and navigate the expectation of being a breadwinner. Finally, Chapter 4 examines how these fathers make sense of fatherhood, generally, especially given the fact that their many of their own fathers were absent. Aligning themselves with certain notions of masculinity can serve as a resource for making sense of their experiences as teen fathers while still signifying their manhood. While these approaches may allow teen fathers to claim masculine identities, they can also be constraining in that they often draw attention to their inabilities to live up to the very ideals in which they rely on to bolster their masculinity.
CHAPTER 2: BECOMING TEEN FATHERS

Travis and I met at a restaurant near the local university where he studies auto mechanics. At twenty-one, Travis is the father of a 2-year-old daughter. His new girlfriend is currently five months pregnant with another little girl due just before Christmas. He attended the interview wearing a baseball cap with the silhouette of a naked woman on it and a t-shirt with two monkeys, each holding a banana, with the phrase “mine is bigger than yours” scrawled across the front. He was open and candid throughout the interview, often making (sometimes crude) jokes. When I first asked him “what happened?” he offered a simple retort: “I have fighter jets,” he said with a chuckle and a shoulder shrug. As Moore (2007) argued, sperm can be viewed as a powerful metaphor for contemporary masculinity. The metaphor that Travis uses symbolizes strength, power, aggression, and virulence – all representations that characterize an ideal type of masculinity that portrays Travis as a “man’s man”, so to speak. And there was Marlin, a 16 year-old with one daughter, a baby on the way, and another child that may or may not be his, who openly admitted that he and his friends would compete to see who could “get the most girls”. The rewards, he says, are “babies…and respect.”

More often than not, though, the men in my study utilized masculine norms in much less overt ways. It is easy to roll our eyes at the crassness of hyper-masculine displays like those of Travis and Marlin. But, to portray teen fathers as generally predatory, as impregnating women to prove their sexuality and masculinity falls short. The teen fathers I interviewed do rely heavily on norms of masculinity, especially those
that set them over and against women; however, they do so in ways that are normalized and taken-for-granted.

As the previous chapter outlined, conventional wisdom still posits that early childbearing is an important social problem, despite an abundance of evidence to the contrary (Furstenberg 2007; Geronimus 2003; Luker 1996; Mollborn 2011). By having a child at an early age (and often outside of marriage) teen parents have openly disrupted cultural expectations about who should have a child and when. To be sure, both teen mothers and teen fathers are charged with managing the potential stigma of having a child at an early age. However, teen fathers face a unique set of challenges: stereotypes that label them as predators, absent, or uncaring (Kiselica 2008; Luker 1996; Paschal 2006). Then again, teen fathers are also unique relative to teen mothers in that they can more easily deny their paternity and, in turn, their accountability.

In this chapter, I examine the ways in which men talk about the responsibility for having a baby at a young age. Questions of why or how “this” could have happened are frequent refrains in discussions surrounding teen pregnancy. This chapter represents an attempt to understand the ways in which teen fathers make sense of their responsibility, their role, in the pregnancy. In my discussions with these young men, however, I find that their descriptions of “what happened” are about more than people or events. Instead, their stories about becoming teen fathers also serve as powerful arenas in which to perform identity work, negotiating the potential stigma of teen pregnancy. In trying to reduce the negative reactions of people around them, the men draw heavily on norms of
masculinity not only to deny responsibility, but also to signify their identities as men, as “good guys.”

Even though teen birth rates have been generally declining since the mid-1970s, many Americans and policy makers still worry that early childbearing has reached “epidemic” proportions (Furstenberg 2007; Geronimus 2003; Luker 1996; Mollborn 2011). Hence, as with other social problems, research analyzing teen pregnancy requires us to navigate multiple “realities” – those drawn from social research as well as those that characterize popular perception (Furstenberg 2007). Twenty-four of the 26 men in this study acknowledged that other people – “society” at large (however they defined it, local or otherwise) – viewed their having a child at this age as a mistake. Still, this acknowledgement has the potential to naturalize teen pregnancy as a social problem – that it is everywhere and always a problem. For example, while the fathers may recognize that society at large sees early childbearing as a “bad thing,” they themselves may not. However, their narratives about responsibility are nested within these understandings – of how they understand the “problem” of teen pregnancy, of how they think others view their being a “problem.”

Teen mothers and fathers are located in a tough position, having openly violated various societal expectations, especially those that dictate that individuals follow a “normal” life path (e.g., education, job, and marriage, then family). Having a child outside of this path is generally considered a mistake, challenging societal beliefs about the timing and context of parenthood (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Furstenberg 2007; Kiselica 2008; Luker 1996; Luttrell 2003). However, compared to teen mothers, teen fathers also
face a unique set of challenges. Young men who become teen fathers frequently face stereotypes that label them as fickle at best and predatory at worst (Kiselica 2008; Luker 1996; Paschal 2006). Again, the majority of the men in this study recognized and acknowledged that their having a child at this age was considered problematic by “society.” Their narratives about responsibility respond to, and intersect with, these experiences and realizations. In other words, their stories are not just about the pregnancy; they are also about negotiating and reducing the negative reactions of people, of the society around them.

In their attempts to negotiate the potential stigma of teen pregnancy, the men draw on norms and discourses of masculinity to deny responsibility while still maintaining their reputations and identities as “good guys.” This is not to suggest that teen mothers do not also do important identity work in negotiating the stigma of teen pregnancy, but, rather, that masculinity provides a different set of tools with which to do this.

Norms of masculinity do not result in undiluted power and privilege for all men at all times. Examining teen fathers’ narratives of responsibility reveals the ways in which discursive constructions of masculinity can be both enabling and constraining. For example, aligning themselves with stereotypes of young men as “naturally” heterosexually obsessed can serve as a resource for signifying their manhood, as well as mitigating the stigma of early childbearing. But, these same images also serve to stigmatize teen fathers as selfish, even predatory. In short, teen fathers are managing multiple concerns – not only are they negotiating the potential stigma of teen pregnancy, they are also negotiating their identities as men.
What happened?: Stories of becoming teen fathers

The story about “what happened” is an important part of the bigger story of being a teen father. None of the men I interviewed blamed themselves for the pregnancy. All but four placed the responsibility directly on the mother. The remaining four blamed parents (e.g., providing alcohol the night of conception), a doctor (e.g., saying the woman could not get pregnant), or circumstance (e.g., the condom broke). Further, in telling the story of what happened, these men draw heavily on norms of masculinity to construct themselves as not responsible for the pregnancy. Through my analysis of the interviews, three primary themes emerged – all of which are linked to, and maintain, the ideals of what it means to be men: (1) gendered assumptions regarding pregnancy and contraception – specifically that women are in charge of preventing pregnancy; (2) a belief that male sexuality is uncontrollable; and (3) the utilization of love and intimacy talk.

Because masculinity is culturally aligned with status and power in ways that femininity is not, teen fathers are also able to potentially garner greater esteem by signifying themselves as men. However, masculinity comes with costs, as well as benefits. Hence, the men I interviewed often moved between expectations, relying on more than one assumption. In other words, the ways in which they rely on these dominant tropes are fluid.
“’Cause Every Time I Asked Her If I Should Wear [a Condom] She Said No”

The most common cultural assumption the teen fathers relied on was the belief that women are in charge of preventing pregnancy or, at the very least, managing birth control and contraception. As Kristin Luker argues in her seminal work on teen pregnancy, following the development of the Pill “…contraceptive use has become increasingly feminized: both men and women tend to think that contraception is the responsibility of the woman and that it’s the woman’s fault when something goes wrong” (1996, 146).

However, while the development of the Pill contributed to the feminization of contraception, sex itself has historically been a masculinized domain. Traditional gender stereotypes have long portrayed men as sexually obsessed while women were charged with controlling men’s sexuality via access (Brumberg 1997; Dunn 2002; Hust, Brown, and L’Engle 2008). These gendered assumptions are most often visible in studies and accounts of rape. Post-assault, victim-blaming accusations that women invite rape with their clothing, alcohol consumption, or being in the wrong place at the wrong time are based on longstanding beliefs that women are responsible for managing men’s sexuality. These beliefs, combined with the development of the Pill and other (mostly) feminine forms of contraception, along with norms surrounding the gendered division of labor concerning relationships and childcare – all have served to further locate the nexus of responsibility for intercourse, contraception, and pregnancy squarely on the shoulders of women.
Similarly, the majority of the young men I interviewed located the nexus of responsibility on the mother. Several were straightforward in their claims. Dallas, 18, stated, “We were tryin’. She wanted to get pregnant,” even though he “wasn’t sure he was ready, but she talked [him] into it.” Jon, 17, tells a similar story, maintaining that his girlfriend “just wanted to have [his] baby” even though he “wasn’t sure it was a good idea.” Sometimes the men openly blamed the women, such as the case with Quinton, 16, who claimed that “it really wasn’t my fault because I told her to get up [afterwards] but she didn’t…” Despite having openly admitted to not wearing a condom, Quinton still places the responsibility for getting pregnant on the woman, since she apparently didn’t get up and use the restroom immediately following sex. Each of these examples speak to general assumptions that it is the women who are in charge of either choosing or preventing pregnancy, denying the men any real choice in the matter.

Most often, the men rely on assumptions that managing birth control (e.g., the Pill or condoms) is explicitly the woman’s domain. For instance, when I asked, “What happened?” Marcus responded frankly that “she wasn’t on birth control.” Similarly, Paul claimed that their pregnancy stemmed from his girlfriend’s irresponsibility: “She probably missed a pill.” But men’s not-doing is less culpable than women’s not-doing. In addition to cultural stereotypes that label males as sexually obsessed, while females are in charge of access and consequences, assumptions that women are responsible for preventing pregnancy (and sex, unwanted or otherwise) are located in a long cultural history that has valued, and continues to value, men’s sexual pleasure over women’s (Brumberg 1997; Higgins and Hirsch 2007; Moore 2007). Many men stated that they
didn’t wear condoms because the woman told them not to, regardless of the fact that these claims were often accompanied by other acknowledgements that condoms don’t “feel good” or that they just don’t “like it.”. For example, after stating that he didn’t use a condom because “it didn’t feel very good,” Dean went on to say:

I think she wanted to get pregnant. She denies it to everyone else, but…’cause every time I asked her if I should wear [a condom] she said no. [Interviewer: So, because of that you think she wanted to get pregnant?] Yeah, I do.

Similarly, Joel, who also claimed that he “hated” condoms, responded this way when I asked “What happened?”: “One day, she was just like, ‘I don’t want you to wear a condom.’ And I was, like, ‘okay’.”

The decision to use a condom, however, is not a simple one, but is weighted by complex gender dynamics that dominate heterosexual relationships (Gavey, McPhillips, and Doherty 2001). Condom use is typically perceived as a man’s prerogative (more so than other forms of contraception), yet cultural norms, along with public sexual health messages and abstinence-only education, place the onus of safe sex, pregnancy prevention, and/or no sex primarily on women (Fields 2008; Gavey, McPhillips, and Doherty 2001; Kimmel 2008; see also Fennell 2011). This presents a contradiction of expectations that women must navigate in their intimate relationships.

These seemingly simple negotiations tend to make invisible the gendered contradictions that culturally handicap women. The assertiveness that goes along with encouraging women to insist on condom usage contradicts cultural norms of femininity
(Luker 1996). Women are expected to manage protection and be prepared for sex while still being the “good” girl that doesn’t plan on sex but is merely “carried away” in the heat of the moment. As Kristin Luker states:

…[The] skills a young woman needs in order to use contraception effectively are precisely the skills that society discourages in “nice girls,” who are expected to be passive, modest, shy, sexually inexperienced…and dedicated to the comfort of others… When it comes to contraception, she is caught in a net of double binds (1996, 148).

So while women are expected to be hesitant about sex, and only interested in and having sex under the guise of love, they are still expected to plan ahead. In a culture that punishes women for having sex while simultaneously rewarding men, this “net of double binds” leaves women in a vulnerable position – one that puts their identity and reputation at risk. Kimmel’s book Guyland adeptly portrays this double standard. As one of the men in his study says: “If a guy hooks up with a girl… She’s the one that let her guard down…her job going into the night…was to like protect herself, protect her moral character and her moral fiber…” (2008, 198). This statement demonstrates that sex (including a resulting pregnancy) means something very different for men and for women. While sex bolsters men’s masculinity, it compromises not only women’s femininity, but also their moral character.

Despite research suggesting that women dislike condoms as much as men do, condom usage is still more strongly linked to men’s (dis)pleasure while there remains a
general absence of discussion related to condom use and women’s (dis)pleasure (Higgins and Hirsch 2007). The result is that men have more power in refusing to wear a condom than women do in insisting that men wear one – an argument that is supported by prior research finding that women were less likely to be assertive with condom usage if the partner resisted (Detzer et al. 1995; Gavey, McPhillips, and Doherty 2001; Paschal 2006; Wingwood and DiClemente 1998; see also Higgins and Hirsch 2007).

Some of the men I interviewed discussed the decision to not wear a condom as merely an aside. The real problem, as they saw it, was the women’s choice to not take the Pill. Ben, a 17-year-old with an 11-month-old son, admitted to not wearing a condom because he “didn’t like it,” but nonetheless suggested that the pregnancy stemmed from her irresponsibility: “She’d actually [been] talking to her mom about getting on birth control but then she just kept puttin’ it off and puttin’ it off. And, so, here we are.” JD, 17, told a similar story. He too admitted to not wearing condoms because they “didn’t feel good.” But when I asked “What happened?” he responded:

I was always, like, let’s go get you on birth control. And she was always, like, “No, I just got off because it messes up my body.” And I was, like, well, there’s different things. And she was always just like, yeah…But she never did. And then we got pregnant.

Sometimes, though, the men didn’t blame the women per se, but they still placed the responsibility of the pregnancy on her shoulders. In response to how/why they got pregnant, several of the men explained that the woman had difficulties with the Pill or other forms of female contraception. For example, Daniel, an 18-year-old with one child
and one on the way, claimed that both pregnancies stemmed from her difficulties with birth control – as opposed to his not wearing a condom. In explaining the first pregnancy, he said, “She had this birth control in her arm…it was hurtin’ her and makin’ her real sick. So she got that [taken] out and a week later she got pregnant.” The second pregnancy seemed to follow a similar path:

She was on birth control, but she wasn’t…I don’t know…[she] didn’t like taking it or something. She said it made her sick… and it made her tired.

It made her depressed, kinda.

Daniel’s reasons for each pregnancy are located in her difficulties with birth control, rather than his not wearing a condom. This sort of framing, while not explicitly blaming the woman, still locates the responsibility for the pregnancy as hers alone. Despite Daniel’s knowledge that his partner didn’t like using (or couldn’t use) birth control, he doesn’t assume any responsibility for utilizing another method of protection. If the Pill doesn’t work, it is up to her to employ another form.

But both teen mothers and teen fathers are forced to negotiate an important cultural contradiction. On the one hand, having a child too early (and presumably out of wedlock) is considered a mistake (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Furstenberg 2007; Luker 1996; Luttrell 2003); on the other hand, whether a pregnancy is intended or not, there is a cultural expectation that the parents not wish away the presence of the child. So there is a distinct line that teen parents must walk: take responsibility for their “mistake” without admitting it was a mistake. This contradiction is not gender-neutral, though. Since
women are the ones expected to prevent pregnancy, combined with other cultural norms that assume that women should/do want children, the mistake is especially theirs.

Whether their stories are characterized by blame, or just a general lack of empathy with women, they represent the efforts of teen fathers to construct themselves as powerless or not in control of issues surrounding sex and pregnancy. They accomplish this by relying on norms of masculinity – specifically that sexuality is an essential and natural part of masculinity, but family planning (and all things family-related) is the domain of women. Moreover, men’s not-doing is linked to pleasure, and this pleasure is taken for granted. Women’s not-doing, on the other hand, is automatically linked to irresponsibility.

“You Know How When They Say It Looks [Worse] for a Girl Than for a Boy?”

Another theme that characterized the men’s narratives was that the pregnancy was an accident, the result of getting lost in “the heat of the moment.” However, even these simple explanations were still located within larger, cultural assumptions of gender. In particular, they relied on one of two primary cultural discourses to explain the pregnancy: They utilized a “boys will be boys” frame, suggesting that as males they are incapable of controlling their sexuality; or they drew on the girl’s promiscuity. As discursive resources, both frames utilize gender norms as tools to allow the men to construct themselves as not responsible for the pregnancy. So while the stories within this group began with responses such as “it just happened”— beyond this initial claim their narratives
expanded to tell larger stories that relocated the responsibility elsewhere, away from them.

Brian, 16, relies heavily on a discourse of male sexuality. After stating that the pregnancy was an accident, he continued:

“It’s just one of those things where you just wanna have sex. You’re not thinking of anything else... I mean... I’m a guy, you know... I’m like, I just wanna have sex. And, when you’re a man and your hormones are raging, and it’s like you can’t think about anything else besides having sex... so you just do it.

Brian claims that his being a man prevented him from thinking clearly about anything besides having sex, especially the consequences. Damian, 18, also relies on cultural proscriptions of male sexuality. “It just happened,” he said. “I mean, I knew it could happen, but... I’m a guy, I can’t help it. As a guy, it’s like, you just can’t help it.” Like Brian, Damian lays claim to the fact that male sexuality is uncontrollable. The language that Brian and Damian use, that they are “guys,” invokes this cultural discourse that assumes that their drive for sex is normal, natural, and, consequently, beyond their control.

As previously stated, a majority of the men acknowledged that “society” saw their having children at a young age as a mistake. Given this awareness, the stories these men tell about becoming fathers take on a different angle. Relying on a discourse of the uncontrollable male sex drive as a component of masculinity allows them to deny responsibility for the pregnancy. The biological frame of uncontrollable desire that
presumably stems from hormones and the male body serves as a naturalizing, taken-for-granted defense. In other words, this biological assumption of masculinity allows men to offer a seemingly natural justification for the denial of responsibility for the pregnancy. They can’t change what they can’t control. Moreover, the accounts of the young men were characterized by a view of sex as unavoidable for boys in ways that it was not for girls. As a result, sex was viewed as more of an individual choice for women than it was for men. This gendered construction of choice served to portray the women as responsible for the pregnancy, given their power and ability to choose whether or not to participate in (unprotected) sex.

However, they also benefit from this masculine display. As other scholars have argued, expressing heterosexual desire establishes a general, baseline masculinity (Pascoe 2007; Wilkins 2009). Whether we view these claims of hormone-driven behavior as trite or as empty clichés is beside the point. For these men, they serve as valuable resources for performing identity work, for constructing themselves as men. Aside from merely shedding responsibility, these men are also able to lay claim to a valuable asset – masculinity.

Beyond the boys-will-be-boys frame, many of the men drew on the girls’ sexual activity to justify, or at the very least offset, their participation in the “accident.” When asked what happened Jon, 17, with one daughter and another child on the way with another woman, replied:

Well…we were drinking and ended up hookin’ up, you know, havin’ sex.

And it just happened. [Interviewer: Were you using protection?] No.
But, like, she was messin’ around with other guys. She was sleepin’ with other guys while she was hookin’ up with me. So, like, I didn’t think the kid was mine.

Dario, 19, with a son, told a similar story:

No, I ain’t use protection. I didn’t like it, you know. And then she was pregnant. But, like I said, I done broke up with her and she had started talkin’ to her old boyfriend, and all these other guys…I thought it wasn’t mine. I kept tellin’ people it wasn’t mine…that it was one of them other guys’ baby.

Tony, 18, was also quick to point to his ex-girlfriend’s promiscuity. “It was just an accident,” he said. “But, she was always out with all these other guys all the time. She cheated on me all the time. I thought for sure the baby was someone else’s.”

Dario, Jon, and Tony locate the pregnancy in factors outside of themselves particularly that the respective mother was “messin’ around” with other men. These men mobilize gendered stereotypes by implying that her promiscuity is more culpable than their own. Marlin, a 16-year-old with one daughter, a baby on the way, and another child that may or may not be his, openly claimed that the latter woman (who says that the child is his) had several children by three different men, marking her as “nasty” in his opinion. “’Cause you know how when they say it looks [worse] for a girl than for a boy? Yeah, that’s how I think about it. With a boy, there ain’t too much wrong with it, really. But, like, a girl…that’s just nasty.”
The equation of masculinity with sexual prowess and femininity with sexual restraint allows the men’s behavior to go unnoticed. Men’s sexual promiscuity is expected, even normal. The women, however, are doing the opposite of what is expected of them as women, thus compromising their feminine and moral identity. For men sex is status-producing and status-enhancing, while for women it is a dangerous assault to their reputation and their identity (Kimmel 2008; Tanenbaum 1999; Wilkins 2008). Consider Marlin and the similarity of his situation to that of the mother of his (potential) third child – multiple children by multiple partners. This similarity results in very different outcomes for him and for her. Dismissing the women as “sluts” justifies their exploitation and releases the men of any real responsibility in the resulting pregnancy. Consequently, it appears that the double standard is alive and well, despite apparent gains that appear to grant women more respect as agentic sexual actors (Risman and Schwartz 2002; Wilkins 2008). And, with a baby as proof of sexual activity, the slut label becomes an even more powerful epithet. Ultimately, by framing the pregnancy in terms of her promiscuity, these fathers are able to deny, or at least cast doubt on, being a father altogether – which is clearly the most definitive and successful way to avoid responsibility and stigma.

Men’s (active) heterosexuality is a central tenet of masculinity, especially that of teens and young men (see Kimmel 2008; Pascoe 2007; Wilkins 2009, 2012). The men in this study benefit from the norms that the culturally hegemonic display of masculinity espouses – and their ability to rely on their “natural” sexual prowess, while condemning the same behaviors in their partners, is one of the ways in which they do so. By relying
on these assumptions, they are able to deny any real responsibility for the pregnancy, while simultaneously staking out their place as “real men.”

As strategies for shifting blame and signifying their masculinity, assumptions about the feminization of birth control and compulsive heterosexuality may be beneficial. However, these discourses can also align with stereotypes that portray teen fathers as self-centered and reckless. In short, while these approaches may allow teen fathers to claim masculine identities, they also stigmatize them as the wrong kind of men.

“I Thought She Was the One”

Teen fathers alleviate the costs of the previous two discourses by relying on a third: love and intimacy talk. In contrast to the previous sections, where the men defined themselves in relation to the women, the men who utilized a discourse of love set themselves against other, “lesser” men. Norms of masculinity can support these men in constructing narratives that deny their responsibility for the pregnancy, and thereby negotiate the stigma of teen pregnancy. However, these same masculine ideals can also be constraining – creating additional problems that they must also negotiate. Relying on stereotypes of young men as “naturally” heterosexually obsessed, for example, can serve as a resource for denying responsibility as well as signifying their manhood. But these same images also serve to stigmatize teen fathers as selfish, and even predatory. And, perhaps more than anything, the men in this study wanted to be seen as “good guys.”

Discourses of love provide one avenue in which to mitigate the stigma of teen pregnancy while still maintaining a level of respectability. Moreover, while love and intimacy talk
appear to contradict norms of masculinity, in reality they serve to reinforce them by maintaining gendered power dynamics within the relationship (Wilkins 2009, 2012).

Francesca Cancian (1987) has argued that love has become feminized, that the work associated with love and relationships (e.g., communication, vulnerability) has become the domain of women, whereas instrumental support (sex, negotiations with the “outside world”) has become masculinized. These gendered expectations suggest that women understand and are better at love than men, and that women must teach men how to “do” love. Jennifer Dunn’s work on stalking proves illustrative. She found that male stalkers’ actions were often justified in terms of love, or in a larger culture of romance. The same was not true for female victims – love was not a valid excuse to explain their reactions to stalkers’ actions. Men’s invasive and threatening behaviors were defensible by way of their deep love for the women (“he just loved her too much”), whereas women, who are believed to be better at love, are consequently denied the ability to use love as a justification for their actions (Dunn 2002, 42). Put simply: Women should know better.

Another powerful point in Dunn’s work is her demonstration that, within the culture of romance, women are expected to be flattered by men’s attention and displays of love:

If men are expected to be unromantic, making the use of romantic imagery all the more effective, women’s role expectations may require that they be flattered by the imagery… This expectation interacts with the notion that
women are responsible for men’s feelings when they are fortunate enough to elicit them” (Dunn 2002, 159).

The men in this study also relied on these sorts of gendered notions of love when explaining how their pregnancy came about. When asked why he didn’t use protection, Luke, 17, with a 16-month-old son and another one on the way (each with two different women), said, “It’s more special to me…When we have sex, it’s not like ‘Okay, let’s hurry up and get it done.’ It’s a close bond between us. I just feel that it’s more special without.” Or as Quinton, 16, said: “I wasn’t using protection because I felt comfortable with her. It wasn’t like with the other girls.” And Marlin, 16, when asked why he didn’t use a condom, explained that, of all the other girls he’s dated, “this is the first time [he’s] been in a real relationship.” He says, “I love her, for real.” For Luke, Quinton, and Marlin, love represents a valid justification for having unprotected sex. Their statements imply that not using a condom represents a sort of compliment to the woman, a demonstration of her value.

Edin and Kefalas (2005) heard similar accounts in their study of low-income mothers: unprotected sex was oftentimes viewed as a symbol of love and commitment to the women as well as the potential children. Still, love and romance are submerged in gender-specific “feeling rules” that tell women that they are in charge of managing their feelings and those of their partners (Dunn 2002; Hochschild 1983). In other words, romantic behavior and love talk become symbols of the depth of the men’s feelings toward them. And if a willingness to have unprotected sex comes to be seen as a demonstration of love, then women are located in a precarious position to manage their
relationships, and the emotions of the men, via methods of contraception (Dunn 2002; Edin and Kefalas 2005). Consequently, the decision to have unprotected sex becomes all the more mired in gendered assumptions surrounding love and romance.

Again, compared to the other themes, the men who utilized a discourse of love set themselves against other, “lesser” men. Wilkins (2009) makes similar arguments in her comparative study of goth and Christian men. She finds that both subcultures make similar claims of “being better” by distinguishing themselves from stereotypical qualities of masculinity – lewd, predatory, selfish – all qualities that “other” men embody. “Like other resources, intimacy talk is more valuable if it is rare...This strategy, then, is predicated on distinctions among men” (Wilkins 2009, 363). The men in my study also rely on the stereotypical assumption that “all men are dogs” – except for them. Their utilization of love as a reason behind the pregnancy allows them to maintain their identity as good men, despite making a culturally viewed “bad choice.” As Josh, 20, with two boys, said:

I mean, I was using [protection] at first, but I thought she was the one. I mean, it wasn’t like I was just sleeping with all these girls...I loved her.

We was talkin’ about gettin’ married and all this stuff. And then I wanted to have kids with her. And then we did. But, like, it just didn’t work out.

Eric, 20, with a 14-month-old daughter, is also quick to locate the pregnancy in a context of love. “We didn’t plan on it,” he said. “But it’s not like we were just messin’ around. We love each other. We want to get married...when the time is right.” For Josh and Eric, having children out of love locates them in a different place than other, shallow,
irresponsible men. Having children in his teens wasn’t the result of selfish, casual sex; it was located in a context of love. So, while having children at a young age may be considered a bad choice, he did it for the right reasons, so to speak.

For women, love justifies desire (Risman and Schwartz 2002). Since desire and sexual prowess are perceived as innate qualities of masculinity, men need little justification. But utilizing a discourse of love provides an added benefit. Since love and romance are associated with the feminine, and therefore subordinate, it is easily assumed that participating in these sorts of discourses will jeopardize their masculinity. However, similar to previous research, the men in this study utilized romantic talk as a way to bolster their masculinity (Allen 2007; Pascoe 2007; Wilkins 2009). Popular displays of the emerging “sensitive” man have come to symbolize progress toward gender equality in relationships. However, as Wilkins states, “…[W]hile men’s participation in intimacy talk may be desirable, it does not necessarily undo gender power relations” (2009, 362). In fact, men’s use of intimacy talk can actually maintain power in a relationship (Dunn 2002; Wilkins 2009; see also Kleinman 1996). Since men are assumed to be less expressive, their emotional displays become more significant and more valued, relative to women’s, for whom love and romance are considered natural (Dunn 2002; Kleinman 1996; Wilkins 2009).

To summarize, while drawing on love as an explanation for the pregnancy seemingly contradicts hegemonic ideals of masculinity, it actually reinforces them by allowing men more power within the relationship (Kleinman 1996; Risman and Schwartz 2002; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009; Wilkins 2009). This discourse of love also serves to
further demonstrate their masculine identity by linking it to their active heterosexuality. Their utilization of the discourse of love demonstrates their desirability to women, therefore bolstering their heterosexuality, and thereby their masculinity (Pascoe 2007; Wilkins 2009).

**Conclusion**

Both teen mothers and teen fathers are charged with negotiating the stigma associated with having a child off-time and out of wedlock; both are left trying to reestablish their reputations as “good girls” or “good guys.” Norms of masculinity provide these men with a set of tools that allows them to not only deny responsibility, but also signify their identities as men (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). This is not to suggest that teen mothers do not also do considerable work to deny responsibility for the pregnancy, but rather that masculinity and femininity provide different discursive tools. Consequently, the identity projects that teen fathers and teen mothers are able to accomplish are very different.

Still, teen fathers are negotiating competing concerns. Teen fathers face stereotypes that label them as predators, absent, or uncaring. Norms of masculinity can be used in attempts to mitigate the general stigma of teen pregnancy, but they can also serve to reinforce assumptions that teen fathers are generally selfish, merely impregnating women with nothing to lose and only status to gain (Kiselica 2008; Luker 1996; Paschal 2006). Examining teen fathers’ narratives of responsibility reveal the ways in which gendered norms can solve some problems while creating others. Aligning themselves with stereotypes of young men as “naturally” heterosexually obsessed, for example, can
serve as a resource for denying responsibility as well as signifying their manhood. But these same images also serve to stigmatize teen fathers as selfish, and even predatory. While these approaches may allow teen fathers to claim masculine identities, they also stigmatize them as the wrong kind of men. Consequently, many of the teen fathers I interviewed positioned themselves in opposition to these stereotypes. By locating teen pregnancy within a context of love, they are able to challenge assumptions that teen fathers are inherently selfish and predatory by constructing themselves as respectable and good.
CHAPTER 3: “BECAUSE THE MAN IS SUPPOSED TO BE THE PROVIDER”

The Big Story: “Because the man is supposed to be the provider.”

“It gets real hard,” said Daniel. “Because the man is supposed to be the provider. The woman is supposed to be the caregiver and the man is the provider. And it’s just hard…not being able to provide as much as you should.” Daniel’s story was a sad one. He was a transient for most of his teen years. He moved from couch to couch, always careful to never overstay his welcome. His father “walked out” when he was “just a kid” and his mom’s addiction to pain pills left him to fend for himself for much of his childhood. He speaks confidently of his ability to “survive.” “I actually lived in an abandoned house longer than I did anywhere else,” he says. At 18, Daniel is the father of a 6-month-old girl and his girlfriend is pregnant with their second child. The first 6 months of his daughter’s life haven’t fared much better than Daniel’s. Daniel, his girlfriend, and their daughter are still moving from apartment to apartment, staying wherever they can: with his sister, her grandmother, his friend, and even the kind neighbor across the street. Daniel’s story of being a father can’t be separated from his story of poverty and homelessness. Even in the face of his constant struggle to find “regular work”, and despite his inability to provide even the most basic of needs for his new family, Daniel still clung heavily to the ideology that fathers are the breadwinners.

All of the teen fathers I interviewed saw the primary role of fathers, and/or men generally, as the providers. The tales these men tell, then, resonate with previous studies that found that providing financial support was of utmost importance to teen fathers
This is, perhaps, unsurprising given the knowledge we have about the gendered roles of parents. Regardless of age, race, or social class, the cultural norm of fatherhood is that he is the financial provider, the breadwinner; while mothers are more often charged with tasks of nurturing and caregiving (Hays 1996; Walzer 1998). Fatherhood and motherhood are, of course, more complex than this simple dichotomy would lead us to believe. An increasing number of studies have further complicated this seemingly one-dimensional role of the father, focusing their analyses on aspects of father involvement (e.g. availability, day-to-day caregiving) (Fuligni & Brooks-Gunn 2004; Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera 2002); exploring, comparing, and contrasting the role of the father with the role of the mother (Stone 2008; Walzer 1998); and still others have examined fatherhood as a social construction, exploring the ways in which cultural practices of fatherhood have changed over time, and continue to vary across race and class lines (for a more detailed discussion, see Marsiglio, et al 2000; Morman & Floyd 2006). Even with these attempts to conceptualize the role of the father as being about more than just financially providing, however, research continues to suggest that employment and breadwinning are still “materially and symbolically central to fatherhood” (Roy 2004, p. 255).

So, while discussions about paternal involvement (or those that attempt to explore the increasing participation of fathers in more hands-on caregiving) continue to evolve and develop, they still tend to take for granted the role of providing (Christiansen and Palkovitz 2001; Roy 2004). For example, research that explores the work-family balance
that fathers (as well as mothers) must negotiate presumes that there is, at the very least, a job that requires negotiation (Voydanoff 2002). And, despite social, cultural, and even academic movements that push for re definitions of “good dads” as more than just a provider – as someone who is “there”, as someone who melds traditional expectations of a good job with “new” ideals of nurturant fathers – the norm of breadwinning has not been sufficiently displaced (Daly 1995; Roy 2004; Townsend 2002). In other words, what it means to be a “good dad” has certainly expanded – it can mean many things. But what it means to be a “bad dad” is still largely predicated on expectations of financial provision.

This is the big story – that men are supposed to be the providers – and it’s the one that’s already been told multiple times over. It’s also nothing new to suggest that teen fathers define what it means to be a “good dad” in terms of breadwinning – multiple studies have done this as well. Likewise, multiple studies have also explored the ways in which teen fathers’ abilities to be breadwinners are hindered given the limited job availability for young fathers, stemming from factors such as age, lower educational attainment, and decreased skill sets (Allen & Doherty 1996; Glikman 2004; Kiselica 2008; Marsiglio 1994; Paschal 2006). The consequences of this inability, however, are often framed in terms of the impacts that it has on the children’s lives – or at the very least, the men’s ability to father effectively. Marsiglio (1994) states it most succinctly: “Since many disadvantaged fathers feel inadequate about their ability to fulfill the breadwinner role they often dissociate themselves from it in order to minimize their sense of inadequacy” (p. 330). Hence, when men are unable to do fathering (when fathering
equals breadwinning), they tend to distance themselves from the role altogether (Kiselica 2006; Marsiglio 1994; Paschal 2006). But, teen fathers are also unique in that, beyond the challenges of being successful breadwinners, they must also negotiate cultural stereotypes that assume that teen fathers are absent, uninvolved, and at the very least, non-contributing. So, in addition to cultural norms that dictate that fathers provide financially, teen fathers also face negative stereotypes that take for granted the idea that they won’t (Weber and Schatz 2013). And the teen fathers I interviewed were clearly aware of this. Take Josh for instance, a 21-year-old father of two: “You gotta support your kids,” he says. “If not, you’re gonna be a deadbeat.” Michael, 17 and new father of a 2 week-old son, gave a similar account:

No matter how many kids you got, you gone have to take care of your kids regardless, you know. I don’t want everybody lookin’ at me like...like I’m a deadbeat dad or nothing like that.

The metaphorical deadbeat serves as a straw man that many of the fathers compared themselves to – and an identity that they work hard to avoid. To be sure, all of the fathers I interviewed wanted to be seen as good dads. But, more than just a metaphor or an identity, the “deadbeat” also represents the power and the hegemony of the breadwinner norm. The work by Holstein & Gubrium (2000) which addresses the influence of cultural norms on life choices is useful here. Specifically, they state the following: “No matter how we construct our lives over time, we do so in relation to what are taken to be substantial and resolute moral guideposts” (p. 210; see also Ewick and Silbey 1995 for a similar discussion). The power of social norms become easily visible in these instances
of the young men’s narratives – if not providing makes them deadbeats (read: bad dads), then they have no real choice but to participate in this hegemonic story-telling. In other words, failing to acknowledge the breadwinner norm results in a “bad dad” label – and again, that is an identity that all of them are working avidly to avoid.

But, participating (or at the very least, paying lip service to) the breadwinner norm also provides benefits beyond portraying themselves as good dads. It also allows them to bolster their masculinity – since, as many of the fathers claimed, being a man is intricately linked to “taking care of their responsibilities” (read: their children). Given that fatherhood and masculinity are so intimately linked, by being a good dad they are also able to shore up their identities as good men. In other words, the idea of men as breadwinners is more than just an ideology or an expectation. It also serves as a powerful discursive resource for making sense of their identities as men, as well as fathers. Whether or not they are actively or successfully providing, the very act of invoking the breadwinner discourse still allows them to actively construct a masculine self.

Relative to femininity, masculinity grants certain privileges. However, masculinity does not result in undiluted privilege to all men at all times (Wilkins 2012a). Similar to the last chapter, masculinity as a social construct, as an institutionalized form of privilege, and as a discursive tool, provides resources for navigating the challenges of teen fatherhood; but it is also limiting in that it often lays out unrealistic or unreachable expectations.

To put it simply: Very few of the teen fathers I interviewed are able to accomplish breadwinning successfully. Many of them struggled to find regular and stable work, let
alone work that paid enough that would allow them to take care of their children/families. However, despite the apparent unavailability of this expectation, all of the men in my study maintained the notion that as fathers/fathers-to-be their new role was defined primarily by their need to financially provide for their children and families. But, their choices are few – on one hand, they must participate, because a failure to support this belief would ultimately challenge their masculinity, and their reputations as good dads. On the other hand, this expectation creates additional dilemmas. Due to age, class, and a potential host of other factors, they are unable to participate effectively – but they can’t admit that they can’t provide without jeopardizing their masculinity, so they talk around it; they construct narratives that mask their vulnerability, allowing them to still be seen as men and as good dads.

This piece follows the path previously laid out by Amy Wilkins (2012b). In her study on the emotion work of black university men, she found that these men must also navigate important contradictions. In short, she argues control and assertiveness are culturally associated with masculinity; however, race confounds these behavioral norms since controlling images of the “angry black man” serve as powerful stereotypes that her respondents must also avoid. So, as Wilkins further demonstrates, these dichotomous expectations create identity dilemmas that require considerable, tactical negotiation. Specifically, the black university men she studies craft strategies of emotional restraint in an attempt to manage the vulnerabilities of race while still maintaining their identities as men. She states the following:
On the one hand, avoiding the caricature of “the angry black man” requires stringent emotional control. On the other hand, black men’s suppression of anger denies them access to masculine privilege and power… To participate in middle-class spaces, then, black men must manage their emotions, but they must do so in a way that allows them to navigate the double binds caused by contradictory gender, race, and class expectations (Wilkins 2012b, p. 39).

Similar to the men in Wilkins’ work, the teen fathers I interviewed are also navigating contradictory expectations. As men and as fathers, they are expected to be the primary providers; but, as teens with limited resources and skills (among other structural constraints) they are unable to accomplish this responsibility effectively. However, to admit this would further jeopardize their identities as men and as “good dads”.

In this chapter, I examine the ways in which teen fathers negotiate and attempt to resolve these dilemmas. The fathers I interviewed rely on cultural ideals of masculinity and fatherhood in order to fashion themselves as “good men”. But, when fatherhood is largely, if not solely, defined in terms of breadwinning, they must find ways to mask this vulnerability, thereby giving different ways in to accomplish masculinity and “good” fatherhood. For the teen fathers here, the breadwinner discourse is a resource, but it is also a problem to be managed (see Wilkins 2012b).
The Little Stories: “It Changed My Life”

“Big stories are important and readily recognizable, but they don’t tell the whole story. For that, you need to hear the little stories (Gubrium, 2012, personal communication).”

As I mentioned above, the big story is the one about men and fathers as providers. And, again, this is the story that the majority of research on teen fathers tends to tell. But, my research suggests that this isn’t the only story – or, rather, the story is much more complicated than that. The “little stories” these fathers tell point to other structures – especially social class – as shaping the ways in which they are able to draw on and/or respond to the breadwinner discourse. In other words, their class locations allowed them to access and/or negotiate this ideology in different ways and to different degrees. Similar to Wilkins’ (2012b) argument, masculinity and social class create competing expectations that these teen fathers must navigate simultaneously. So while the idea of breadwinning, as a cultural norm, as a cultural script, may be accessible to most men, the ability and expectation to “do” it in their everyday lives looks very different based on the social class in which they come from. These constraints are not always visible, however (to the men, or to the “worlds” in which they live), so their identity work becomes all the more important if they are successfully portray masculine selves.

The work these men do in attempting to navigate the breadwinner norm become especially visible in their narratives about how becoming a father at a young age changed their life. All of the young men spoke openly about the fact that having kids changed their life. It altered their relationships with girlfriends, friends, and family; it forced them to “grow up”. For some, it closed doors and eliminated opportunities; for others, it
opened up windows, it gave them a reason to live. As a result, the ways in which these young men conceptualized “change” was dynamic and fluid. But, when I asked them to expound on the ways in which they saw their lives changing, patterns emerged that suggest that the paths their lives have taken, perhaps will take, were inherently different.

The main argument surrounding teen pregnancy, especially from those on the side of policy and social welfare, has been that early childbearing essentially “ruins lives”, that it results in overwhelmingly negative consequences for the mothers, the fathers, the children, and the society at large. But, existing research on teen mothers suggests that these inevitable outcomes are subject to debate (Furstenberg 2007; Geronimous 2003; Mollborn 2012). The fact that teens that face early parenthood are more likely to come from lower classes and poorer backgrounds indicate that those who become teen mothers and fathers differ from the larger population in ways that could also result in poor outcomes, regardless of age and parental status (Edin & Kefalas 2005; Furstenberg 2007; Geronimus 2003). Moreover, several studies have shown that, given the existing risk factors, teen pregnancy can actually work to improve opportunities.

Edin and Kefalas’ (2005) study on low-income women provides a powerful point of departure. They state:

> What outsiders do not understand is that early childbearing does not actually have much effect on low-skilled young woman’s future prospects in the labor market. In fact, her life chances are so limited already that a child or two makes little difference… (p. 171)
Similar arguments have been made by numerous scholars. Furstenberg (2007) and Luker (1996) provide extensive reviews of the research conducted on both sides, generally coming to the conclusion that the “consequences of early childbearing are far from devastating (Furstenberg 2007, p. 47).” Moreover, as Geronimus (2003) contends, the arguments that teen pregnancy results in largely dire consequences rely on middle-class assumptions that take for granted social and economic resources that socio-economically advantaged parents are able to draw upon in order to ensure the success of their children (see also Lareau 2011).

But again, these studies focus on teen mothers, while similar research on teen fathers is meager, at best. Moreover, given the omnipresence of women’s economic inequality, relative to men’s, combined with cultural expectations surrounding motherhood and fatherhood (e.g. mothers as caregivers, fathers as breadwinners), as well as the privileges that are disproportionately bestowed on men as opposed to women, we can expect gender to intersect with the classed realities of teen mothers and teen fathers in different ways. In short, cultural norms tell us to expect different things from mothers and fathers, that their roles and responsibilities are “naturally” different. For instance, as Walzer (1998) argued, conventional wisdom suggests employment is obligatory for fathers, and voluntary for mothers – and these common ideologies result in different expectations surrounding the roles of mothers and fathers within the family. Or as Townsend (2002) stated, for fathers “work is not a separation of family, but a manifestation of family commitment (p. 136).” So, while the studies of teen mothers can
offer a jumping off point, they also challenge us to think differently about the ways in which gendered norms play out differently for teen fathers and teen mothers.

Before going any further, it is important to again note my interest in the “truths” these young men tell. The ways in which these teen fathers talk about their “choices”, their futures, and their opportunities have the tendency to create a picture of certainty, specifically the certainty that their life paths were indelibly altered by their having children at such a young age. As earlier chapters intimated, our culture’s conventional wisdom posits that teen pregnancy results in a complete derailment of social, academic, and class mobility. The reality is that we can never know that for certain. Hence, my central point here is not that these fathers would have become successful (or perhaps great failures) had they waited to have children. Indeed, some of them probably would have benefited from waiting; but, it is not this “truth” that I am interested in. Instead, I am interested in how they talk about their lives and their opportunities, and how they see teen parenthood shaping, intersecting, and even colliding with these understandings. And, again, as I immersed myself deeper within their narratives I realized that the story of how they see their lives changing is really just a story within a story. To be sure, the ways in which they talk about opportunities, jobs, and college tell us a great deal about agency and efficacy on multiple levels. But, the ways in which they invoke the breadwinner discourse in their narrative attempts to communicate and make sense of their life-changes also gives a broader understanding of the ways in which gender plays out in their everyday lives. And, indeed, as Gubrium intimated above – in order to understand how the big stories matter in the everyday, for that we need the little stories.
Middle-Class Teen Fathers: “I’m tryin’ to make my life better to make hers better too.”

Despite their comments that having children changed their lives, the teen fathers who came from upper-/middle-class backgrounds generally claimed that their opportunities and life paths hadn’t changed all that much. For example, when I asked Levi (an eighteen year old senior in high school, and father of a 4-month old baby girl) how his life was different following the birth of his daughter, he said “not that much, really.” As a successful football player who is being actively recruited by colleges, his path hasn’t changed all that much. His original goal to play football for a university on the west coast was replaced by the option of attending a college closer to home (e.g. in the same state.) Still, for the most part, there was a high probability that he would leave his hometown and his daughter to attend college. The importance of Levi’s narrative surrounding his continued plan to “go away to college” rests within the ways in which he draws on a masculine discourse of breadwinning to justify his choices. In his discussion of “the future”, he says the following:

I just wanna play football. And go to college. That way I can have a good job so I can support her later on down the road.

Travis, a 21 year old with a 2 year-old daughter and another one on the way, talks similarly about his decision to move away to go to school. Travis lives 7 hours away from his hometown, his family, and his daughter. Similar to Levi, Travis also claims that “babies change everything”, but again, his plans and goals haven’t been altered that much. When I asked him if he thought his life would have been much different had he not become a dad at 19, he says this: “Maybe a little different. But…I don’t know…not
really because, you know, even if I didn’t have my kid I’d probably still be doing the same thing now.” Coming from a solid middle-class family, Travis spoke openly about his family’s expectation that he go to school. When I asked him if it was hard balancing the two, going away to college and being a dad, he had this to say:

[It’s not really hard] being a dad, just being away…but, you know, I’m trying to make my life better to make hers better too.

Luke, a senior in high school and the father of a 17 month-old son, tells a similar story. Although, he’s not sure what he wants to do after high school, his beliefs in his role as a man and a father are the same. His description, while lengthy, is indicative.

Being a man, being a father…[it] means being able to take care of your family and having a job, being able to support them… that’s what I want most…to be able to support him when he gets older… [Having a kid] makes me realize what I need to do for the future so that I can provide for him and, you know, live in a house, have a house of my own, pay my bills and pay for my kid’s education. So, I gotta make sacrifices now, so I can take care of him later on down the road.

Levi, Travis, and Luke all subscribe to the gendered notion that the main responsibility of fathers, of men, is to provide for their children. Coupled with their firm location within the middle-class, the expectations that they accomplish this via college becomes, not just an expectation, but a reality. Masculinity and social class can both result in forms of privilege – and, when these privileges intersect, they become all the more powerful. As
such, when we examine more closely the resources that these men are able to draw on, their success seems much more likely, relative to the other teen fathers I interviewed.

For example, Levi’s position as an honor roll student and a “star” athlete gained him added privileges in school. His coaches, teachers, and principal agreed to give him an extra study hall during the day so that he could “get [his] homework mostly done at school and then go home and help with [the baby].” But, aside from the cultural capital that these young men are able to acquire via their locations as middle-class men, the reality is that their families are able to provide for their children in the meantime, while they are “getting on their feet.”

Both class and masculinity can serve as enabling and constraining of success. As the sons of nurses, successful business owners, skilled laborers in larger manufacturing plants, police officers, and teachers, these middle-class teen fathers had access to various resources that, not only encouraged college and other middle-class accoutrements, but also ensured their likelihood. And, like most of the teen fathers I interviewed, they also saw their role as fathers as being defined primarily in terms of breadwinning. But, the ways in which middle-class teen fathers rely on a masculine discourse of breadwinning is largely indicative of their ability to participate effectively in achieving it – if not now, then in the future. Especially in the instances of Levi and Travis, the breadwinning discourse serves as a powerful justification for continuing on their chosen paths, (e.g. going away to college). This discourse allows them to frame college as a responsibility, rather than an opportunity. Perhaps more importantly, though, this responsibility takes for granted the fact that their parents have the resources to assist them in providing for
their children in the present, so that they can do it on their own in the future. For these young men, as with all the teen fathers I interviewed, providing is the responsibility of the father. But, their inability to do it in the present creates a dilemma that they must negotiate. Their social class, and the resources and expectations that come with it, also serves as a resource for negotiating this dilemma. They’re not providing now – but they’ll do it in the future.

**Working-Class Teen Fathers: “Right now, I just gotta keep workin’.”**

The stories working-class teen fathers tell about fatherhood also rely heavily on a discourse of breadwinner masculinity. However, unlike the middle-class teen fathers, it doesn’t provide the reasons for going away to college (for instance), but instead it is the reason why they can’t go away to college. Take Tony, 19 years old with a 1 ½ year old son, and a story very similar to Levi’s. Tony was a senior when his son was born and a “star” football player with a scholarship to a state school that would have taken him 5 hours away from his baby boy. “I had a full-ride scholarship to [a university]. But I quit the team,” he says. When I asked him why, he said quite simply, “Because I had to get a job.”

Mitch was also a football player with hopes of going away to college. But, when his daughter was born shortly before his 17th birthday, he too had to make different choices. He tells his story this way:

My plan was to go to college and play football…I never planned to go to [the vocational school] then. I wanted to stay at [my high school] and go
to college and have some kind of career, not like welding, what I’m in right now. My plan was to play football in college. I was going to be an engineer. But, it’s done now. I just, I hate it. I can’t play football and work. But, if I don’t work, I can’t…I can hardly afford my gas, my insurance, food, diapers. I wanna go to college and play football…but it’s just not going to happen both ways.

While the working-class teen fathers spoke about their relationships with their families and the “support” they received in similar ways to the middle-class fathers, the reality is that the familial support they were able to rely on looked very different as their narratives unfolded. Tony and Mitch, for example, talked frequently about their parents’ strong ties to their (grand) children, babysitting and spending time with them when they can. But, their support is much more tempered by time and money. Their parents all work full-time; with Mitch’s mom working two jobs just to take care of Mitch’s siblings. Moreover, given the limited space available in their homes, both Tony and Mitch moved out on their own after their kids were born, because as Tony said, “there just wasn’t room for all of us.”

The general expectation that characterized the accounts of working-class teen fathers was that they had to work to support their children; their parents could offer little in the way of monetary support. The consequences of this reality are profound, however. While the middle-class teen fathers viewed college, for example, as a responsibility to providing a good life for their children “down the road”, the working-class teen fathers viewed school as an opportunity that may or may not happen. Joel was 17 when his
daughter was born. And while his employment history is splotchy, at best, his attempts to find stable work are a constant, having worked on and off repeatedly since graduating from high school. He, too, spoke about wishes of going to college; but, his acceptance of its improbability is paramount. “There ain’t much I can do now,” he says.

I want to go to school, you know, but it’s kind of hard to pay for her and pay for my place and food for her and me. I can’t pay for college and do all that, too. I’d like to do college, but I can probably never go back. That’s kind of where I’m at right now.

Josh was eighteen and a senior in high school when his first son was born. Just after he turned twenty, his girlfriend gave birth to their second son. Not yet 21, Josh has been working “on the line” for two years. He also spoke humbly about the ways in which becoming a teen father altered the path he saw his life taking. He explains his situation this way:

I was always wanting to go into the army ever since I was little. And then I was thinkin’ about going to [the local university]. But, well…I gotta have a job… But, it’s just a lot of responsibility…so when I get paid, I gotta spend my money on them…diapers, you name it. So, I just try to do my best. I just try to do my part. But, everything just costs so much, you know. So, I don’t know what’s gonna happen. Right now, I just gotta keep workin’. Maybe later on down the road…

Josh’s story exemplifies the materiality that all of the working-class dads verbalized. Their stories speak to the larger constraints that being a breadwinner entails. While the
middle-class fathers framed education as a responsibility, the working-class fathers saw it as an opportunity – and one that their early parenthood most likely compromised.

Similar to the middle-class teen fathers, the working-class fathers relied heavily on a norm of breadwinning masculinity. Both groups framed their choices and/or opportunities within a discourse of their responsibility, as men and fathers, to be the providers. But, again, the majority of them weren’t providing – or at the very least, struggling to provide effectively. As previously suggested, they must acknowledge the masculine norm of breadwinning – or not be counted as men at all; but in doing so, it also draws attention to their struggles and inabilities to do it effectively. Their class locations, however, provide different resources in which to negotiate this dilemma.

Additionally, while the breadwinner discourse creates a potential dilemma for these men to navigate, the teen fathers’ narratives suggest that it can also serve as a resource. For the middle-class fathers, the breadwinning discourse serves as a way to explain, or perhaps justify, their opportunities. By invoking the provider discourse, the middle-class fathers were able to maintain their paths of success, while still constructing a positive identity as a “good dad”. However, their ability to frame their lives in this way presumes the resources that a middle-class standing can provide. On the other hand, for the working-class fathers, this same discourse accounted for their lack of opportunities. The precariousness that characterized the lives of the latter group located them in a rather unique position. Marcus, 20 with an 8-month-old son, provides a prime example. As the son of a “furniture delivery guy” and a nurse’s aide, Marcus’ family had hoped that he would do better. He explains: “[My family], they were all surprised. They were
disappointed. They thought I was gettin’ out of this life.” As families and individuals on the verge of “something better”, such as a college education, and the general likelihood for greater stability, working class fathers were aware of and hopeful for something “better”. Consequently, the working class fathers are able to talk about bigger and better careers. They’re able to talk about the possibilities of going away to college. However, given the instability of their families, the parents of the working-class teen fathers are unable to offer resources that can serve as a buffer against their “mistake.”

**Teen Fathers in Poverty: “It’s only hard if you make it hard.”**

When I met Quinton he was sixteen and “doing time” in the Juvenile Detention Center for “fighting”. His daughter was due any day. He spoke in abstract, idealistic terms about what he thought fatherhood would be like for him. He talked about “getting a good job”; he talked about “preparing [his daughter] for the world”; he talked about sacrifice, about “giving up [his] dreams for her.” At the time, I thought that his generic descriptions stemmed from his age, or perhaps from the fact that he hadn’t yet experienced the day-to-day reality of fatherhood. But the abstractness that characterized Quinton’s story was, I came to realize, about more than just age or changing diapers. In short, there were distinct differences between all three groups of fathers, but the differences that separated the lower-class teen fathers from those previously discussed were about more than just framing. For the middle- and working-class teen fathers I discussed above, their narratives about the impact that becoming fathers had on their lives was in most ways real and tangible (whether there was a significant change or not), in
that they talked about specific jobs, specific colleges, specific careers. But, for the poor and lower-class teen fathers, their stories relied on dream-like versions of cultural expectations that they were clearly aware of, but had no apparent idea of how to actually achieve. Still giving voice to the cultural norm that men and fathers are the breadwinners, they talked often about “getting a good job” or “providing for their kid(s)”. However, as they tell their stories, it becomes quite clear that the idea of “getting a good job” and the materiality of what “getting a good job” means, (e.g. how to go about doing it) are two completely different things.

For example, Quinton spoke frequently of his goals in life: “Someday,” he says, “I hopefully want to go to the NBA or either be a psychologist.” Inspiring words that often encourage kids to “shoot for the stars” were not lost on many of the boys I interviewed, including Quinton. But the unrealistic nature of such goals was frequently ignored. For example, considering that Quinton hadn’t played basketball on an organized team (school or otherwise) for three years, primarily because he “couldn’t make grades”, suggests that his visions of success – defined as either a professional basketball player or a psychologist which requires years of schooling – are potentially out of reach.

Still, when Quinton talked about being a father, the ways in which he saw his dreams supporting and/or conflicting with this new role take on a whole new perspective. Consider the following explanation Quinton gives in response to my question about how becoming a dad is changing his life:

Just thinkin’ of how I’m gonna support it, basically. It’s just hard because, like, I’m confused of what I want in life right now because everything’s
chasin’… Because like…if I go into the NBA I really ain’t gone see my baby… ‘cause I’m always gone be on the road. Because basketball teams travel a lot. But, when I think about the future, even before the baby was in the picture because…I just don’t wanna be a failure. But at the same time…I’m preparing myself to…give up my dreams for my child because…I want my child to have a dream. I want my child to be successful. Like, going to the NBA or stuff like that…like, my dreams…I’m willing to give ‘em up for her because…I want for her to have ‘em.

Similar to the middle- and working-class fathers, Quinton is clearly aware of the cultural expectations that men and fathers are the providers of their families. But, the vague and specifically unrealistic ways in which he talks about this expectation are altogether different from the fathers discussed previously.

But, Quinton is not the only one. All of the lower-class fathers I interviewed shared this ambiguity in their talk. Like Dakota, eighteen with a 2-week old daughter, who said that his goal was to “be somebody.” Or Beau, twenty years old with a 7-month old daughter and a son due in 3 months, who claimed that his life really hadn’t changed all that much since his child was born; his goals, the direction he saw his life taking, were generally still the same: “It really hasn’t changed all that much. The kids just came a little quicker than I expected. But other than that, my goals are still the same. Get a good job, nice house, you know, big yard, good school…nice family, kids growin’ up
good…retire someday.” Similar to Quinton, Dakota and Beau talk generically about where they see their lives going.

In general, the majority of the poor and lower-class teen fathers saw their lives changing very little in the face of their early fatherhood. Despite the fact that most of them agreed that “kids change your life,” their stories suggested otherwise. Similar to the middle-class teen fathers I interviewed, when I asked them to expound on the ways they actually saw their lives changing, there general response was “not that much.” However, unlike their middle-class counterparts, who were mostly shielded from the potentially hazardous consequences of their “mistake”, poor teen fathers had little protection from the penalties of early parenthood. Their families had little, if any, resources to offer in attempts to keep them from struggling. But, the disheartening reality is that these young men had little to lose, fewer opportunities to protect.

As mentioned above, Edin and Kefalas (2005) witnessed similar storylines play out in the narratives of low-income mothers. And, similar to these mothers, the teen fathers I interviewed spoke largely of their children as changing their lives for the better. A statement made by Edin and Kefalas provides a striking parallel. They state: “Children provide motivation and purpose in a life stalled by uncertainty and failure (p. 172).” This quote echoes the refrains made by many of the lower-class fathers I interviewed. Consider Daniel, the young man whose struggles of providing opened this paper. As someone who spent the majority of his life homeless, without “any family to speak of,” his child(ren) represent more than just responsibility. He explains:
I was happy. After I got it in my head that I was gonna be a dad, I was happy. ‘Cause I wanted somebody…somebody to have my last name…somebody that’s family, that’s my blood, to have around. I never had that before.

Stereotypes that teen parents (especially mothers) selfishly have babies in order to have someone to love is often troubling for many outside observers (see Edin & Kefalas 2005 for a similar discussion). But, for young parents like Daniel, children don’t represent the derailment that critics of teen pregnancy so often espouse (see Edin & Kefalas 2005; Furstenberg 2007; Geronimus 2003; Luker 1996). Instead I heard responses like that of Dallas, an 18-year-old high school dropout with a 2-week-old daughter: “If it weren’t for [my daughter], I’d still be doin’ all the stupid stuff I was before. Fightin’, getting’ drunk, smokin’. Yeah, I probably would’ve been a lot worse. I wouldn’t a grew up.” Or, Jon, a 17 year-old with two boys and another baby on the way, whose refrain speaks volumes about the directions in which he saw his life going: “It could be worse,” he says. “I could be in jail, I could be dead.” Marquis, 18 with a baby on the way, and a long history of parental neglect and shuffling between his natal home and various foster homes explains that before he found out he was going to be a father, “I was just pretty much, like, just forget life. I mean…there’s not a place in it for me, so I might as well just do what I do. But, now…I have something to look forward to…somebody that’s going to look up to me.”

Even in the face of poverty, and the constant struggles to “make it”, the low-income fathers still saw their responsibility as fathers as primarily about being providers.
But these, fathers, perhaps even more so than the middle- and working-class fathers, also struggled to provide financially for their children. But, the ways in which they negotiate this dilemma are altogether different from the fathers discussed above. While middle- and working-class fathers talked about providing in the future or giving up college to provide in the present, lower-class fathers talked mainly about “being there.”

As Daniel, the young man introduced at the beginning of this paper, states: “I think that havin’ a job makes me a better dad. But...just being, just being there makes me a good dad.” Dakota makes a similar statement: “It’s hard when you’re not workin’,” he says. “But, the hardest part is to be there for your kid.” Or as Jon, a 17-year-old father of two, says:

The dad makes sure that he has what he needs, you know. There’s clothes on its back, food on the table. [I] gotta make sure I have everything it needs. There’s heat on. There’s an air conditioner if it’s hot. Everything like that. But, a good dad...basically it’s just being there, you know.

That’s the important part. You know, knowing that if it calls you and just like an emergency...Drop everything. And, I’ll be there for my kid.

As the narratives of Daniel, Dakota, and Jon suggest – they are well aware of the cultural norm that fathers provide for their children. But to acknowledge this expectation also requires them to negotiate the reality that they aren’t able to accomplish it. The way in which they negotiate this dilemma is reframe fatherhood as being about “more than” providing – the hard part, the important part, according to these fathers is “being there.”

As Quinton suggests:
[To be a good dad is] To be there for it, to support it, to love it and to know that material things doesn’t matter…that yo child would rather for you to be there than to…have all this, all type of…material things…to…remember you by because those material things, sooner or later, they gonna go away. The clothes, the shoes, sooner or later she gone grow out of it, she not gone have it no more, so…I feel that…to be a good father is to just…give, um, try to give your all, and to always be around and to…try to love it unconditionally.

So, while the middle- and working-class fathers negotiated the problem of being breadwinners by weaving stories of sacrifice and being breadwinners “later on”; the lower-class teen fathers talked around it in ways that reframed fatherhood as about “being there”, not just financially providing.

**Conclusion**

The little stories these men tell give a more nuanced meaning to the ways in which teen fathers navigate the role of fatherhood. For all of the teen fathers I interviewed, fatherhood was primarily defined as being a breadwinner. But their inability to do it successfully creates additional dilemmas that require careful work and strategic negotiation to maneuver successfully. All of the fathers in this study wanted to be seen as “good dads”. But, where good dad equals breadwinning, their resources as teenagers (and of course complicated even more by class location) limit their ability to do this effectively. So, in order to maintain their masculinity, their agency as men and fathers,
they must reframe this struggle. In short, they must mask or downplay this vulnerability, talking around it in ways that gives them a different way to accomplish masculinity and "good" fatherhood.
CHAPTER 4: LEARNING TO BE THE EXCEPTION

“You always look back …and wonder what it woulda been like to have a dad around.”

Much of the research on teen fathers – some directly, some indirectly – make note of the fact that the young dads in their study are disproportionately more likely to come from homes where the father was absent (Kiselica 2008; Parra-Cardona, et al 2006; Paschal 2006; Thornberry, et al 1997). Similarly, of the twenty six men in this study, 17 reported that their own fathers were “not around”. Furthermore, of the nine men who said that their fathers were “in [their] lives”, three identified their fathers as “bad dads”, as men who, at the very least, were unreliable and undependable. Concerns over, and experiences of, absent fathers continue to play a significant role in stories of teen pregnancy – for teen mothers, teen fathers, and the children of teen parents (Kiselica 2008; Paschal 2006; Thornberry, et al 1997). For better or for worse, the absent-father theme serves as a somewhat comfortable prop for making sense of adolescent girls’ and boys’ poor choices. For example, teen mothers, especially, are often framed as girls who got pregnant because they were looking for male attention stemming from their own “daddy issues”. But, more than a risk factor, more than an obstacle to be overcome, and more than a psychological scar, the stories of the teen fathers I interviewed suggest that the storyline of the absent dad is also a tool, a resource, that helps them to make sense of their lives, roles, and experiences as fathers themselves. In other words, as I talked to these men about becoming fathers, about being “good dads”, their stories circled around the stories of their fathers – the majority of which were not around.
From a psychological or public health perspective, the effect of absent fathers is often described as a “wound” that needs tending (Kiselica 2008; Paschal 2006). The importance of these effects notwithstanding, here I am more interested in the ways in which these men draw on their experiences of absent fathers to better understand their own situations and roles as fathers themselves. Given that these men don’t exist in isolation, their experiences of fatherlessness and fatherhood can’t be examined in isolation either. First of all, gendered expectations about what it means to be “real” men are inherent in many of their stories. As earlier chapters have intimated, assumptions of normative masculinity are significant for how they see and portray themselves. Expectations of toughness and independence are clearly visible in the tales they tell about who they “are” or want to be. In addition to notions of masculinity, cultural messages about what it means to be a “good dad” have also been disseminated widely. The message that a father is important for a family, and for society generally, has been publicized and circulated quite effectively. Even President Obama has been called upon to propagate the message in a recent public service announcement – calling on fathers to “Take time to be a dad today!” Hence, the effects of father-absence matter in ways that extend beyond individual wounds.

And certainly, the men in my study also talk about their fathers “taking off” in emotionally-injurious ways. Several of the men, for example, talk quite openly about the repeated disappointment they felt when their fathers failed to follow through on promises or plans made. But, to frame their experiences of growing up without fathers as “wounds” not only individualizes a larger cultural narrative, but it makes that narrative invisible.
More than this, though, to talk about absent father “wounds” represents an interpretation of academics and social service providers (see Kiselica 2006). The narratives of the men I interviewed suggest that this interpretation, however, is much more complex. The ways in which they are able to talk about the absence of their fathers is complicated by notions of masculinity. Specifically, it lends itself to a portrayal of victimization, to notions of weakness. These sorts of characteristics, however, contradict typical notions of masculinity as strong and tough (Connell 1995; Kimmel 2008; Pascoe 2007; Thorne 1993; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009; Wilkins 2009). So, in telling their stories of fatherlessness they must navigate competing concerns: what it means to be a “good dad” and what it means to be “a man.” And, while these two identities can be complimentary – unfortunately this is not always the case, especially for teens.

For the men in this study, not having a father of their own limits their abilities to be a good dad. In this way, it can serve as a useful frame for making sense of their uncertainties, their fears and excitements surrounding fatherhood. In other words, how they make sense of their new responsibilities, how they talk about being “good dads” are often tied to the fact that their own dads were “never there.” For example, as I demonstrate below, many of these young men state that they don’t know how to be good dad; because, in fact, they never had one. This creates a narrative space for accomplishing several identity projects surrounding fatherhood and masculinity. On one hand, they are able to draw on the absence of their fathers to generally lower the expectations of their abilities to successfully “father.” This allows them (even if only narratively) to construct and signify themselves as “good dads”. And, as men who
generally face continual challenges to be what society deems a “good dad,” this narrative tool can be a useful one. Difficulties that often stem from factors surrounding age, social class, race, and education limit the ways in which they are able to accomplish fatherhood – but these sorts of structural constraints are often out of verbal reach. Consequently, drawing on a frame of absent fatherhood can be especially useful in helping them to justify, or even make sense of, why they struggle to be good dads. This perspective is also bolstered by their understanding that absent fathers extend beyond their own experience. Hence, another topic I discuss below explores the ways in which the majority of men I interviewed generally believed that there are more “bad” dads out there than good ones. So, the absent-father frame also allows them to create a space for comparison between themselves and other dads where they can construct themselves as the exception, as better than all the rest. 

But, relying on stories of absent fathers to bolster their own identities as fathers must be negotiated strategically. This frame can also produce negative consequences. First of all, while these stories can assist them in signifying themselves as “good dads,” to talk too much about their experiences of fatherlessness has the potential to portray them as weak, as victims of circumstance. And, again, these characteristics go against cultural norms of masculinity that suggest that men are strong and tough. Consequently, drawing on the stories of their father’s absence or abandonment creates a contradiction that they must successfully navigate if they are to maintain their identities as good fathers, but also as men. Second, while the assumption that most men are “bad” dads creates a potential
space for them to narratively construct themselves as the exception, it also carries the risk that their story will merely reaffirm the stereotype.

The stories that teen fathers tell tend to rely on (while also giving meaning to) the importance of father presence/absence – and, especially at the point in their lives when these men are actively becoming fathers themselves, these stories and experiences probably resonate more powerfully for them. However, fatherhood is tied in indelible ways to masculinity. As Walzer (1998) argued: “doing parenthood is also a way of a doing gender (p. 8). So their fatherhood projects are also masculinity projects. In their attempts to be, or at the very least present themselves as, good fathers they are also bound to cultural norms of what it means to be “real men.” They must make sense of, communicate, and portray themselves and their experiences of fatherlessness within the appropriate bounds of masculinity. At the same time, as I demonstrate below, being a “good dad” is defined in strong part by being a “man” – so if they fail to successfully signify themselves as good fathers, they also fail to signify themselves as men.

But, this too, presents a narrow space in which to negotiate their identities. As teenagers, these fathers must navigate certain expectations of masculinity and fatherhood, but also youth. Hegemonic norms of masculinity are pervasive, but these norms play out differently in regards to age. Assumptions of strength and toughness often cross boundaries of age, class, and race (Wilkins 2009; Wilkins 2012a; Pascoe 2003), but, how these norms become achieved or portrayed in the everyday often takes different forms across different groups depending on the tools and resources at hand. For example, the toughness of young masculinity often relies on assumptions of adventure and fearlessness
– characteristics that become less visible (perhaps even less important) as men age, acquire full-time employment and “settle down” to have families. These sorts of expectations are often exemplified in the stories of the fathers I interviewed via their talk about sports, partying, and “gettin’ in trouble.” In contrast to cultural norms of femininity (e.g. that girls should be protected, often remaining close to home), ideals of youthful masculinity present another set of contradictions that these men must navigate. Whereas girls are taught to be mothers early on (via such toys as babydolls), the expectations of fatherhood are often much more vague. In their analysis of the popular show, 16 and Pregnant, Weber and Schatz (2013) make a similar argument. They state:

…On the show, the teen mother is shown completing the majority of caregiving whereas young men are repeatedly shown more concerned with sports, stereo and videogame equipment, and their cars rather than with caring for and supporting (financially or emotionally) their partners and children. This fits with tropes of masculinity, especially in boyhood, that are associated with space, freedom, exploration, trouble (good and bad), adventure, and independence, as well as being separate from family life. Fatherhood, which denotes the need to be responsible, contribute financially, et cetera, then, clashes with general expectations of young masculinity in ways that motherhood and femininity do not.

This contradiction is an important one that the fathers in this study must also navigate. As I demonstrate below, to be a father is to be a man – but young masculinity also conflicts with fatherhood in stubborn ways. These men are clearly aware of the
expectations that they be “good dads”, but the ways in which they are able to accomplish this rely on strategic and deliberate negotiation.

The ways in which young dads are able to talk about their experiences with their own fathers, and to make sense of their own role within this “social problem” is shaped in large part by cultural norms of masculinity. On one hand, it creates a space for them to perform important identity work – allowing them to construct themselves as the exception, as better than most other men/fathers. It lowers the standards, so to speak, thereby making them easier to surpass. On the other hand, expectations that they “man up,” or that they handle the challenges that stem from this within the bounds of strength and toughness, constrain the ways in which they are able to talk about this experience.

**Without Direction: “I may have not have did what I did...if I had my father, but he wasn’t ever around.”**

Some may see these stories of absent fathers as excuses, as ways of shifting responsibility for their “poor” choices from themselves to others – and perhaps it may be. I am not concerned with that however; I am not concerned with the “what ifs” of their situations and experiences. I’m not concerned with the ways in which their lives may or may not have been different – only the ways in which the teen fathers I interviewed narratively construct an understanding of that difference.

As an earlier chapter demonstrated, the stigma of teen pregnancy is one in which these fathers are very aware of – so it is certainly plausible that they are drawing on this script as a way to navigate this stigma. But, even with that being said, these young men
are clearly aware of the ways in which this explanation has the potential of being read as an excuse. But, more than that, the act of making excuses contradicts typical norms of masculinity – norms that specify that men take responsibility for their mistakes, that they “play whatever cards are dealt”. Consequently they negotiate this dilemma rather delicately. For example, Quinton, 16 years old with a baby on the way, mentions at various points throughout the interview that the path his life has taken stems largely from the fact that his father “took off” when he was five years old. As his quote that the beginning of this section suggests, he “may not have did what [he] did” had his father been there to show him right from wrong. He goes on to say the following:

My mom always asked me…like… ‘What made you start [getting in trouble]?’ And, like, I wouldn’t never tell her but I always knew that it was from my father not bein’ there, but I never told her.

When I asked him why he never told his mom, why he never talked about his social and emotional struggles surrounding the absence of his father, he explains it this way:

I’d always say, um, ‘Maybe it would have been different if he would’ve been in my life’…but… then it would be like I blamed someone else, but it’s not really like that. I take responsibility for whatever I did wrong. I always blame myself for whatever I did…it was just…basically, I think my life would be turned around based on…my father leavin’.

Michael, the father of a 2 week-old baby boy, tells a similar story. In talking about the “trouble” he’s gotten into, (that which includes becoming a father at the age of 17) he too talks about the difference that having his father around could have made. He says:
You know, sometimes I think in my head, like…I mean I never was the type to blame it on anybody else, to blame it on my dad. I know I gotta take responsibility for my actions, take it like a man, you know…but, I just keep thinkin’…man, my life woulda been a lot different.

Jon, 17 with two (maybe three) kids also talks about how his life would have been different had he had a father figure. He tells his story this way:

You know, some people don’t think that dads have a big part in their son’s lives, or our kids’ lives, I should say. But I think that without a father – trust me, from experience, I think it has a really, really big part in how you grow up and your future. [JBW: How do you think it affected you?]

Obviously having three kids…And, I’m not trying to blame anyone else but me. I mean, I did this. And I’m-a man up and take care of it. But…I didn’t have a…a father figure. I didn’t have somebody there to kind of teach me how the game goes or, you know, like walk me through it. It was just kind of like I had to pick it up myself and do what I thought was right…and it turns out I was wrong.

For Quinton, Michael, and Jon, the stories of their fathers’ absences color the pictures they have of how their lives have gone, the choices they’ve made. Altogether they believe that they probably wouldn’t be “where they are” had they had someone, specifically a father, to guide them, to teach them “how the game goes.” And again, we can never know whether this would be true. Indeed, each of these young men’s lives is characterized by other factors, such as poverty, drug abuse, prison – there is no guarantee
that a father figure would have redirected their lives down much more “positive”, perhaps more productive paths. Still, they believe otherwise. Perhaps this represents a colonization of thinking, the effects of the widespread, cultural messages that tell us all that fathers are important for families, especially the lives of their children, in ways altogether different from mothers (Walzer 1998). Beyond this, though, their narratives suggest that an absent father is more than just a wound to be cared for. Jon, Michael, and Quinton are all acutely aware of the potential repercussions of telling this story. For each of these men, to indicate that their lives were deeply affected by their fathers’ abandonment carries the risk of making excuses, of not taking responsibility – which, as Jon states most clearly, violates cultural assumptions of masculinity, of “manning up.”

These three men aren’t the only ones who seemingly had to negotiate norms of masculinity in their stories of absent fathers. Take Josh, a 20 year-old father of two boys, for example. In talking about his childhood, he shares this about his father:

[My childhood] was alright. My dad wasn’t there. It was just me and my sister and my mom. He took off before I was even born. So…that kinda, that kinda hurt a little bit, but I got through it.

Similarly, Beau’s childhood was also characterized by an unknown father who “took off” before he can remember.

I don’t really know my dad. I mean…I know him. My sisters have the same dad as me. So, yeah, we know him…we just don’t really know him too well. He lives in Mississippi, I guess. He took off when I was probably…2 or 3 years old…something like that. It sucked. I always
wondered, you know, what it would have been like…but, I mean, I made it through. It wadn’t nothin’ really. 

While their stories don’t state as obviously and vividly their negotiations with masculinity as the three men discussed above, for both Josh and Beau, it is still evident. Both men talk about the emotional conflict that stems from their fathers leaving – but, they are also very aware of the importance of downplaying the importance of this conflict. As they state, not having a father “sucked” and “hurt a little bit,” but they are both also quick to minimize this emotional vulnerability. Since cultural norms of masculinity prohibit displays of weakness, their assertions of strength – that they were able overcome it, that it wasn’t really a big deal – demonstrate the contradictions between their experiences of fatherlessness and gendered norms of masculinity. For all of these men, their fathers’ leaving and/or abandonment is indeed a central part of their lives, but the ways in which they can talk about this experience is constrained by cultural expectations that they be “men” (read: strong, not vulnerable).

Learning to be the exception: “I just wanna be better than what my dad was and my dad was...nothin’. So...as long as I’m better than nothin’.”

Narrating the stories of their fathers leaving creates certain dilemmas that these men must strategically negotiate, as the above discussions have suggested. But, it also creates a space for them bolster their identity as good dads, and as men. Of the seventeen men in this study who came from families where the father was absent or uninvolved, thirteen of them drew on this experience to talk about their lack of
knowledge, or general know-how, of what a good dad is/does. For example, as Travis says, “I don’t know what a good dad is, ‘cause I never had one.” Daniel makes a similar statement. “I was scared,” he says. “I was really scared of being a dad. I mean…because I never had a dad to show me how to be a dad.” And, as Beau reflects on what it means to be a “good dad,” he says the following:

I don’t know. I really don’t know what it means to be a good dad. I don’t know what a good dad is. I never had a good dad, so how would I know…

For many of the men, including Travis, Daniel, and Beau, their fears and uncertainties about being (good) dads are indelibly linked to their own fathers’ absence. This becomes especially interesting when we consider the ways in which parenting is constructed, generally. Mothering is culturally and most commonly defined by way of biology – an assumption which many of the men also gave voice to. Cultural stereotypes that women/mothers are naturally more nurturing (if only because they carry the baby for 9 months) are widespread, despite an increasing acknowledgement of the repeated lessons, toys, and other forms of socialization that consistently teach girls and women how to be mothers from early on (Luker 1996; Luttrell 2003). Still, statements and accounts that presumed the natural inclination of women and girls to be mothers were common among the men in my study. On the other hand, however, statements such as the ones above suggest fatherhood is not a natural instinct, but a skill or role that is learned – most often from a father that is present and involved. The consequence, for these men, especially
given that their fathers’ largely weren’t “around”, is that fatherhood is unknown territory, something they don’t “know” how to do.

However, it’s not just their own fathers’ absences that characterize their understanding of good/bad dads. Almost all (24/26) of the teen dads I interviewed made reference to a “norm” that “most dads aren’t involved in their kids’ lives”. Given that the majority of my respondents reported this observation (often stated as a matter of fact) suggests that it stems from more than just individual experience. Perhaps it’s a local characteristic – a somewhat normal occurrence for the town they live in or true for the other people in their peer network. Or perhaps, it once again stems from the larger cultural script that continually encourages dads to “take time to be a dad today”.

Regardless of where these notions come from, whether they are true widely or just for the men in this study, statements such as these suggest that these beliefs are clearly significant for the teen fathers I interviewed. For example, as Eric says, “there aren’t a whole lotta dads that are actually dads, you know.” Or, as Marlin observes, “a lot of kids, most kids…they grow up without a dad.”

The ways in which these men draw on this belief to make sense of their roles and their identities as good fathers is especially compelling. Their understanding of fathers as generally absent combined with their belief that their own fathers’ absences constrain their own abilities to be good fathers, certainly create a rather sad picture for how/what these men can expect in terms of their own experiences of fatherhood. But, on the contrary, the majority of these men – either drawing on their own experiences of having a “bad dad” or on their cultural understandings of “most” fathers as “bad” – are able to
utilize these stories to construct themselves as different, as good in spite of all the bad. They are, to put it simply, the exceptions.

The quote that opens this section, made by Daniel, serves as a powerful example, and hence deserves repeating in full. He says:

I think I’m a good dad. I think that…I’ll always be a good dad. I just wanna be better than what my dad was and my dad was…nothin’. So…as long as I’m better than nothin’.

Marcus makes a similar statement. When I ask him if he is a “good dad”, he says, “Yeah, I did better than my dad did, so…yeah, I’m a good dad.” Quinton responds in the same way:

Yeah, I’ll be a good dad. As long I don’t do like my dad did. And, I’ll never do that. I’ll never ever leave my child alone, like my father did me and my brothers.

And, again, it isn’t just their own fathers who serve as comparison – but “other” dads, as well. The assumption that “most” dads aren’t “good dads”, that they are generally “gone” from their children’s lives, serves as a powerful point of reference for these young men in constructing their identities as men, as fathers, for telling us who they “are”. Consider the following excerpt from Brian’s discussion about being a “good dad”:

Well, you know, some dads…actually most dads…are just…not around. I mean, I know some of ‘em that don’t even talk to their kids, you know. I’m not that kind of person. I’ll always be there. Always. That’s the kind of person I am.
Michael tells a similar story:

There ain’t really too many dads that’s out there for they child, so…hardly any, you know. ‘Cause, like, my dad ain’t out here for me still, so… But, I’m gone do what’s best for my son, you know what I’m sayin’… I just wanna do everything my dad ain’t do, you know what I’m sayin’, like everything…like, I don’t know…it’s…I just wanna be the best I can be.

Not a lot of dads do that.

In all of these examples, these young men construct a picture – one where the majority of dads, including their own, are absent, uncaring, and uninvolved. They, on the other hand, are different. They are “there”, or they will “be there”. The power of their stories rests in their ability to narratively construct themselves as different than “most” dads – they are the exception(s). All of the fathers I interviewed wanted to be seen as good dads, or at the very least, they wanted me to see them as active, caring, supportive fathers. Despite research that suggests that these men are probably more likely to follow in the paths of their own fathers (Lemay, et al 2010), regardless of their intentions, their stories suggest that they really do want to be good dads. And, the frame of “the exception” helps them to (narratively) accomplish this.

Importantly, though, they also rely on gendered assumptions – especially those surrounding fatherhood. Their very ability to construct themselves as the exceptions to the rule, given that that “most” fathers, including their own, are not around, makes certain assumptions about masculinity and fatherhood. Most importantly, it assumes that fatherhood is learned (a belief that stands in direct contrast to their assumptions of
motherhood as natural). Moreover, by portraying the majority of fathers as “bad dads” they are able to shore up their own identities as “good dads”; and because fatherhood is indelibly linked to masculinity, they are also able to signify themselves as men. Still, as I demonstrate in the next section, what it means to be a man is further complicated by expectations of youth.

**Being a dad is about being a man: “If you bring a baby into this world, you gotta man up and take care of it.”**

In addition to navigating their histories of fatherlessness within the bounds of masculinity, they must also navigate the present, as fathers themselves, within those same bounds. Their accounts of good fatherhood as a display of masculinity were unmistakable; for these men, being a dad is intractably linked to “being a man”. For instance, several of the men who spoke of their fathers’ “taking off” were also quick to discount their fathers’ masculinity. As Dean, a 16 year-old father-to-be, states, “He’s not a man. He took off, left it all to my mom. That’s not what a man does.” Or as Eric says, “My dad wasn’t a man. A man steps up. He didn’t do that. He left.”

Many of the young fathers embraced this link, with several of them drawing on the cultural cliché that being a “good dad” is what defines the difference between being a boy and being a man: “It’s just like they say,” claims Daniel, “A boy can make a child but it takes a man to take care of the child.” Tony gives a similar description:

Being a dad is what makes you a man. Because I mean like you just can’t be – I mean, it doesn’t make you a man just because you got a kid or
something, you know? You got to be there for them. You gotta be in their life. Being a dad, being a man…you gotta be there, you gotta step up.

For these men, their understandings of fatherhood, of what it means to be “good dad” were interconnected with their definitions of masculinity, such that to understand one required an understanding of the other. Quinton, for example makes several references to the fact that “becoming a dad at 16” meant that he had to “become a man very soon.” Or as Marcus states:

Um…being a good dad is about taking care of your responsibility no matter what the…you know, you…if you bring a baby into this world, you gotta man up and take care of it. It’s about steppin’ up. Being a dad is about steppin’ up, it’s about being a man.

Dario argues a similar point:

Being a dad is about taking care of your responsibilities. It’s about bein’ a man, because a man takes care of his family and…the baby’s mother and your daughter or son. That’s your family, so…if you don’t take care of it you’re…you’re not a man. If you’re not takin’ care of your responsibilities, you’re not a man. Basically, you’re just like a coward because you’re running away from the problems when they get hard and that’s not what a man do. A man stays there and try to make everything better.

As the above examples suggest, for these young dads, fatherhood and masculinity are inextricably linked such that they become mutually defining: being a “good dad” is about
being a man, and “manning up” makes you a “good dad”. The idea that fatherhood and masculinity are both about taking care of responsibilities, about “stepping up”, creates a seemingly simple path to follow. But, this line of thinking also creates additional dilemmas when “stepping up” is easier said than done, regardless of the good intentions. And, in addition to structural barriers that make it hard for them to “step up”, assumptions of young masculinity create another set of dilemmas. Cultural expectations that boys and young men are adventurous, and perhaps fearless, contradict norms of fatherhood that foreground responsibility and settling down. So, again, there is another incongruity that these men must navigate, if they are to maintain their identities as “good fathers” and also as “men.”

This dilemma becomes especially visible in their stories about “growing up,” about taking on the responsibilities of fatherhood. Similar to Quinton’s repeated statements that becoming a dad means that he has to “become a man,” other fathers spoke about having to give the partying, the fighting, and the trouble that characterized their lives prior to the birth of their child(ren). Tre, for example, said that being a dad meant that he had to “stay out of trouble.” And, Tony, the young dad who gave up a football scholarship to get a job, explains the transition this way:

I mean, I was gonna go to college and play football. But other than that, I never thought about nothing farther than the weekend, what I was gonna do on Saturday night. Now it’s all about working…it’s about growin’ up.

Daniel talks similarly about “growing up”, about being a father and a man. He describes it this way:
A lot [has changed.] I’ve had to grow up, stop partyin’ all the time and being with my friends all the time. It’s more about family and…just being a man, trying to make it, trying to get a job.

For many of these young men, their lives prior to fatherhood were characterized by partying (mostly drinking and/or smoking marijuana) and getting into some kind of trouble. The accounts of Tre, Tony, and Daniel speak to the contradiction between this lifestyle and that of being a father. For them, being a father is about growing up, it’s about taking responsibility. And while this shift may occur for many men as they transition into fatherhood, regardless of age, this change seems to be more formidable for these young men – for whom youth and the expectations that go with it are still vividly present in the lives of their friends and classmates.

Their narratives also illustrate that while the expectation that they “grow up” is widespread, similar expectations that they still be independent and at least “a little wild” are often set alongside tales of responsibility. Consider Travis’ story:

[At school] everyone’s like “What’s up?” And I be like “You know, not much, I just can’t wait to get home.” And they’d be like “Well, why?” And I’d be like, “Cause, I can’t wait to see my daughter.” And they’re like “What? You have a daughter?” And I’m like, “yeah”… And then they’d be like, “So you probably don’t wanna go to this party?” And I’d be like, “Dude, I’m kinda tired but I’m not dead. Yeah, I’ll go.” I mean, I know there’s a lot more responsibility than, like, a lot of the other kids in school, it’s like…I mean, for them it’s like party every single night, it’s
like…and I can’t do that like they do it. I got other things I gotta spend my money on. So, like, after class…it’d be me and my buddy…we’ll go over to, uh, Frank’s bar and unwind and have, like, two beers after class. I mean, I can still get a little wild now and then, but mostly…I’m to the point where, I’m just like, drink for the taste not to puke.

This excerpt, while lengthy, is indicative of the negotiation between being a dad and “growing up” and still being “a little wild” – a phrase that points to the independence and rowdiness that goes along with being young (and a boy). Josh talks similarly about “calming down” and “growing up” – while still maintaining some “fun.” He explains it this way:

[When she got pregnant] I had to…get a job and start taking on more responsibility, calming down, you know, quit doin’ all I was doin’ before. I mean, I was dumb and getting in trouble, like any other teenager. Having too much fun, I guess. (Laughs.) And, I mean, I can still have some fun. (Laughs.) I still like to go with my friends and stuff, I just don’t do it like I used to, like get in trouble, you know. But yeah…kids, they do bring you up.

The stories that Travis and Josh tell accomplish two important projects. First, for Travis and Josh, being a father is about responsibility and settling down – at least a little. But, this stands in strong contrast to the actions and expectations of their friends and peers. Assumptions that boys are wild, independent, and even fearless, contradict the notions they have of fathers as settled, working, and responsible. Again, these young men want
to be seen as “good dads”, but when being a “good dad” goes against certain expectations of youthful masculinity, they must perform important identity work to negotiate these incongruities. So, for Travis and Josh, their stories suggest that they are good fathers – the have settled down, they’ve toned down their partying ways; but, they haven’t given it up entirely. They’re still allowed to “have fun,” to get “a little wild” now and then.

But, to be sure, this negotiation isn’t entirely constraining. By constructing themselves as giving up (at least a little bit) of their wildness, by putting an end to all the trouble, they are again able to create a space where they are the exception. Unlike their peers, they are more mature, more responsible. This combined with their understanding that “most” fathers are absent, lends itself to the notion that they are different.

The previous sections point to the ways in which men’s talk of fatherhood and father absence is shaped by notions of masculinity, of “manning up”. But, as this segment suggests, “manning up” is not as simple as it would seem. Norms of masculinity are still complicated by a variety of factors, including social class, race – and, here, age. So, while masculinity may serve as a solution to some problems, it also has the potential to create others.

**Conclusion**
Father absence often serves as a powerful frame for understanding teen pregnancy – for teen mothers and teen fathers. But, the ways in which young dads are able to talk about this experience, and to make sense of their role within this “social problem” is shaped in large part by cultural norms of masculinity. On the one hand, it creates a space for them
to perform important identity work – allowing them to construct themselves as the exception, as better than most other men/fathers. On the other hand, expectations that they “man up,” or that they handle the challenges that stem from this within the bounds of strength and toughness, constrain the ways in which they are able to talk about this experience. And still, it’s more complicated than this. Despite hegemonic norms of masculinity that outline the cultural ideals of what it means to be a man, the resources individual men have to achieve these standards vary depending on other structures such as race, social class, and age, among others. For teen fathers, youth becomes an influential factor in shaping the ways in which they be “men.”

To be sure, teen motherhood also contradicts notions of youth in similar ways. As a culture we expect teenagers (boys and girls) to have at least some basis of freedom from responsibility – especially that which assumes the primary care of someone aside from themselves. But, given that expectations of motherhood (e.g. nurturing, caring) generally correspond to notions of femininity, the conflicts that stem from youth and parenting look altogether different for teen mothers. For teen fathers, masculinity, especially young masculinity, presents a different set of contradictions that they must negotiate. And, while these expectations can also provide resources for negotiating the stigmas and challenges of teen fatherhood, they can also create additional dilemmas.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

When I first began this project, and even after my interviews were complete, I saw this as a project that explored the “lived experiences” of teen fathers. As this dissertation has developed, however, the story of masculinity that weaves in and out of the stories these young men tell became more and more visible. The teen fathers in this project want to be seen as “good dads,” but perhaps even more important, they want to be seen as “good guys”. In the face of teen pregnancy, notions of youth, masculinity, and social class can all offer competing concerns that these men must negotiate if they are to successfully present an identity, a self, that is both “good” and acceptable. The ways in which these young men respond to, challenge, and reaffirm the norms, experiences, and stigmas of adolescent fatherhood are indelibly linked to masculinity. Because, after all, to be a good dad, is all about being a man.

Assumptions of responsibility – for birth control or pregnancy prevention, for childcare, and for financial provision among many others – run throughout our cultural portrayals, questions and discussions of teen pregnancy. These assumptions, however, don’t exist in isolation – they are located within historical, cultural, and moral boundaries. Notions of teen pregnancy as a social problem, notions of what it means to be a teen parent are deeply rooted in structures of gender, social class, race, and youth/adulthood.

In this concluding chapter I recap the dominant themes in my analysis of masculinity and teen fatherhood. I conclude by looking at the importance of these
findings for what they can tell us about teen pregnancy and teen parenthood, as well as youth, in general.

**Negotiating Teen Pregnancy and Responsibility**

As I discussed in chapter 2, both teen mothers and teen fathers are charged with negotiating the stigma associated early childbearing. Both girls and boys are left trying to reestablish their reputations. The young men’s responses to “what happened?” are not only strategic answers about responsibility, but they are also important stories that speak to “their strange experiences of being a problem (Luttrell 2003, p. 3).” Norms of masculinity, however, provide teen fathers with a unique set of tools that allow them to not only deny responsibility, but also signify their identities as men (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). Again, this is not to suggest that teen mothers do not also do considerable work to deny responsibility for the pregnancy, but rather that masculinity and femininity provide different discursive tools. Consequently, in their discussions of responsibility, the subsequent identity projects that teen fathers and teen mothers are able to accomplish are very different.

Teen fathers are negotiating competing concerns (in ways altogether different than teen moms). Teen fathers face stereotypes that label them as predators, absent, or uncaring. In attempts to mitigate the stigma of teen pregnancy, norms of masculinity can prove useful, but they can also serve to reinforce other assumptions, specifically those that suggest that teen fathers are generally selfish, merely impregnating women with nothing to lose and only status to gain (Kiselica 2008; Luker 1996; Paschal 2006). Examining teen fathers’ narratives of responsibility reveal the ways in which gendered
norms can solve some problems while also creating others. Aligning themselves with stereotypes of young men as “naturally” heterosexually obsessed, for example, can serve as a resource for denying responsibility for the pregnancy – hereby shifting blame away from them. At the same time, it works to signify their manhood. But, this strategic use of stereotypically masculine characteristics also serves to stigmatize teen fathers as selfish, and even predatory. So, while these approaches may allow teen fathers to claim masculine identities, they also stigmatize them as the wrong kind of men. Consequently, many of the teen fathers I interviewed positioned themselves in opposition to these stereotypes. By locating teen pregnancy within a context of love, they are able to challenge assumptions that teen fathers are inherently selfish and predatory by constructing themselves as respectable and good.

**Negotiating the Breadwinner Norm**

Again, all of the teen fathers I interviewed saw the primary role of fathers, and/or men generally, as the providers. But, teen fathers are also unique in that, beyond the challenges of being successful breadwinners, they must also negotiate cultural stereotypes that assume that teen fathers are absent, uninvolved, and at the very least, non-contributing. So, in addition to cultural norms that dictate that fathers provide financially, teen fathers also face negative stereotypes that take for granted the idea that they won’t (Weber and Schatz 2013). And the teen fathers I interviewed were clearly aware of this, as their repudiation of the “deadbeat” clearly demonstrates. But, more than just a metaphor or an identity, the “deadbeat” also represents the power and the
hegemony of the breadwinner norm. The power of social norms become easily visible in these instances of the young men’s narratives – if not providing makes them deadbeats (read: bad dads), then they have no real choice but to participate in this hegemonic storytelling. In other words, failing to acknowledge the breadwinner norm results in a “bad dad” label – and again, that is an identity that all of them are working avidly to avoid.

Acknowledging the breadwinner norm also provides benefits beyond portraying themselves as good dads. It also allows them to bolster their masculinity – since, as many of the fathers claimed, being a man is intricately linked to “taking care of their responsibilities.” Given that fatherhood and masculinity are so intimately linked, by being a good dad they are also able to shore up their identities as good men. In other words, the idea of men as breadwinners is more than just an ideology or an expectation, it also serves as a powerful discursive resource for making sense of their identities as men and as well as fathers. Whether or not they are actively or successfully providing, the very act of invoking the breadwinner discourse still allows them to actively construct a masculine self.

As I’ve reiterated at different points throughout, relative to femininity, masculinity grants certain privileges. Still, all men are not created equal, and masculinity – especially the specter of a failed masculinity – is still burdensome in many ways. Masculinity as a social construct, as an institutionalized form of privilege, and as a discursive tool, provides resources for navigating the challenges of teen fatherhood; but it is also limiting in that it often lays out unrealistic or unreachable expectations. And, since very few of the teen fathers I interviewed are able to accomplish breadwinning
successfully, acknowledging the breadwinner discourse also draws attention to the fact that they are able to it (effectively), thereby questioning their manhood. But, their choices are few – on one hand, they must participate, because a failure to support this belief would ultimately challenge their masculinity, and their reputations as good dads. On the other hand, this expectation creates additional dilemmas. Due to age, class, and a potential host of other factors, they are unable to participate effectively – but they can’t admit that they can’t provide without jeopardizing their masculinity, so they talk around it; they construct narratives that mask their vulnerability, allowing them to still be seen as men and as good dads.

All of the fathers in this study wanted to be seen as “good dads”. But, where good dad equals breadwinning, their resources as teenagers (and that which is complicated even more by class location) limit their ability to do this effectively. So, in order to maintain their masculinity, their agency as men and fathers, they must reframe this struggle. In short, they must mask or downplay this vulnerability, talking around it in ways that gives them a different way to accomplish masculinity and “good” fatherhood, all the while working within the bounds of culturally approved definitions of manhood and fatherhood.

**Negotiating Father Absence**

As I discussed in Chapter 4, father absence often serves as a powerful frame for understanding teen pregnancy – for teen mothers and teen fathers. But, the ways in which young dads are able to talk about this experience, and to make sense of their role
or participation within this “social problem” is shaped in large part by cultural norms of masculinity. On the one hand, it creates a space for them to construct themselves as the exception, as better than most other men/fathers. On the other hand, expectations that they “man up,” or that they handle the challenges that stem from this within the bounds of strength and toughness, constrain the ways in which they are able to talk about this experience. And still, it’s more complicated than this. Despite hegemonic norms of masculinity that outline the cultural ideals of what it means to be a man, the resources individual men have to achieve these standards vary depending on other structures such as race, social class, and age, among others. For teen fathers, youth becomes an influential factor in shaping the ways in which they can be “men.”

To be sure, teen motherhood also contradicts notions of youth in similar ways. As a culture we expect teenagers (boys and girls) to have at least some basis of freedom from responsibility – especially that which assumes the primary care of someone aside from themselves. But, given that expectations of motherhood (e.g. nurturing, caring) generally correspond to notions of femininity, the conflicts that stem from youth and parenting look altogether different for teen mothers. For teen fathers, masculinity, especially young masculinity, presents a different set of contradictions that they must negotiate. And, while these expectations can also provide resources for negotiating the stigmas and challenges of teen fatherhood, they can also create additional dilemmas.
Implications

Attempts to cope with teen pregnancy usually take the form of sex education reform (e.g., abstinence-only education) or other policies (e.g. welfare reform) that frame early childbearing as a social and monetary burden on taxpayers. These strategies often reinforce the assumption that teen pregnancy is a woman’s issue by emphasizing women’s responsibility in choosing or preventing pregnancy. Recent decades have witnessed the increase in programs that seek to bring (teen) fathers back into the fold, especially those that promote paternal involvement by enforcing paternity and child support. However, these approaches fail in several respects. First, they neglect the larger structural influences that men, and the culture at large, utilize in maintaining teen pregnancy as a women’s problem. For example, the claims these young men make about the promiscuity of their sexual partners can mean much more than calling names or debasing reputations (see chapter 2). As Monson (1997) demonstrated, women’s child support and welfare receipt were often determined with heavy consideration paid to their sexual activity. So it is not just concern over women’s sexual activity that becomes problematic, but also that men’s claims of this activity have the power to shape women’s identities and access to resources.

Second, by examining the discursive tales of teen fathers, we see that fatherhood is about more than breadwinning. And negotiating the breadwinner norm is about more than just doing it or not doing it. Their inability to participate effectively, to provide for their children successfully, don’t undermine their desire to do it. Assumptions that these young men just don’t “take the time” to be fathers minimizes, even ignores, the larger
obstacles of class and age that make it altogether difficult for many of them to even figure out how to be a breadwinner.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, this project and the stories these men tell speak to larger cultural concerns surrounding the hegemonic power of gender – especially masculinity. Whether it’s talk about getting pregnant, getting a job, or stories of their own fathers – these young men are rooted in norms and ideals of masculinity. Cultural expectations of masculinity are at the heart of many of the stories they tell. And, as I’ve shown, these expectations can serve as powerful resources in helping them to construct their own identities as good fathers and as good guys; but they can also create formidable obstacles that often work to contradict the very identity they are working to construct.

A note on race

I am aware of the lack of discussion of race within this work. Within my data, race and class were conflated – all, except one, of the Black men in this study were also part of the lower class (as I defined it). So, while race undoubtedly plays out in important ways for these young men, the ability to see it will take a greater amount of deciphering and coding. Some of them talk very openly about race, but most don’t mention it at all. That being said, we know that race (as well as class and gender) are still present, even when not visibly apparent. For example, Bettie’s (2003) work demonstrates very vividly the ways in which teen girls often rely on and maintain class distinctions, even when it seems that class discourse is largely absent (or unavailable). I believe that race works in the same way. But, in the portions of my work included here – those racial differences were not apparent. As I argue in the introduction, this speaks to the hegemonic nature of
masculinity. It speaks to the ways in which, despite their difficulties (or even inabilities) to be what society deems is a “real man” because of the constraints imposed by race, youth, and social class, their desire to meet this expectation is still persistent. And, perhaps, given these other constraints, it is all the more necessary.

The “End”

When I began my research, I envisioned a project that would tell the stories of what it was like to be a teen father – because, as I’ve mentioned, their “sides” are often unheard. Originally, I saw a project that shared the everyday realities of teen fathers – their lived experiences. And, I think this project still does that, to some extent. But somewhere amidst the reading and rereading (and rereading) of the transcripts, the ways in which their narratives circled repeatedly around masculinity became an enduring theme. And, so somewhere in the process of this research, it became a project about masculinity. I know there is another project, perhaps one that focuses on the more day-to-day tasks and realities of their lives that will emerge out of this work. But, for now their stories about masculinity seemed to be the one that needed to be told first.


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Social Development
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