

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: Psychosocial Dimensions of Fatherhood  
Readiness in Low-Income Young Men

Damian Michael Waters, Master's of Science,  
2009

Directed By: Kevin Roy, Ph.D., Department of Family  
Science

Researchers have a limited understanding of how men become ready for fatherhood, especially among young, low-income men in the transition to fatherhood. The present study draws a diverse sample ( $n = 53$ ) enrolled in fatherhood programs in Midwestern cities. Life history interviews were conducted with the participants and grounded theory was employed to identify common themes among the narratives. Four cognitive dimensions of fatherhood readiness were identified by the current investigation: presumptive paternity and acknowledged paternity that one is a father, fatherhood vision, maturity, and men's perceptions of their provisional capacity. These contributed to the construction of narratives that describe fatherhood—trial readiness and decided readiness. Implications for social policies and programming are discussed.

PSYCHOSOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF FATHERHOOD READINESS IN LOW-  
INCOME YOUNG MEN

By

Damian Michael Waters

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master's of Science  
2009

Advisory Committee:

Associate Professor Kevin Roy, PhD. Chair

Professor Elaine A. Anderson, PhD.

Assistant Professor Jaslean LaTaillade, PhD.

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## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the young men discussed in this study. Your candor has helped me begin a career dedicated to understanding your lives as fathers. I hope the thoughts contained herein resonate with your experiences and begin to tell your fatherhood stories. Keep ya' heads up.

## Acknowledgements

“Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Proverbs 29:18)

Many hands contributed to the completion of this project and I am deeply grateful for the collaboration, direction, and encouragement they provided. Firstly, I would like to thank my thesis committee. When I think of how you have worked with me over the past few months, the verse above comes to mind—without your guidance and dedication, I would not have been able to complete this thesis.

Dr. Kevin Roy, thank you for allowing me to benefit from the data you have collected. You gave me access to men’s stories in a way that I would not have achieved on my own. I also appreciate the considerable time you spent meeting with me and carefully reading my drafts. You listened patiently to my tangents and helped me figure out what I was thinking. You also shared your expertise with me and helped me learn more about our field—where it is going and how I can contribute. It is upon this foundation that I will build my career.

Dr. Elaine Anderson, thank you for helping me push through the penultimate stages of the project. You provided assistance at a critical moment in this project and advocated for me when I could not do so for myself. Thank you for “standing in the gap” for me. Your gentle correction and encouragement have provided an example of the professor I aspire to be.

Dr. Jaslean LaTaillade, I appreciate our impromptu “Sunday afternoon chats” outside of the chapel. Not only did you hold me accountable for my progress on the thesis but you also helped me consider my reasons for studying low-income men.

Thank you for listening to me and helping me push towards my goals. I would also like to thank my family and friends for their encouragement, the “study breaks” they provided, and their confidence that I could accomplish this. To my coworkers at the Center on Health Disparities—Dr. Marilyn Lynk, Marcos Pesquera, and Barbara Reguerin—thank you for your flexibility, understanding, and celebration throughout this summer. Jocelyn, you were instrumental—I appreciate that you frequently checked in on my progress and helped me figure out the details of completing a thesis. Sonja Williams and Weena Cullins, thank you for your encouragement—unbeknownst to you, your words of exhortation came at a pivotal moment, thank you for helping me refocus on my larger purpose. Mom and John, thank you for lifting me in prayer. When I felt discouraged, I know that your prayers carried me when I could not carry myself.

Most importantly, I thank you, Heavenly Father, for opportunity to serve you through this research. I will glorify you with the research I will conduct so that your justice might be accomplished on this earth. I will give you honor and praise with my career.

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## Introduction

The present study represents the intersection of several areas of study that have gained increased attention from researchers and policy makers in recent years--the transition to parenthood, fatherhood research, and the transition to adulthood. In its investigation of fatherhood readiness, it assumes that readiness is a man's preparedness to translate his role expectations of fatherhood into a conceptualization that is responsive to the contextual factors in which a man is embedded. The transition to parenthood has long been a focus of research due to its implications for infant outcomes and early childhood health. The majority of this research has focused on maternal health and prenatal and postnatal experiences. Some research has also discussed partner relationships during the transition to parenthood. Studies have examined the factors that contribute to the decisions to become parents (England & Edin, 2007; Kokko, Pulkinnen, & Mesiainen, 2009), relationship quality during pregnancy (Howard & Brooks-Dunn, 2009) and the effect that having a child has on relationships (Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009). This research, however, has often discussed married parents and those involved in committed romantic relationships during and after pregnancy. There is a lack of research on unmarried parents that includes the perspectives of both mothers and fathers. Also, few studies have discussed the implications of adolescent parents' developmental position for their parenting. Fewer studies have examined the developmental implications and transition to parenthood in the years that follow adolescence (Van Cleve & Sadler, 1990). Because these factors impact how parents transition to parenthood, it is

important that their developmental position and relationship status be considered when examining the construction of fatherhood readiness.

The present study examines the experiences of fathers (between the ages of 18 and 24 years old)—considers these men to be “young” fathers. The experiences of young, low-income men during the transition to parenthood, however, are underrepresented in the extant body of research. While research on fathers has examined the contextual factors that contribute to fatherhood involvement, little is understood about their readiness to become fathers. The present study conceptualizes fatherhood readiness as preparedness to translate one’s role expectations into a conceptualization of fatherhood that is responsive to the contextual factors in which a man is embedded.

Low-income parents have received significant focus in scholarly research due, in part, to the policy implications such studies may yield. An increasing number of studies have explored the role that employment plays in parent involvement since the enactment of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWORA) of 1996 (Crouter & Booth, 2004). In particular, researchers and policymakers have also demonstrated increased interest in father involvement. Studies have often focused on the barriers that fathers face to involvement (Dubowitz, 2004; Tamis-LaMonda, Kahana-Kalman, & Yoshikawa, 2009). Other studies have also sought to understand how low-income fathers enact the fatherhood role in the challenging contexts surrounding them (Cabrera, Ryan, Mitchell, Shannon, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2008; Coley & Hernandez, 2006; Marsiglio, Roy, & Fox, 2005). The current study

continues in this vein and seeks to understand how young-income men construct their ideas of readiness for fatherhood.

Adolescent parents have also been the focus of significant research efforts. However, much less is known about low-income young people during the years immediately following adolescence. Erikson (1968) noted some of the experiences and developmental tasks associated with this period, including becoming financially independent, partnering, identity formation and developing a sense of personal responsibility. Arnett (2004) termed this period from eighteen years of age to approximately thirty as “emerging adulthood.” The current study looks at young men in this emergent period and how their perspectives of fatherhood reflect their developmental position as they move from adolescence into adulthood.

Previous studies have framed the transition into parenting and adulthood by a focus on prenatal experiences, changes in the partner relationship, and pregnancy intentions (Marsiglio, 2008; Levine, 2006; Kao & Long, 2004; Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, Markman, 2009; Claxon & Perry-Jenkins, 2008; England & Edin, 2007; Rogers & Speizer, 2007). Fewer studies, however have examined parents’ sense of readiness for the parenthood role. Parenthood readiness may have implications for how men and women transition to the parenting role as well as the quality of their interactions with their children. When researchers have addressed psychological and emotional readiness for parenthood, the samples have principally drawn from married, White, middle-class couples. Even in studies that employ nationally representative samples, the experiences of low-income parents may be obscured by the general findings. When studies have sought to elucidate the transition to

parenthood for low-income parents, they have often focused on “off-time” adolescent parents, particularly mothers.

There are several reasons fatherhood readiness among young, low-income men is important. Firstly, young men are at a unique developmental position where they are making educational, employment, social, and intrapsychic transitions (Arnett, 2004). These transitions influence how men experience fatherhood, their role expectations, and how they will fulfill these goals. Readiness is a reflection of men’s role expectations and young men’s developmental position. While paternity has been assumed in prior studies of readiness, young men may not be as certain of the paternity of their children and this influences how men construct their ideas of fatherhood readiness. Finally, the implications of readiness for father involvement are of particular interest to policymakers and program designers. Whereas previous research and policy efforts have targeted the roles that parenthood intention and motivation play in involvement, the construct of readiness allows for consideration of men’s constructions of their contexts to be considered when examining their projective ideas about fatherhood involvement.

In order to gain a better understanding of men’s experience during the transition to fatherhood, Marsiglio (2008) suggests that researchers “investigate what conditions enable men to trust themselves as fathers and value their possible contributions to their children’s lives” (p. 1108). Drawing from prior research and emergent findings, the present study outlines the psychosocial dimensions of readiness for fatherhood. Furthermore, the study considers the influences of various contextual factors on the construction of readiness.

## Literature Review

### Theoretical Assumptions

The present study begins to bridge the gaps regarding the dimensions of readiness by exploring the marginalized experiences of fathers during the transition to parenthood literature. The findings of the current investigation will augment bodies of research on low-income populations and fathers in general. A symbolic interactionist framework is assumed in the current study because it lends itself to understanding how fathers themselves construct meaning for the fatherhood role in light of the complex factors influencing their transitions to parenthood.

The present study understands readiness as preparedness to translate one's role expectations into a conceptualization of fatherhood that is responsive to the contextual factors in which a man is embedded. Symbolic interactionism lends useful concepts to the study of readiness for fatherhood. The concepts of role, identity, and socialization are explained below. The idea that actors inhabit various *roles* is a central concept of symbolic interactionism. Role refers to both the position, rules outlining an actor's behavior, as well as attitudes towards oneself and others (White and Klein, 1996). Roles produce social expectations for a given actor's performance of a role. The quality of role enactment is related to the clarity of these expectations. The clearer the expectations are for a given role, the easier it is for an actor to inhabit that role and for other actors to know how to interact with it (White and Klein, 1996). This proposition implies that men who have been situated in a context that has provided them with ambiguous or conflicted opportunities for socialization of the

fatherhood role will have more difficulty enacting the role themselves. Without the benefit of consistent socialization, it can be difficult to develop a personal sense of how the fatherhood role should be fulfilled, thus hindering preparation to fulfill that role.

Symbolic interactionism's focus on the cultural expectations associated with social behavior is especially suited for achieving the present study's goals to better understand how men construct their notions of readiness for fatherhood (White and Klein, 1996). This person-centered approach that assumes "the thoughts, feelings and behaviors of individuals, cross-sectionally as well as developmentally, are best understood in terms of complex, dynamic systems" (Bergman, 2001, p. 30). The lives of low-income young men are necessarily dynamic as they experience changes in their educational and professional engagement, seek partnering relationships, and begin establishing autonomy from their parents (Arnett, 2004).

Symbolic interactionism incorporates contextual considerations through the concept of role strain—a situation where an actor "does not have sufficient resources to enact a role or roles" (White and Klein, 1996). A similar difficulty occurs when the expectations of different roles are drastically different or contradictory, often forcing an actor to choose a certain role—or aspects of it— more than its rival. Fathers who are not romantically involved with the mothers of their children may experience these challenges to their role. Their role as a romantic "ex" may place them in a distant relationship with their partner, while their role as father often means that they must engage with the mother in order to have a relationship with their children. The result is that he must accommodate the enacting of one of these roles. Applied to readiness,

the meaning a man assigns to his socioeconomic or educational level may conflict with the role expectations he has developed for fatherhood (e.g. “I need to be financially stable before I have children”).

Symbolic interactionism offers the idea of the “looking glass self” in understanding identity development. This idea “asserts that one’s self-concept is a reflection of one’s perceptions about how one appears to others” (Shrauger & Schoneman, 1999). Mead (1934) “the individual experiences himself, as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of others in the same social group, or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs” (Mead, 1934, p. 138). While Mead emphasized external definition as a means of developing one’s identity, later theorists highlighted individuals’ interpretations of their own behavior in identity development (Bem, 1967).

Socialization refers to the process by which people learn the meanings of symbols. Roles “come to be known and understood through interaction with others in situations in which those others respond to the person as a performer in a particular role” (Burke & Tully, 1977). This process happens as a person witnesses and interacts with those symbols, and learns from others in their contexts how to respond to these symbols. Socialization occurs as individuals learn how to inhabit the roles (role-taking) and then are able to carry them out in relation to others’ roles. Taking the present study, symbolic interactionism holds that men learn about the roles associated with the symbol of father through their interactions with their fathers as well as the meanings that their social context has constructed around that fatherhood. These socially learned meanings shape the role expectations a man has for fatherhood.

In considering the intrapsychic phenomena of fatherhood readiness, symbolic interactionism holds that these constructs are socially determined. Although an individual may experience readiness and its dimensions internally, they are socially constructed through interactions with others. Therefore, the current study conceptualizes these constructs as psychosocial. Following is a review of components of readiness that have been identified by prior research, beginning with the psychosocial dimensions.

### Psychosocial Dimensions of Readiness

*Competence.* Research on fatherhood readiness began with an exploration of how competence—an internal sense that one has the skills and self-confidence necessary to be an adequate father—shapes men’s acknowledged paternity that they are prepared to become fathers. Cowan (1988) conceptualized competence as an intrapsychic phenomenon as well as a skill set with four unique dimensions. Vitality and commitment—the desire and drive to work to fulfill the duties of the fatherhood role—have been identified as a marker of competence (Cowan, 1988). Problem-solving is included among these skills and refers to an ability to deploy resources to meet the challenges presented by novel situations. Cowan also identifies perspective-taking as the ability to take a step back to understand one’s place within the broader frame of goals and position in the family, and to develop one’s responses accordingly. This skill becomes especially relevant when men are faced with difficult situations and must make decisions that affect their continued participation in their families.

Similarly, emotional regulation is marked by impulse control. Emotional regulation also implies an ability to be emotionally present for one's partner and child.

*Father Identity.* The degree to which a man identifies himself as a father and integrates this perspective into his overall identity is an important cognitive dimension of readiness for fatherhood (Cowan, 1988). Men develop their fatherhood identities in light of the models that surround them, especially through their experiences with their families of origin. Fathers who reported having poor relationships with their parents had children at an earlier age than those who reported having more positive relationships (Jaffe, Caspi, Moffit, Taylor, and Dickinson, 2001). Beaton (2003) found that fathers who reported either being very close or distant to their families of origin reported the most positive attitudes towards involvement.

Daly (1993) further discussed the complexity of how men draw from their fatherhood models to construct their own ideas of fatherhood. In addition to the positive themes men take from their experiences with their own fathers, men often seek to construct fatherhood identities that are compensatory for the lack of relationships men had with their own fathers (Daly, 1993). Men accomplish this revision by looking to various models to develop their identity, including men in their communities, their partners, and even mothers (Daly, 1993). The narratives men construct around their experiences with their fathers influence the father identities men develop for themselves (Roy, 2006). These narratives often contributed generative themes to fathers' identities as they sought to establish a better relationship with their children than they experienced with their fathers. The identities men

develop in response to these narratives require constant readjustment to respond to the contexts surrounding them. Palkovitz (2002) found that men commonly sought to “rework” the definitions of fatherhood that they learned from their fathers so that their children would not have to endure the same hurts they experienced. Reworking the fatherhood role often involved spending more time with their children, being more emotionally available to their children, and even avoiding the abusive patterns of their fathers.

Marsiglio’s (2000) discussion of the development of procreative consciousness among young men offers a frame for understanding the development of the fatherhood identity. He posits that men develop a procreative consciousness that “refers to men’s attitudes, feelings, and impressions of themselves as these factors pertain to various aspects of procreation—including men’s image of themselves as prospective fathers” (Marsiglio, 2000, p. 124). This consciousness is comprised of global, relatively stable, ideas about their ability to father a child and their aspirations for fulfilling the fatherhood role, and a situated consciousness that refers to the immediate context in which men find themselves when making decisions about procreation-related behaviors. These global and situated consciousnesses offer a useful frame for thinking about men’s ideas about their readiness for fatherhood.

*Maturity.* Developing maturity also influences how men develop a sense of readiness for fatherhood. Maturity is a fluid, developmental process that occurs over an extended period of time (Korobov & Bamber, 2004). The adultification of children in low-income families may influence their development of maturity as they grow older. Adultification takes various forms, including children being provided

information and given responsibilities that are typically reserved for adult consideration, children being made peers or occupying pseudo-partner role, and their being made responsible for parenting younger siblings (Burton, 2007). Adultification often results in children not being afforded developmentally appropriate learning opportunities. Therefore, men who were adultified as children may lack the necessary scaffolding to easily make the transition to parenthood and their constructions of readiness. Although adultification has been associated with depression and anxiety, Burton suggests that adultification may have benefits for some low-income children. Adultification may contribute to the development of perseverance, life skills, and family loyalty among low-income children. The benefits offered by adultification may contribute to low-income young men's readiness to father in challenging contexts.

In their study of adolescent boys' psychosocial maturation, Korobov and Bamberg (2004) viewed "maturity as...locally and discursively accomplished by young men as part of their everyday interactive social practices" (p. 472). This understanding of maturity lends itself to studying fatherhood readiness among young adults. As a locally accomplished task maturity— is contextually situated and is negotiated through individual experiences. That is, maturity is not a global disposition but demonstrated in discrete situations. The discursive nature of maturity refers to the social aspects of the construct—maturity is developed through social interactions. These interactions occur with men's peers and other people in their social contexts. Fatherhood significantly alters the course of young adulthood and the birth of one's first child may spur young men to assume responsibility to a degree that they had not

prior to becoming fathers (Palkovitz, 2002). Reflecting on their experiences as fathers, men believed that fatherhood helped “settle” them down, find direction, and become more aware of—and willing to meet—the needs of others. Men’s discussions of fatherhood also featured generative themes as fatherhood caused men to become keenly focused on making life better for their progeny (Gerson, 1997; Roy & Lucas, 2006). While these attitudinal shifts were common among the participants of Palkovitz’s study, fathers younger than 21 years-old indicated that fatherhood brought more drastic changes than did older fathers. The differences between young and older fathers’ affective responses may indicate differences in their perceptions of readiness to become fathers. Where older fathers, by and large, will have attained resources they believe are necessary to be a good father, younger fathers may not have had an opportunity to garner a similar portfolio of assets. Men who believe that their “contextual portfolios” are amenable to fatherhood may report feeling more prepared to become fathers.

In light of the extant research on maturity and the transition to adulthood, the present study conceptualizes maturity as a sense that one has achieved the markers of adulthood, including the assumption of responsibility for one’s actions and their consequences, making efforts towards productivity—educational or otherwise—and the development of a clear idea of the self (Galambos, Magill-Evans, & Darrah, 2008). Maturity also implies that one’s decision making—professional, social, and personal—aligns with one’s ideas of adulthood.

## External Factors Influencing Dimensions of Readiness

*Community Connection.* In addition to psychosocial factors, other externally driven characteristics may influence fathers' readiness. Much of the research about institutional connection has focused on young persons 16-23 years old who are disconnected from these education and employment (Roy, Vesely, Buckmiller, & Fitzgerald, 2008; Besharov & Gardner, 1998). Besharov and Gardner (1998) found that one-third of persons in the age range experienced disconnection for an extended period of time in a given year. Disconnection commonly begins with premature withdrawal from school and may coincide with incarceration, drug use, and "off-time" pregnancies (Besharov & Gardner, 1998). Considering that these supportive institutions are gateways to perceived capacity for provision, low-income men are disconnected from these supportive institutions disproportionately to their more-advantaged counterparts. Disengagement from these "supportive" contexts is considered in the present study because low-income men's experiences being disconnected from these institutions may impact their sense of personal preparation for fatherhood.

Despite the challenges facing disconnected fathers, there is some evidence to suggest that men may still gain support from social institutions that are not usually recognized by society or the current body of literature. Palkovitz (2002) found that men's social interactions become more child-centered with the advent of fatherhood and that these new relationships are more superficial than their friendships that preceded their children. The study found that fathers maintained engagement in these relationships if their friends had also become parents. In explaining this shift, fathers

often cited the constraints on time and financial resources that fatherhood brought. Fathers also indicated that they adjusted their social circles to exclude those whose lifestyles were not amenable to their being a father (e.g. partying, drug use, involvement with illicit activity). Palkovitz (2002) also found that fathers' involvement with their larger communities also shifted towards child-centered activities. As men began interacting more with others who had children, they also became more involved with community organizations that served children (e.g. scouts, little league sports teams).

Engagement with social institutions for low-income “disconnected” men, then, may take a different form than is usually acknowledged. Involvement with formal organizations notwithstanding, low-income men also became “engaged in informal support structures; they are protective of kids on the street, they want to inform parents of unsafe and questionable behavior, and they try to engage kids in things that will keep them from drugs and violence” (Palkovitz, 2002, p. 212). These contexts may constitute a form of connection for these men that has not been considered in the extant body of literature. These informal community connections are considered in the present study as a possible factor that affects how low-income men construct their sense of readiness for fatherhood.

The communities where men live shape their perceptions of fatherhood and therefore how they evaluate their readiness for the role. Roy (2004) found that men in low-income neighborhoods are often restricted in their movement to a zone within a three-block radius of their home due to a lack of reliable transportation, as well as concerns about gang affiliations and constant police presence—especially significant

for men with criminal records. This limited spatial mobility often had implications for their employment opportunities as these men also noted a lack of jobs in their neighborhoods. Men's employment and access to financial resources has been associated with their degree of paternal involvement (Waldoff & Gina, 2007). With their access to employment significantly compromised, many of these men in Roy's (2004) study were unable to provide for their children and were less engaged in other aspects of their fatherhood role. More directly, the study found that if their children lived outside of this proximal area, fathers indicated that they interacted with their children less frequently than when children lived closer.

*Employment and Community Connection.* Providing for one's children features strongly in men's role expectations for fatherhood. The earnings gap between young people whose parents are wealthy or middle class and those from poorer families is growing (Bynner, 2005). Young, low-income men—especially minorities—are disconnected from work and school at significantly higher rates than whites coming from middle or higher income families (Jekielek & Brown, 2005; Corcoran & Matsudaira, 2005). Men who are disconnected at this early stage in their adult development are at higher risk for poverty, welfare receipt, and having children who are raised in single-parent households (Brown & Emig, 1999). Fathers may experience tension and difficulty when trying to fulfill the providing aspect of the fatherhood role (Henwood, 2003). This difficulty may be especially true for low-income men who have less education and are underemployed at disproportionate rates relative to their peers. This unfavorable assessment of their capacity to provide for their children may influence men's ideas about their readiness for fatherhood.

Men's experiences in finding and keeping jobs are also shaped by the daily realities of their communities.

Data from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study indicate that non-resident fathers increase their level of employment during the first five years of their children's lives (Percheski & Wildeman, 2008). Fathers' employment stability and income affect the relationship they have with the mothers of their children and, in turn, their involvement with their children (Coley & Hernandez, 2006; Levine, 2006). In a study examining fathers' daily interactions with their children, MacDonald & Almeida (2004) found that fathers who worked more hours spent less time with their children. The level of emotional support fathers provided for their children did not differ by the number of hours they worked. Fathers, however, did report being involved in a higher number of stressful events regarding their children (e.g. interpersonal conflicts, financial concerns) on days when they worked fewer hours. This study also found that the relationship between the number of hours fathers worked and their involvement with their children was moderated by the amount of discretion and control they believed that they had in their jobs. The sample recruited for this study resembled the participants of the present study—many of the men were minorities, lacked sufficient social capital, and were employed in low-income jobs, all of which predict low levels of job flexibility and low-levels of involvement (Golden, 2001). Because providing is often a significant feature of men's ideas of fatherhood, their employment status may influence how they construct their ideas of readiness.

*Social Support.* Social support has been associated with lower levels of parenting stress and increased father involvement (Fagan, Bernd, & Whiteman, 2007;

Erkut, Szalacha, & Garcia-Coll, 2005; Davies et al., 2004). The positive relationship between social support and parenthood involvement may be preceded by a greater sense of readiness in light of high levels of perceived support. Social support comes from friends, family, one's partner, childcare providers, and counselors (Gager, McLanahan, & Gleib, 2002). These people provide information about how to care for a child, household assistance, and may alleviate some of the stress associated with the transition to parenthood (Gager, McLanahan, & Gleib, 2002). Marsiglio, Hutchinson, and Cohan (2000) also discussed how men mobilize their social resources to help them refine their perceptions of parenthood readiness. Men construct their sense of readiness for fatherhood through collaborative processes that ultimately reinforce their privately developed ideas about their preparedness for fatherhood (Marsiglio, Hutchinson, & Cohan, 2000). Through conversations with others—peers, partners, and family members—men confirm or challenge their notions of personal readiness for fatherhood.

*Intentionality.* The partner relationship warrants special attention when discussing social factors related to fatherhood readiness due to its intrinsic connection to parenthood. Marsiglio (2000) found that men's ideas of readiness were significantly shaped by their appraisals of their partner relationships. May (1982) indicates that the relationship's stability, loving and needing each other, commitment to parenting the child, and knowing each other well enough to anticipate how their partners would respond to situations were characteristics that contributed to a sense of readiness for parenthood. In recent years, scholars and policy makers have become increasingly interested in the role that intention plays in the decision to have children,

particularly for fathers. The scope of “intention” varies widely across studies. At one end of the continuum, intention has been defined as a general desire to have children at some point in one’s life (May, 1982). This global idea of intentionality hinges on timing. May’s idea of intentionality asks *when*— not *if*—men want to have children but *when*. Other studies have examined intention in the context of the relationship at the time of conception (England & Edin, 2007; Gager, McLanahan, & Gleib, 2002; Bronke-Tinkew, Ryan, Carrano, & Moore, 2007).

A nationally representative study of 6,816 resident fathers’ indicated that positive intention is associated with parental involvement (Bronke-Tinkew, Ryan, Carrano, & Moore, 2007). Intentionality has also been examined in relation to the parental subsystem. A study of the pregnancy intentions among Salvadoran fathers found that while the majority of participants were actively attempting to impregnate their partners, a quarter of the men did not want to have children at all or believed that the birth was mistimed (Carter & Speizer, 2005). Men who intended to have children reported feeling happy upon learning that their partners were pregnant and significantly fewer men without such intent reported similar reactions. Instead, men who did not intend to have children reported feeling surprised and worried. Men’s negative feelings about pregnancy may translate into less involvement during the prenatal period, which other studies have linked to levels of future paternal involvement (Fagan, Schmitz, & Lloyd, 2007).

Fathers’ involvement and relationship with the mother during the prenatal period has been associated with engagement in the fatherhood role (Cook, Jones, Dick, & Singh, 2005). Knowing that one will become a father often produces a

mixture of jubilation and uncertainty about their abilities to fulfill the role (Kao & Long, 2004). Feelings of uncertainty may be intensified for a young unmarried father who is uncertain about his role towards his partner while she is pregnant (Leitte, 2007). Young, low-income men must often negotiate this ambiguity when figuring out what it means to be a father and if they are ready to enact that role. Social (i.e. relationship with partner, poor communication with partner, peer and family expectation) and cognitive/emotional factors (i.e. feelings of isolation, inability to engage in the pregnancy, uncertain normative expectations, and intense emotions) contribute to this ambiguity and hinder unmarried fathers' involvement with their children. In a qualitative study of 21 pregnant women and their partners, some young men expressed a desire to be involved during the prenatal period but were discouraged from doing so by their partners. Others reported being physically present with their partners during the prenatal period but being psychologically absent (Leitte, 2007).

In their study of parenthood intentions, England and Edin (2007) found that the level of relationship commitment between the parents is related to their intentions to become parents. They found that highly committed couples were less likely than less committed couples to use contraception and more frequently reported either desire or ambivalence to having a child. In making this connection, these studies have often asked parents if they intended to conceive children and associated their responses with their relationship status.

While England and Edin (2007) have identified the relationship status and retrospectively expressed pregnancy intentions, these findings isolate two variables in

the milieu surrounding the transition to parenthood. In understanding low-income men's transitions to fatherhood, it is important to consider other psychosocial factors that influence their procreative decisions and parenting dispositions. Paternity establishment, for example, has been cited as a factor that influences the level of paternal involvement (Argys & Peters, 2001). Paternity may be a voluntary acknowledgement that is the father of a child or may be established through formal DNA testing. Whereas intention refers to the decision to have a child, the present study seeks to understand how men conceptualize their readiness to enact the fatherhood role. Readiness, as conceptualized in the current study, is an evaluation of one's ability to meet these expectations.

*Parenting and Procreative Experience.* Marsiglio (2000) identifies men's reproductive and childcare experiences as an important factor that shapes men's ideas about their readiness for fatherhood. He found that men who at one point believed their partner to be pregnant think about the fatherhood role differently than men who had not experienced a close encounter with their procreative potential. These men as well as those who had extensive childcare experience (e.g. caring for younger siblings, nieces and nephews) reported more psychosocial readiness for fatherhood for those without these experiences. These experiences with one's reproductive and childcare capacity influence how men understand their preparedness to be fathers.

#### Focus and Scope of Present Study

Prior research on the transition to parenthood and fatherhood informed the present study's investigation of fatherhood readiness. The conceptualization of competence as an intrapsychic disposition and skill set was useful for considering the

various manifestations of readiness—the thoughts a man has about being ready for fatherhood as well as his actions towards preparing himself for assuming an identity as a father. The young men involved in the current study are simultaneously making transitions to adulthood and to parenthood. Prior research indicates that both transitions require men to assume new perspectives of their social and institutional connections, and thereby develop maturity in their new roles. Through the development of new perspectives, men develop identities as fathers and adults. Prior research also indicates that the partnering relationships that young men form are also important during the transition to parenthood. Fatherhood readiness exists at a prospective, philosophical level, as well as a contextually based level that informs acute decisions about fatherhood. The present study sought to explore how psychosocial dimensions of fatherhood—identity, acknowledged paternities about fatherhood, perceived capacity for provision—and institutional connection contribute to the development of readiness.

### Research Questions

Taking the assumption that men are embedded in a variety of social and environmental contexts, the present study seeks to understand how young first-time fathers in low-income communities construct a sense of readiness to become fathers.

This study asks the following questions:

- What are the psychosocial dimensions of readiness, in particular, fatherhood vision and maturity?

- How do fathers' perceived capacity for provision and their knowledge about the paternity of their children influence the psychosocial characteristics of readiness?
- Given these dimensions, how do men develop readiness narratives as young, low-income men in transition to fatherhood?

The information gained from this study will increase our understanding of the transition to fatherhood for low-income men through a systemic conceptualization of the factors that influence the relationship between fathers' readiness to become fathers and their realization of that role. Understanding how young, low-income men construct readiness enables program developers to create interventions that will support father involvement among this population, a need that has been identified by policymakers. In order to gain this understanding, qualitative analysis was employed in this study. Whereas prior studies have noted the relationships between contextual factors and fatherhood involvement for low-income men, the present study highlights how low-income men construct role expectations around these factors, the fatherhood role, and how these relate to their intentions to become fathers and their enactment of the role over time.

### Definitions

Drawing from the concepts identified by prior research, the following terms are the major constructs that will be explored in the results and discussion sections:

**Fatherhood Readiness:** preparedness to translate one's role expectations into a conceptualization of fatherhood that is responsive to the contextual factors in which a man is embedded. Readiness arises from an assessment of one's ability to meet those

role expectations given the resources and limitations afforded by the contexts surrounding a father.

Fatherhood vision: Knowing how one desires to be a father, including a philosophical disposition towards the role and practical ideas about the daily practices associated with child rearing (e.g. changing diapers, discipline practices)

Maturity: A sense that one has achieved the markers of adulthood, including the assumption of responsibility for one's actions and their consequences, making efforts towards productivity—educational or otherwise—and the development of a clear idea of the self (Galambos, Magill-Evans, & Darrah, 2008).

Presumptive paternity: Knowledge that there is a possibility that one may have fathered a child.

Acknowledged paternity: A father's confidence about the paternity of a child attributed to him.

Perceived capacity for provision: Having consistent and dependable access to financial resources, transportation, a home, and other resources necessary for supporting oneself and a child.

## Method

### Qualitative Approach

A qualitative approach works well to understand contexts specific to fathers and the expectations associated with them (Roy & Kwon, 2007). This approach allows participants to explain how they construct expectations around their contexts and their behavior. Understanding these expectations is essential for the development of a theory of fatherhood among low-income men, as it allows participants' lived experience to guide analysis while imposing few constraints on how they explain the complex interrelationships between their environment, other people, and themselves. The present study represents a secondary analysis of data collected with men involved in various fatherhood programs in the Midwest. The Human Subjects Review Committee of the University of Maryland approved the current study (see Appendix A).

### Sample

The present inquiry draws from studies of low-income men involved in fatherhood programs between 1998 and 2001 (Roy, 2006; Roy, 2005; Roy, 2004). In the original studies, a total of 153 interviews were conducted with fathers ranging in age from 17 to 61 ( $M = 28.87$ ,  $SD = 8.84$ ). A subsample ( $n = 53$ ) of first-time fathers between the ages of 18 and 24 at the time of the interview ( $M = 21$ ,  $SD = 2.18$ ) was selected for their proximity to the onset of fatherhood. The men were recruited from four fatherhood programs. Participants were drawn from community-based fathering programs in Chicago ( $n = 16$ ) and Indianapolis ( $n = 26$ ), as well as men involved in a

prison work release program in Indiana ( $n = 11$ ). Participants were informed that the researchers desired to learn about their experiences growing up, engagement in school and work, and about their perspectives of fatherhood. Participants received a \$20 stipend as compensation for the two-hour interviews. The men who agreed to participate in the study generally expressed more enthusiasm about the fatherhood programs and attended program meetings more frequently than those who declined (Roy, Buckmiller, & McDowell, 2008). The sample consisted of 75.5% African-American ( $n = 40$ ), 5.7% Latino ( $n = 3$ ), and 18.9% European American ( $n = 10$ ). The majority, 71.4% ( $n = 35$ ) were underemployed, working less 20 hours per week. Over half of the men had pursued further education some extent (58.5%;  $n = 31$ ). Table 1 displays the demographic characteristics of the sample.

Table 1

## Demographic Characteristics of Sample

Q	Number	Percent
Race/Ethnicity		
African American	40	75.5
European American	10	18.9
Latino	3	5.7
Total	53	100
Work Engagement		
Unemployed	16	28.3
0-10 hours per week	7	13.2
10-20 hours per week	8	13.2
20-30 hours per week	9	17.0
30-40 hours per week	15	28.3
Total	53	100
Educational Level		
less than high school	23	43.2
GED	13	24.5
high school diploma	17	32.3
some college	31	58.5
Living Situation with Child		
Residential	11	20.8
Nonresidential	38	71.7
Transitory	4	7.5
Total	53	100

## Data Collection

Life history interviews were conducted with the participants to understand their experiences as fathers and being fathered. Researchers who had experience working with the men in the program conducted the interviews. The interviews followed a semi-structured format and asked questions about the neighborhoods the men have lived in, their educational experiences, occupational involvement, and about their professional and personal aspirations. The semi-structured format provided a general guide for the questions that interviewers asked while allowing them flexibility to further explore aspects of participant's experiences (Daly, 2007). Semi-structured interviews with participants allowed the men to describe how they constructed role expectations from their contexts for the fatherhood role. This approach allowed each man's story to be understood as unique while looking for commonalities across their narratives. From these commonalities, a few "typical patterns" arose that begin to describe how men develop an identity that is ready to incorporate fatherhood (Bergman, 2001).

## Interview Protocol

Regarding fatherhood, the interview protocol included items pertaining to their experiences with their fathers and other significant adults during childhood, their experiences when learning that they would become fathers, their relationships with their partners, as well as solicited information about their relationships and involvement with their children. Interviews began by soliciting information about their current neighborhoods and their perceptions of those areas. The interviews also

discussed the issues around the fathers' children—relationships with the mothers of their children, how they learned they would become parents, and their perceptions of “good fathers.” After discussing their experiences in school and work, as well as their relationships with their families, especially their fathers, the interviews concluded with questions about their present perceptions of their situations and goals as individuals and as parents. Pertinent questions asked in the interview included:

- How many kids do you have?
- Do you have paternity?
- How is your relationship with your kid(s)?
- How did you feel when you found out that your partner was pregnant?
- What makes somebody a good father?
- Who taught you to be a good father?
- What is the best age to become a father?
- How do you show your love to your children?
- How is your relationship with the mother(s) of your children?
- What does it mean to be a responsible father?
- What is the most important aspect of being a father?
- What is the best age to become a father?
- Do you have other family in the area?
- When did you move out of the house?
- What has it been like to get a job and keep it?
- Do you feel excluded from the job market?
- How did you become involved in this fatherhood program?

- What are your greatest fears as a father?
- What is your greatest hope as a father?
- How do you hope to improve as a father?
- What are your greatest successes as a father?

Although the face validity of some of the questions may not indicate readiness or the factors that promote it, the semi-structured format of the interviews often yielded conversational themes that carried over between questions. The complete protocol used for the interviews is included as Appendix B.

#### Data Analysis

Grounded theory guides qualitative analysis to identify trajectories in the fathers' experience, as fatherhood readiness and involvement are influenced by the aforementioned contextual factors. The Non-numerical Unstructured Data, Indexing, Searching, and Theorizing (NUDIST) program was employed to facilitate analyses. NUDIST maintains the textual records, allows researchers to create an index for the data set, and analyzes the data (Richards & Richards, 1991). Following grounded theory, analysis occurs over three phases of coding: open, axial, and selective (LaRossa, 2005). Open coding, the first phase of analysis, refers to a "line-by-line" breakdown of the interview data (Daly, 2007). The researcher approached this phase with a set of *deductive*, a priori codes as well as an expectation that unforeseen, *emergent* codes would arise "in process" from the data. Prior research, for example, suggested that financial provision featured prominently in men's fatherhood role expectations. Therefore, "financial provision" was employed as a deductive code for passages in which men discussed the importance of providing for their children, their

provision intentions, as well as the challenges they faced when attempting to provide. As the researcher read the interviews, it became apparent that knowledge about the paternity of their children was an important aspect of their constructions of readiness. This unexpected theme became an emergent code to generally describe a man's "knowledge about the paternity" of his children.

Although there is individual diversity among the participants, grounded theory assumes that there will be a degree of commonality among the characteristics of their experiences (Daly, 2007). Having completed initial, open coding of the interviews, researchers then look for conceptual similarities between the codes. The process of identifying conceptually-similar codes, or categories, constitutes the second wave of grounded theory, axial coding. An important task of the axial coding phase is that distinguish it from others (Daly, 2007). In addition to distinguishing the characteristics that describe individual categories, axial coding also examines the overlapping characteristics among the categories (Daly, 2007).

Whereas axial coding sought to describe various categories of participants' experiences, the final wave of analysis, selective coding, further drew the analysis together to develop a theory of how the categories are related to each other. In explaining these relationships, researchers select the most important categories and relationships between them to delineate a theory of how they work together to describe men's experiences. In examining the relationships between the axial codes, the researcher observed that two primary readiness narratives described men's experiences of readiness. Fathers who believed that they were able to provide for their children and were certain of the paternity of their children displayed a commitment to

becoming ready for fatherhood and making the necessary lifestyle adjustments. The researcher also noted that when there was uncertainty in either fathers' perceptions of their provision capacity or the paternity of their children, they approached becoming ready for fatherhood tentatively, on a trial basis. Thus, the "central categories" of *decided readiness* and *trial readiness* were developed. These categories were sufficiently general to explain the interrelating characteristics of their supporting categories (Daly, 2007).

### Data Quality

Several measures were taken to ensure the quality of the data as well as the accuracy of its interpretation. The interviews solicited personal information about participants' life histories and experiences that may be sensitive to some individuals and therefore not shared with "strangers". In order to encourage participants to discuss these intimate topics, researchers sought to establish relationships with the men in the months prior to conducting the interviews. These relationships not only allowed the men to become familiar with the researchers, but also allowed the men to begin trusting the researchers, thus facilitating candid disclosure during the interview. Researchers began conducting interviews only after they had become familiar with the men and integrated into the fatherhood programs. In the months prior to conducting the interviews, the researchers interacted with the participants as case workers and class leaders in the program (Roy, Buckmiller, & McDowell, 2008; Roy, 2006). During the time between when researchers began working at the program and when they conducted the interviews, they were able to form relationships with the

men and gain their trust. This trust allowed the men to be more candid in their responses thus improving the validity of the data.

Researchers also sought to increase the convergent validity of the data through triangulation of the data. Daly (2007) describes data triangulation as the process of “collecting accounts from participants who may be at different stages in their experiences of a phenomenon, be across different kinds of settings, or who bring different backgrounds and experiences to the research.” Although all of the participants were involved in fatherhood programs, the scope of these programs varied. Interviewees were involved in four separate fatherhood programs in various Midwestern cities. Participants were drawn from a fatherhood program that served men who were transitioning from incarceration and sought to assist them with the process of reintegration into society. Interviews were also conducted with men participating in community-based fatherhood programs in Chicago and Indianapolis (Roy, 2006). Researchers were also conducted with men whose communities were involved in the *Welfare, Children, and Families Three City Ethnographic Study* in Chicago (Roy, Buckmiller, & McDowell, 2008).

### Reflexivity

Due to the interpretative nature of this qualitative study, it is important that the researcher maintain transparency in order to inform readers of my background and illuminate possible biases that influence the perspectives taken in the analysis. At the time of completing the study, I am 26 years old, just recently eclipsing the upper age limit of the sample. It is possible that my age may allow me to connect with their narratives differently than older researchers, but the age vicinity may also contribute

to my overlooking essential elements of their experiences. For example, I may lack sensitivity to some of the implications that their developmental position has on their readiness conceptualizations because I too am negotiating the same transition and relegate these experiences to common experience. As a graduate student, I have attained significantly more formal education than the participants, thus maintaining institutional connection in a way that they have not. Perhaps the most striking difference between the participants and me is that I am not yet a father. Because I have not yet had to consider fatherhood beyond a philosophical musing, my experience remains grounded in role expectations, not practical application. Although role expectations are valuable for developing an idea of how one would like to father, the contexts in which one is situated, the resources that are available, and how these are perceived contribute to a formulation of fatherhood that is more realistic.

For two years, I worked at an alternative high school that served low-income, African American and Latino, primarily male, students. As a teacher, my students often told me about what was happening in their lives. It was during these conversations that several of my students told me that they recently learned that they were going to become fathers. My students expressed a mixture of excitement about having a child, fear about the responsibility associated with being a father and concern about relationships with the mothers of their children. Many of these young men also believed that they needed to “grow up” or be more mature for their children and indicated that they had begun making plans to do so. These plans included strategizing about how to gain employment—which sometimes included prioritizing work over completing school. Despite their concerns, they all expressed a strong

desire to “be there” for their children. Through these intimate conversations with my students, I was introduced to how my students—and assumedly other young men—conceptualized how their lives would change as they became fathers.

As a research assistant on projects using the same interviews I will draw from for the present study, I have interacted extensively with their stories. I have participated in the axial coding efforts and have focused on participants’ childhood experiences. My involvement in this process has been to complete life history grids that highlight themes and changes in these fathers’ experiences through a quantitative approach. Through my experiences coding these interviews, I have been sensitized to the transition that men make as they enter fatherhood and I became interested in studying this role change further.

## Findings

Readiness for fatherhood is a multi-faceted concept that emerges from men's personal examination and contextual negotiation. Three cognitive dimensions of fatherhood readiness emerged from the narratives—fatherhood vision, maturity, and perceived capacity for provision. The current study found that being aware and believing that one has become a father are important factors for how men construct these dimensions of readiness for fatherhood. This chapter first describes the psychosocial dimensions of readiness and then describes the two narratives that emerged to describe the construction of readiness among low-income men, *decided readiness* and *trial readiness*.

### “First You Gotta Have a Head”: Fatherhood Vision

The present study sought to understand the role that “having a vision” played in the psychosocial construction of fatherhood readiness. Having a vision for what they aspired to be as fathers as well as a sense that they knew how to handle the day-to-day tasks of parenting contributed to young men's sense that they were ready to enact the fatherhood role. In reflecting on the transition to fatherhood, many men indicated that knowing what it takes to be a father is important for their enactment of the role. Cole, a 21 year-old father of one, stated.

First, you gotta have a head. If you ain't got that, you shouldn't bring a baby into this world. You gotta know what you have to do if you gonna bring a baby into the world...You gotta know what you gotta do. Whether you know what you gotta do or not your child life gonna go on.

The final clause of Cole's statement highlights the long-term importance that he believed gaining an understanding of fatherhood had for the development of his child.

The men involved in the study often turned to their experiences with their fathers and other role models when developing their understandings of the fatherhood role. When asked who taught them how to be a father, most participants immediately referred to their father—either as the one who taught them how to be a father or, more commonly, not having a father around and having to figure the role out themselves. Referring to the role model that his father set, Brando, a 21 year-old, White father of one child, said:

There is going to be hard times. That's the reality of the situation. But my dad... has got through it. So that is my role model, and I'm positive that I'm going to be just like him... My parents didn't whip me. They punished me, but they didn't whip me. They didn't physically abuse me. That's why I'm going to teach my kid. I ain't going to whip them. Just to let them know that that's a no-no, and maybe raise my voice. Sternness. Use sternness, always be nice and gentle, and when they do something wrong use sternness. I got my approach, and that's pretty much coming from them.

Brando credited his favorable experience with his father as giving him confidence as he stepped into the fatherhood role. From his father's example, Brando learned how to persevere through difficult circumstances and how to approach discipline. Generativity featured prominently in men's formulations of the fathers

they desired to become. Ben, an African American 23 year-old father discussed the impact that not having a father had on his goals for fathering his children.

I mean it was just the simple fact that I had a father, but my biological father, he didn't do anything with me, I never knew him. I just came to the conclusion that isn't me. No matter what happens with me and my fiancé if we separate or whatever And never get back together there will be no way possible that they will be a lot of take me away from my kids because I want them to know me, everything about me, I want to install my knowledge what I know what I've done on this earth. They don't have to have another man raise them they have a father. That's how I see it. That's what made me want to be in my kid's life knowing that my father wasn't there. Even though I had a father that was a substitute just knowing he taught me the things I know to give my kids he always told me just because your father wasn't there you own daddy.

Ben, like many other men, made a deliberate decision that he was going to be involved with his children in a way that his own father was not with him. In his formulation of fatherhood, Ben also accounted for the possibility that his relationship with the mother of his children may not last and resolved to continue to be involved. Men often demonstrated a similar projective accommodation for the precarious state of their current situations and vowed to continue fathering despite the challenges they anticipated.

Men also found themselves at a loss when facing the necessity of developing a formulation of the fatherhood role because they had limited experience with their own

fathers. When asked about the important things he does as a father, Will, a 22 year-old father who was having difficulty seeing his child consistently, said,

I barely see the child so I wouldn't even know about that question... you got me baffled. Cause I don't know. Tell you the truth I don't have a father figure so I don't know what fathers are supposed to do. I mean basically I taught myself everything I know so I'm living like I'm stuck, very stuck here.

In the absence of a father figure to model his fatherhood practice after, Will relied on himself to formulate his ideas of fatherhood. Other men, however, resolved this difficulty by turning to other male role models for fatherhood guidance. Wesley, a 21 year-old African American man who learned that his girlfriend was pregnant shortly after beginning his first year of college, recounted the help Mr. Jones, his mentor throughout high school, lent in developing a plan for transitioning to fatherhood:

He was more sharp than hurt that I got a girl pregnant. He was like I couldn't believe it, but he didn't back down. He said okay, what are you going to do; you have got to have a game plan. And I was like hey this is what I am going to do.' And he said that sounds real good. A lot of people don't do that.

Wesley anticipated that his mentor would be hurt that he had gotten a girl pregnant but appreciated the strategic help and accountability his mentor provided during his transition to fatherhood.

The present study's findings about the role that competence and parenting experience play in the development of parenthood readiness were consistent with those of prior studies (Cowan, 1988; Marsiglio, 2001). Knowing how to accomplish

the practical aspects of parenting (i.e. changing a diaper, discipline, and playing) was also an important component of fatherhood vision. Irritated by a recent court decision stipulating that his girlfriend must teach him how to be a father to his son, Tyrell, 19, drew upon his prior experience raising his siblings to support his position that he knew the technical aspects of raising a child:

She got to train me how to raise my son? I want to get blunt with the judge and say, this is her first child; how is she going to train me to raise my son? I raised my little brother and sister, there's a ten-year break between us, my mom worked and I used to have to feed them and change their diapers. I know there's a difference between your brother and sister and your own, but it's basically the same technique.

Tyrell gained experience with the practical aspects of being a father from his experiences caring for other children. Other men gained childrearing experience from a variety of sources (i.e. raising younger siblings, interactions with nieces and nephews, and through romantic relationships with women who already had children). As Tyrell's remarks indicate, these experiences contributed to their ideas of fatherhood and prepared them to be parents to their own children.

“Be Full Fledged...Put the Childish Things Down:” Maturity

Young men refine their fatherhood vision through the developmental process of maturation. Maturity is conceptualized as a sense of personal responsibility for one's behaviors and their consequences, becoming a productive member of society, and developing a clear idea of the self (Galambos, Magill-Evans, & Darrah, 2008). As they develop a more cohesive identity as an adult, gain financial and personal

independence, and form relationships with others, men mature and their capacity for readiness increases. Graham, an 18 year-old father of two, highlighted the importance of being mature in order to be a father:

To be a father you have to be a man first and if you are not in the mindset of a man then you are just a little boy with a kid and you're a kid yourself. You can be thirty or forty years old and still in the mindset of a little boy and still be acting like a kid. You can be fourteen or twenty years old and have a mindset of a man and be a father.

Having a mindset of an adult often coincided with men discussing the cessation of behaviors they believed to be associated with youth (i.e. being “out on the street,” using drugs). Cognitively, men conceptualized maturity as a willingness to take responsibility for themselves and the lives of their children. When asked about the best age to become a father, Kevin said:

When he's grown and [stops] being a kid himself... When you got responsibilities and you're going to take care of business and it's not all about pleasure and chasing the females it ain't all about smoking. It's your priorities, getting your priorities straight.

Kevin's discussion of responsibilities highlights self-reliance as features of maturity. Men often expressed this self-reliance in relation to responsibility for raising their children.

In light of his current life situation and involvement with his children, Kevin, a 19 year-old father of two, did not believe himself to be ready for fatherhood. He

discussed the importance of knowing what he wanted in life and making his behavior support this vision:

To tell you the truth, I'm not prepared. When it happened but I don't want to be like that to I want to be full fledged what I find I got a kid I'm going all out. I got to step my game up and know where I need to be. But I got to do a little extra to make things better... Going to have to be I'm going to have to stop smoking and put childish things down if you're going to be a man and grown especially you have a child here.

Kevin believed that having children made it more important that he become more mature. His assessment of himself yielded that he had not achieved all the markers of maturity because he had yet to stop smoking and "putting the childish things down."

Men also discussed the importance of changing their social circles in the effort to become more mature and be ready for fatherhood. Hector, a 19 year-old father of an infant, was asked about his ideas about fatherhood prior to becoming one:

I was hoping I was still alive. Because there was a lot of trouble around the streets, I didn't know if I would survive... I was thinking about waking up the next morning. That's the way I used to live because for a while, because when I was in high school, I got into a lot of trouble when I was in high school. Taking about these gangs, and what-not, you know, I took the wrong steps. Now that I have my daughter, everything straightened out. My friends I used to hang out with, I used to get name callings, I used to get phone calls receiving threats, and I wouldn't come out no more. But, I'm trying to raise my

daughter so I don't want to have her around that. Say that they have kids, and they still bringing them around the neighborhood. How is your kid going to look at you? See you on the corner or something. Look at my dad; I want to be like him when I grow up. I don't want my daughter seeing that.

Having a child helped Hector escape gang involvement and shift toward a more future-oriented way of thinking. More than providing an “out” from social circles involved in negative behaviors, impending fatherhood allowed men to think about the legacy they wanted to leave for their children. Hector’s remarks highlight an essential feature of readiness: although young, low-income men may not immediately be “ready” for fatherhood, they often make efforts to become more ready as they transition to the role. For young, low-income men, fatherhood maturity and readiness are a gradual process of making everyday decisions about how to negotiate their contexts in light of the fact that they will soon be—or already are—fathers (Korobov & Bamberg, 2004). As men make more decisions in line with their role expectations of manhood and fatherhood they increasingly identify as fathers—as they identify as adults and fathers, they make more decisions in line with their role expectations. As men become more mature, they are better able to commit to readiness despite the challenges they face.

#### “It’s Important, but It’s Not the Most Important Thing:” Perceptions of Provisional Capacity

Taking responsibility for oneself and for children requires access to financial resources. Financial resources facilitate the establishment of a stable residence and the provision of material resources for one’s child. Many men believed that providing

was an essential component of the fatherhood role yet evaluated themselves as not being ready because they were underemployed or had inconsistent access to financial resources when their children were born. Due to the centrality that providing had in their constructions of the fatherhood role and their recognition of the difficulties they faced acquiring financial resources, many participants expressed a sense of readiness that was compromised by their lack of financial resources. When asked about the best age to become a father, Parrish, a 20 year-old father of one, discussed the importance of being financially established before having a child:

Cause without providing, what are you are doing? You know, just taking up space. That's it, you're here for nothing. Provider is like, man it's your way of living the life. If you ain't the provider you ain't nothing but a bum, you know what I mean. So, being a provider that's the most, that's like more responsibility than the President of the United States, you know what I mean. You got a family to take care of, man. If you don't eat, you know what I mean. It's crazy.

Jared, a 19 year-old father of one, weighed the relative importance of providing financially with other responsibilities of the fatherhood role. He arrived at more moderate stance that acknowledged the importance of “being there” for one’s children while underscoring the importance of provision:

It's like if you see your son everyday and spend time with him everyday it's all good, but at the same time you still need to provide him with the things that he needs so he can be you know, I don't know what the word is. But it's

like, I can be spending time with him and it will be fine, but there are still things that he needs, and I need to do to get them done so he can have them.

Jared's remarks allude to the tempered emphasis placed on provision in the narratives of many men. The emphasis placed on financial support is balanced by a strong sense that material provision is not solely sufficient for full engagement in the fatherhood role. Men recognized that "being there" for one's children is at least equally important to fulfillment of the fatherhood role. Discussing providing as a father, Kevin, qualified its importance by noting that there were other dimensions of fatherhood that should be given attention:

It's important, but it's not the most important thing. It's not even about all that money man. I mean, I didn't have the best clothes but when I was younger it wasn't about that. I don't know nothing about those clothes. It's survival.

What you need is to get that kids mental right, and lead him to the right way.

Drawing on his personal experience, Kevin views financial provision as simply a matter of ensuring his children's physical survival. He alludes to a balanced perspective on providing that most men advocated. Despite their perceptions that they lacked the resources to provide for their children in the ways they desired, many men still believed that they would be able to be good fathers. By rationalizing their lack of ability to provide for their children, men preserved—at least some of— their sense of fatherhood readiness by committing to doing what they were able in order to support their children's development.

## “I Can’t Play Father [If] I Don’t Believe He’s Mine:” Presumptive Paternity and Acknowledged Paternity as Gateways to Readiness Narratives

In addition to the sensitizing concepts outlined by the aforementioned psychosocial dimensions, knowledge that one is a father emerged from the interviews as an important factor in low-income, young men’s constructions of fatherhood readiness. Prior studies that have drawn samples of men involved in committed relationships have overlooked the importance of acknowledged paternity and assumed that men in committed relationships were confident that the children were theirs. Indeed, the stability of those relationships may lead men to assume that the children were theirs.

However, many of the young, low-income men in the present study were not in committed relationships with the mothers of their children. The results suggest that many of these men do not make the same assumptions of paternity. Knowledge about the paternity of one’s child often came in two constructs: presumptive paternity and acknowledged paternity. These types of paternity knowledge arose as important factors affecting men’s sense of readiness for fatherhood. Presumptive paternity arose from awareness that there was a possibility that one has fathered a child was usually gained when a man’s partner informs him that she was pregnant. Denham, an 18 year-old expectant father, discussed learning that his girlfriend was pregnant:

She was like yeah it’s yours. Shoot, well I do what I gotta do, that’s it really. Shit I was kind of happy, but then I wasn’t because I’m too young, you know. But it’s coming and I gotta do what I gotta do.

Denham's experience of learning about his partner's pregnancy and subsequent decision to prepare for fatherhood resonated with many men in the sample. Thus, presumptive paternity that one may soon be a father often galvanized men towards becoming ready for fatherhood.

Acknowledged paternity goes beyond presumptive paternity and refers to a man's conviction that he has a biological relationship to the child and is the point from which fathers' narratives of readiness diverge. When men were certain about the paternity of their children, they commit to maintaining their current level of readiness as well as improving areas they assess to be insufficient for fatherhood. Chris, a 21 year-old father of two discussed his certainty that he was the father of his children,

As far as blood tests and stuff like that, I haven't had a test with DeVeon but I know it's mine for sure so he has my last name and everything. With Jhyel that's pretty much where we, me and Kelly start conflict because I was hearing other lies and thinking otherwise that she was sleeping around with someone else at the time that I was sleeping with her. So I asked for a paternity test, that's where you know as soon as you ask for that paternity test downtown, paperwork starts everything for child support, so I established paternity with Jhyel.

Although Chris was certain that he was the father of his younger son, he notes that gaining such assurance was more difficult with his eldest. Knowing that he was the father of his children, he committed to paying child support and visited his children consistently. Paternity acknowledgement helped Chris transition into the

fatherhood role. Conclusive knowledge about the paternity of one's child promotes the development of readiness for the fatherhood role.

Thus, *decided readiness* is an active effort towards reconciling men's contextual situations and their role expectations in the development of a father identity. *Trial readiness*, on the other hand, usually arises out of uncertainty about the child's paternity or uncertainty that one can raise a child in the contexts in which he is embedded. The ambiguity makes it difficult for men to fully commit to adopting the fatherhood role but trial ready fathers begin making the changes necessary to translate their ideas of fatherhood into an understanding that speaks to their current situations.

When a man is both uncertain of the paternity of his child and the contexts that surround him, he is unlikely to begin the process of translating his philosophical ideas of fatherhood into personally and contextually relevant parenting practices. The present study conceptualizes these fathers as disengaged from the process of becoming ready for fatherhood. Because the men involved in the present study were involved with a fathering program, they acknowledged, to varying extents, that they may be fathers. Attendance at the fatherhood programs also indicates some level of engagement in making oneself ready for fatherhood. These factors contributed to the disengaged narrative not appearing in the interview data. Therefore, this narrative is omitted herein and the two prominent narratives—decided readiness and trial readiness are discussed. The frequency that each narrative appeared is recorded in each cell. The sum of the narratives exceeds the total number of participants because readiness narratives were fluid as men experienced various types of readiness surrounding the transition to fatherhood.

Figure 1 illustrates the matrix of paternity knowledge and perceptions of the contexts as they contribute to the construction of readiness narratives. “Perspective of Contexts” refers to men’s evaluations of their fatherhood vision, maturity, and their capacity to provide for their children. Thus, positive perspectives connote men’s beliefs that these contexts would support raising children. Negative perspectives of contexts imply men’s apprehension that these contexts would be amenable to the enactment of the fatherhood role. The dotted lines separating the cells indicate the fluidity between these conditions as fathers’ perspectives and paternity knowledge may change as their paternity knowledge and perceptions of their contexts shift.

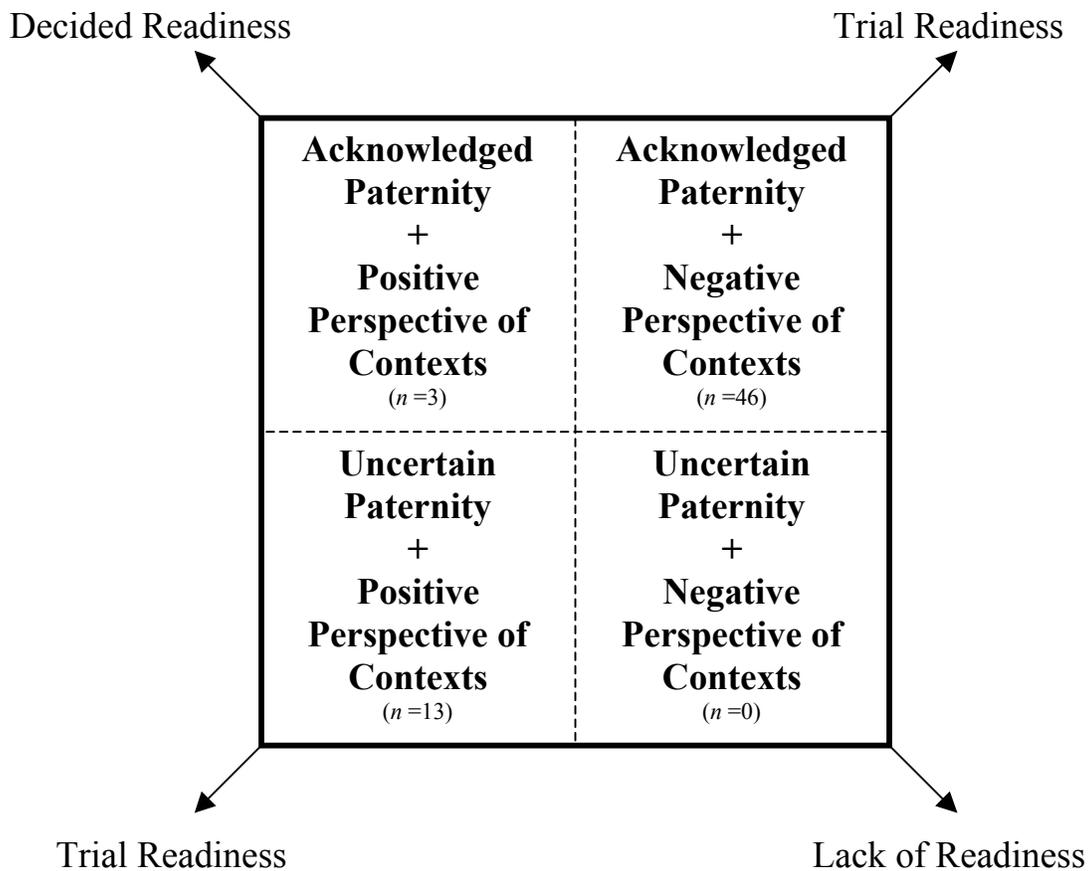


Figure 1: Narrative Matrix

*Decided Readiness.* Decided readiness refers to fathers' sense that they were able to fulfill the fatherhood role within the contexts in which they were embedded. This readiness narrative was the least common among the men in the sample. This version of readiness arose out of men's certainty that they were the fathers of their children. Conclusive knowledge that they were the fathers is often necessary for committing to readiness. The story of Fenton, a 22 year-old father of one, will be used to discuss decided readiness. Although he had yet to formally establish paternity but was certain that eight month-old Alicia was his:

No, I haven't. I've been in the process of doing that and now that it's just a matter of time of her having the time to take out, and me having the time to take out. And she works a lot, I go to school, I look for work. It's just a time factor, but once we get that set, I will have my custody. She's agreed, we've talked about it, and she says no problem.

For Fenton, the paternity test merely protected his relationship with his daughter in the event the relationship with the mother faltered or ended. Paternity establishment was a "formality" as he already believed that Alicia was his. His desire to protect himself in this way may have stemmed from his personal experiences as well as involvement with the fatherhood program that advocated paternity testing for its participants. His experience of having a solid acknowledged paternity about the paternity of his child indicated that formal paternity establishment--although conclusive--was not inherently necessary for acknowledged paternity that one is the father and subsequent readiness for the role.

Acknowledged paternity that they were soon going to be fathers impressed upon men the importance of assessing where they were in relation to their expectations for the role. Favorable appraisals of their situation relative to their expectations for the fatherhood role lent themselves to men having a sense of readiness for fatherhood. As young men with limited educational and work experience, there were few men in the study who had fully attained the markers of successful fatherhood. The question for them was choosing to see the positive aspects of their current situation and recognizing what could be improved. Fenton was looking for work at the time of the interview but took responsibility for providing material resources for his children.

I'm responsible financially, emotionally, in every way I could possibly be. I do for my kids, I buy them kids, the diapers, the milk, the clothes, the toys, the educational things, I spend time with them. All the time. We talk. Me and Sheila have a great relationship, we talk about everything.

Although unemployed, Fenton discussed his readiness to “do” for his kids and cited other areas in which he perceived himself as able to father—stressing education and spending time with his child and her half-sister. He also cited his relationship with his partner as a positive context that helped him be ready to be involved with his children

Whereas Fenton was confident about his paternity status and believed that he was able to father in his situation, other men are not as confident. As a result of their personal assessments, many men identified areas that they desired to improve in order to prepare for fatherhood. Jose, a Latino man whose now-wife became pregnant when

he was 15, realized that he did not have sufficient financial resources to support his child and therefore began working long hours.

[I was working] 80 hours a week...2 or 3 years... The only times I had to be with [my son] was like on a Wednesday...Tuesday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday... [I would] try to go home and go to sleep, make it back at 12:00.

Although he was not financially secure at his child's birth, his acknowledgement of paternity for the child his impelled him to work long hours to improve his ability to fulfill the role expectations of fatherhood. While presumptive paternity that they may be fathers causes men to consider their position in relation to their current position, acknowledged paternity allows men to take steps towards making themselves ready for fatherhood.

Acknowledged paternity that one was the father also allowed men to commit to learning how to father despite the challenges they faced. Decided readiness causes low-income fathers to look at their situations, acknowledge that there may be difficulties and then to develop ways of fathering in light of these. Fenton's narrative highlights how fathers often found novel ways to father. Because he was unemployed, Fenton faced considerable challenges to providing for his children. He discussed the considerable efforts he made to visit his children using public transportation:

It's like an hour for me to get from my house to her house, by public transportation... [I go] about three times a week, sometimes more than that.

When I see both of them together, I see them at their grandmother's house, where Tammy is living. On the weekends, we take public transportation, we

have family time. I take Ashonte one on one to my aunt's house. Whenever I'm in contact with her, I'm with her all day.

His certainty that he was his daughter's father allowed him to commit to figuring out how to be a father despite the challenges he faced of being unemployed and living a significant distance away from his children.

*Trial Readiness—Uncertain paternity.* Whereas decided readiness indicated a certainty that fathers were going to begin translating their philosophical understandings of fatherhood into a workable formulation in their given context, some men developed another version of readiness in response to their contexts. This readiness was contingent upon the amelioration and resolution of the negative issues they faced. This tentativeness allowed men to begin making themselves ready for fatherhood but without making an irrevocable commitment to the role.

Uncertainty about the paternity of one's child was the primary divider between trial and decided readiness. This uncertainty was fluid and could be dispelled by conclusive proof—usually through a DNA test—that the child was theirs. Men often looked at the birth of their child as an event that would give them clarity about their biological relationship to the child. Ellis, an 18 year-old father of one decided to get a DNA test done shortly after his daughter was born because his own mother had doubts about his child's paternity:

Well, there was a time, my mom didn't believe that Amaya was mine, when we were at the hospital, and that's the only time I ever thought that things weren't going to work out. Then we got the test done, and it came out that I was the father 99.9... Yeah, that's what it said on the sheet. They aren't 100%

sure, but they always put 99.9%... [My mom] was happy! She wanted a grandchild. But She just wanted to make sure it was mine. My mom is like, overprotective, I knew she was going to be like that. That's why I didn't really react. But I did kind of freak out when she was like, when she didn't think it was mine.

Whereas many men were uncertain about the paternity of their children because of the relationship status with the child's mother, Ellis' hesitation resulted from his own mother's misgivings. In retrospect, he disregarded his mother's concerns as a function of her being "overprotective" but he also noted that he was distressed during the period in which he was uncertain.

For some men, doubts about the paternity of their children lasted long after the birth. Despite their doubts about being the fathers, men who developed tentative readiness sometimes affirmed that they were the fathers of the children by signing birth certificates when the child was born. Will, a 22 year-old father of one, discussed his uncertainty that he was the father of a three-year old ascribed to him:

That baby ain't mine... You know when I was in the delivery room I was denying it the whole time... I was like 16 we were doing pretty good— [her] little kids was cool with me I was cool with the little kids. It just that child when he came something wasn't right. The first couple hours were iffy. I still don't believe he mine but you know I'm here let's enjoy the moment. A couple days later I signed the papers. I was a fool.

Because, in Will's estimate, the relationship with the mother of the child was going well at the time of birth, he agreed to sign the paternity papers despite his

reservations. Upon the dissolution of the relationship, Will's uncertainty about the child caused him to regret claiming the child at birth.

*Trial Readiness: Negative perspectives of contexts.* In addition to uncertainty about the paternity of a child, men's negative perceptions of their contexts impacted the way they constructed readiness. When men did not perceive their current situation to be amenable to fatherhood, they often did not perceive themselves as ready and had difficulty compensating for their perceived deficits. Whereas acknowledged paternity was generally a discrete phenomenon (i.e. men believed that they were the fathers or they had doubts), men's perspectives of their contextual portfolios existed on a continuum from perceptions that they were adequate to their not being conducive to fathering. Graham recounted his experience of having the financial resources necessary for fatherhood when his first child was born but finding it more difficult to manage when his second child arrived,

But you also have to have the material things that they need, the material needs that they have. So, it's kinda hard to provide for two children if you don't have a job. But it's a lot easier because before Azriel was born; when Angie first told me she was pregnant I was working and bought all kinds of stuff for Azriel and Celeste. Azriel had clothes for all the way until up she was five years old and Celeste has tons of clothes and diapers and wipes and everything. They basically have everything that they want right now and they need until a couple more years.

Although he was unemployed at the time of the interview, Graham was able to prepare for upcoming years when his contextual portfolio—especially his

employment status—was favorable for fatherhood. The fact that he is no longer employed highlights the fluid nature of these contextual factors. Low-income men are often inconsistently employed, thus resulting in inconsistency in their readiness to be fathers.

Ray, a 24 year-old, African American father, discussed the difficulties he encountered of becoming financially stable:

I ain't really got no crib for him to stay at...I can't do for him when I had a crib. Like having food for him and clothes. I buy him clothes or whatever still now. Food for him...that's basically it though...I'm trying to get a job man and go to work. I'm telling you, man I can get a job right now go up there and ask Ms. Lanee today. Let me get like a week's worth of bus passes and you won't see me no more until I got my check. And I can and probably if you wanted me to pay back I could pay you back. Right now I know there is a job out there for me it's just a barrier of not having a car, man and not having some where to stay; you know what I'm saying. Those two things. If I had those two things I wouldn't even need nobody.

Ray perceived himself to be financially stuck because he neither had a car nor did he have a job, both of which depended on the other for initiation. As a non-residential father, not having access to consistent transportation often kept him from seeing his child.

Generally, the more negative perceptions a man had of his situations, the more his development of readiness was challenged. Although Chris, a 21 year-old father of two attempted to get himself ready for fatherhood when he learned that his girlfriend

was pregnant, he was unable to marshal his resources effectively to deal with the complex set of circumstances:

Then we started falling apart cuz of conflict between Densiha and Kelly and you know and me not being able to pay child support on a regular basis cuz I'm going to school, couldn't find a job. So it kind of, all that stuff altogether makes the relationship [hard]. I was too young and I was feeling like I can't support my child, if I can't do this I don't want to have much contact. I don't feel like I deserve contact with my son, which of course now I know was that's dumb. The least I could do was be in his life.

Not only was Chris experiencing conflict in his partner relationships, he was unemployed, and believed himself not to be old enough to be a father. Because he did not believe that his contexts supported having a child, he thought he was unprepared for fatherhood and did not make efforts towards improving his readiness. His story illustrates that the confluence of multiple negative contexts, despite having concrete knowledge of the paternity of one's child, led to a similar level of non-readiness among young low-income men as was discussed for fathers when the paternity is contested.

Ready fathers who were certain of the paternity of their children were often concerned that their contextual portfolios did not align with their vision for fatherhood. Their certainty about being a father contributed to their frustration with not being fully ready and able to enact the father role as they intended. Bryan, a 21 year-old African American father of an infant, discussed his difficulties providing:

The thing about providing you can only provide what you do have. I'm not blessed with exceptional amounts of money, I've been basically out of work cause I was in school, not having very much income from my own side of the family I've been able to provide the type of attention and they type of reliability in the place of perceived capacity for provision. And uh I think that's more important... knowing that you can depend on that father figure who's at least reliable, at least dependable, who's at least going to put his best effort forward even if he doesn't have other resources available to him. At least putting that effort means a lot. Providing is essential really in whatever way you can.

Like other fathers who were certain of their paternity but were embedded in challenging situations, Bryan acknowledged the obstacles he faced in becoming a provider for his children but still hoped to meet his other role expectations.

### *Summary of Findings*

In sum, a vision for fatherhood, maturity, and a belief that one can provide for one's children were dimensions of readiness identified by the current study.

Fatherhood vision was shaped by men's experiences with their own father and often featured generative themes. This construct referred to fathers' ideas of how they desired to approach fatherhood and included both their general dispositions towards the role as well as their practical ideas about how they wished to enact the practical aspects of fathering. As men consider their readiness for fatherhood, the visions for the role shape their constructions of readiness. Provision for one's children featured prominently in fathers' constructions of readiness for fatherhood. Perceptions of

one's ability to provide for one's children influenced men's constructions of readiness. Where men believed that they would be able to provide for their children, they were inclined to think themselves ready for fatherhood. Men who were less confident about their capacity for provision were more likely to indicate that they were not ready for fatherhood. Many of these men did, however, seek to offset their difficulties providing by highlighting their dedication to "being there" for their children. In this way, men were able to preserve a sense of readiness for fatherhood in light of the challenging financial contexts they were situated within. Maturity also arose as an important factor influencing how men developed readiness for the fatherhood role. As men demonstrated the markers of adulthood with greater frequency—gaining autonomy, productivity, and taking responsibility for their actions—they were able to construct narratives of readiness in spite of the challenging contexts that surrounding them.

Fatherhood vision, fathers' perceived ability to provide for their children, and maturity intersected with fathers' paternity knowledge to produce their constructions of readiness. Paternity knowledge took two forms: presumed paternity and acknowledged paternity. Presumed paternity referred to men's awareness that they may be fathers and acknowledged paternity indicates fathers' conviction that a child was theirs. When fathers' perceptions of their contexts aligned with their expectations, they tended to express a readiness narrative in which they believed themselves to be capable of fulfilling the fatherhood role and made efforts to make lifestyle changes to accommodate their new role. This narrative was termed the "decided readiness" to describe fathers' consistent, concerted efforts to prepare for

their children. However, when fathers perceived ambiguity in either the paternity of their children or in their confidence about the contexts, fathers expressed readiness narratives in which they made tentative efforts to make life changes to accommodate the fatherhood role.

## Discussion

### Conceptual Model

Readiness refers to preparedness to translate one's role expectations into a conceptualization of fatherhood that is responsive to the contextual factors in which a man is embedded. Fatherhood readiness is an emergent experience for young a man that is constructed through one's expectations as one interacts with his dynamic contexts. As such, it is important to bear in mind that fatherhood readiness may wax and wane as men encounter their contexts and attempt various "translations" of their ideas of fatherhood. Three cognitive dimensions were identified by the present study to describe readiness: fatherhood vision, maturity, and perceived capacity for provision. These cognitive factors allowed men to render their philosophical ideas of fatherhood into a contextually based understanding—the essence of being ready for fatherhood.

Fatherhood vision refers to possessing an idea about the type of father one desires to be. This construct included the general goals of being actively involved with their children, guidance, and being emotionally "there" for them. In light of the need to develop an understanding of fatherhood in the absence of their own fathers, generative themes figured prominently in the participants' narratives. As men considered how they wanted to construct the fatherhood role for their children, they often discussed the role in terms of doing what their fathers did not do for them.

Readiness also included a sense of maturity that involves taking responsibility for one's actions and cessation of risky behaviors. Men's childhood adultification may have contributed to responsibility assumption and behavioral change. Burton's

(2007) observation that there are benefits and liabilities to adultification among low-income children indicates that adultification may impact how men construct readiness to step into the adult role of parenthood. It may be that fathers who are less ready may have experienced the negative consequences of adultification while other fathers were able to retain some of the benefits of having been adultified. Future studies should explore more explicitly how adultification influences readiness narratives among low-income men.

The salience of maturity for young men's development of fatherhood readiness may be due to the developmental crossroads where they are located. As men in their late teens and early twenties, they are beginning the process of assuming an adult identity. The importance placed on maturity falls in line with the developmental position at which these young men find themselves. Arnett (2004) notes that developing a sense of responsibility for one's actions and consequences is especially important for emerging adults. Participants often remarked that, because they were fathers, they needed to stop negative behaviors, usually drug use and "being in the street"—involvement in social contexts that led them to negative behaviors (i.e. criminal activity, gang involvement). It is likely that men were aware that such extrication would be beneficial as they transitioned to adulthood, having heard this message from various external sources. Becoming a father, however, heightened the importance of this developmental imperative. Perhaps the dual developmental and fatherhood imperatives work to galvanize men to dissociate themselves from negative behaviors. The compounded developmental and role pressures may lead to stagnation or even regression in their efforts to mature as men

and fathers. Further study is needed to understand the interaction of fatherhood and the transition to adulthood to understand the various trajectories low-income men's lives take during emerging adulthood.

While having a vision and maturity are explicitly cognitive concepts, prior research has not understood perceived capacity for provision as such. Material stability has traditionally been understood as a contextual factor that moderates father experiences. Access to financial resources has traditionally been represented as a contextual variable in fatherhood research that affects how men construct meanings of fatherhood. Similar to previous studies, the current investigation initially conceptualized perceived capacity for provision as a contextual factor that affected how men constructed a sense of readiness for fatherhood. The current study's findings indicate, however, that financial provision was central to many men's definition of fatherhood: to be a father is to provide for one's children. As fathers discussed the centrality of providing to their constructions of readiness, the delineation between having material resources as a contextual factor and a psychological dimension of readiness becomes blurred. The present study found that many men believed financial provision to be central to the fatherhood role. Readiness for fatherhood included the perception that they were able to provide financial and material resources for their children. Because participants often equated readiness—an inherently cognitive construct—with financial provision, the present study considers perceived capacity for provision a cognitive dimension of readiness for fatherhood.

Although men and society tended to include financial provision prominently in their role constructions of fatherhood, they often perceived that they were not able to provide for their children in the way that they expected or desired. This instrumental support (i.e. financial resources and housing) was often difficult for the low-income, young men in the study to secure and threatened some men's—especially those who were trial-ready—constructions of readiness (Ahmeduzzaman & Roopnarine, 1992). In order to reconcile this dissonance, men committed to providing what they were able—namely, their time and guidance. Men planned to compensate for their inability to provide instrumental support by providing emotional support and “being there” for their children. Knowledge of paternity was found to shape how men construct their ideas about readiness for fatherhood. The present study conceptualized knowledge of paternity as men's presumptive paternity and acknowledged paternity that they have fathered a child. Presumptive paternity—the most basic component of knowledge—activated men's thoughts about their readiness by referencing their role expectations for fatherhood in relation to their appraisal of the contexts in which they are embedded. Whereas presumptive paternity that they may have fathered a child was a universal experience for the men involved in the study, their acknowledged paternities about the true paternity varied. The status of the partner relationship was often the distinguishing factor between confidence and uncertainty about the paternity of the child. Similar to married men involved in previous studies of readiness, the unmarried participants in the current investigation who were involved in committed relationships assumed that they were the fathers of the child (Cowan, 1988). With this certainty, men began the process of

converting their role expectations into an understanding of fatherhood that recognizes their current situations. This decided readiness usually involved altering both expectations of the fatherhood role and the contexts surrounding them to create a cohesive vision for fatherhood.

Compared to men who were involved in committed relationships, there was greater variability in men's acknowledged paternity about the paternity of their children among those who were not involved in a committed relationship with their partner. These men developed a trial readiness that was contingent upon gaining more conclusive knowledge about their biological relationship to their children. Just as they were uncertain about the paternity of their children, trial readiness placed their translation of role expectations and situational factors in a state of limbo. Trial readiness was characterized by fragmented efforts at reconciling role expectations with situational factors. Trial-ready visions for fatherhood more closely resembled their role expectations than a contextually responsive idea of fatherhood. This narrative allowed men to reconcile the discrepancies of their challenging daily experiences and their ideas for fatherhood.

While presumptions of fatherhood galvanize men to consider their readiness for fatherhood and make efforts toward reconciling their role expectations and their contexts, uncertainty about the paternity of a child often results in caution in these efforts. When there is ambiguity about the paternity of a child, readiness takes a similarly ambiguous form: a mixed reconciliation of global and contextual readiness through working towards improving those situational factors. The result is a "trial readiness" in which men will begin the process of augmenting their situational

contexts but with reservation. The resolution of trial readiness is contingent on confirmation of their biological relationship to the child. Trial readiness, then, is situated between global and contextual readiness, as not knowing causes men to prepare for both being the father and the possibility that they may not have a child.

Figure 2 depicts the conceptual model described by these findings.

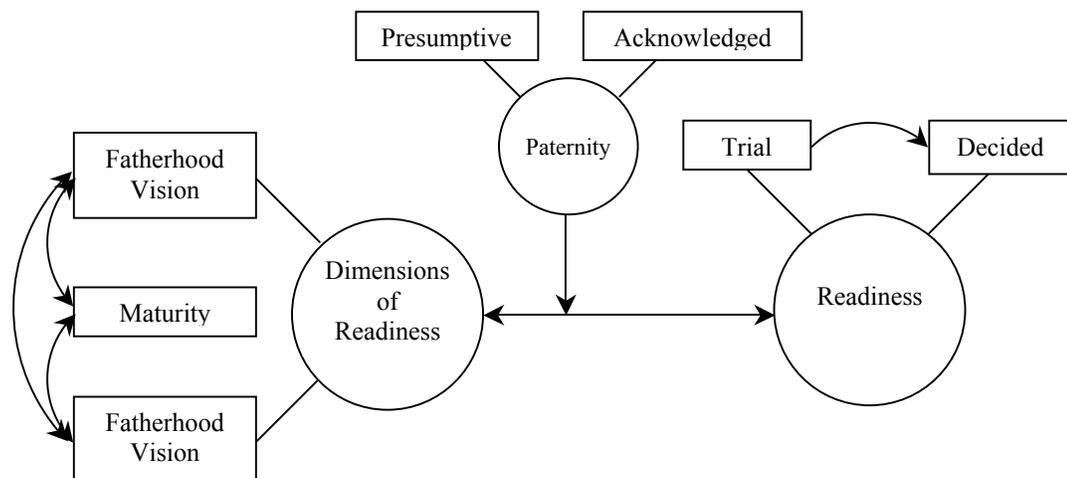


Figure 2: Conceptual Map

It is important to note that although this study conceptualizes committed and trial readiness as different constructs to describe young, low-income fathers, men’s experiences with readiness were far from static. For example, it was not uncommon for men to transition from trial readiness to decided readiness as they learned the paternity of their children. Ellis’ story feeling relief about gaining confirmation of the paternity of his child and his subsequent efforts to prepare himself for the role illustrate that paternity can help one move from trial readiness to committed.

It was also possible for men to transition from decided readiness to trial readiness. This often happened as a function of a dissolved partner relationship. It

was not uncommon for men who accepted paternity while they were romantically involved with the mother to express more doubts when the partner relationship ended. The move from committed to trial readiness may also occur as men's perceptions of their environments change. Young, low-income men often experience difficulties securing and retaining employment. While a young man may believe he is ready for fatherhood because he is able to provide for a child, his sense of readiness may be challenged if he loses that job and is, therefore, unable to fulfill the provider aspect of his role expectation for fatherhood. Readiness can be thought of as the bridge between global and contextually situated ideas about fatherhood—it results from a man's perception that can meet his expectations for the fatherhood role in light of the contexts in which he finds himself. Readiness is the translation of a man's understandings of fatherhood that arise from his procreative consciousness into a formulation that is responsive to the situation in which he finds himself.

#### Theoretical Contribution

In the growing field of fatherhood research, few studies have examined the cognitive dimensions of readiness for enactment of the role. Prior studies have discussed father involvement, partner relationships, fathers' families of origin, and financial provision as they relate to fatherhood, but men's perceptions of readiness to be fathers has been overlooked. The present study's attention to these constructs and their relation to each other represent one of the first attempts to broach the area of fatherhood readiness, especially for the population described by its findings.

The present study drew from the concepts of role, socialization, and identity as understood by symbolic interactionism. Men's visions for fatherhood, ideas about

maturity, and perceptions that being able to provide for one's children were shaped by their expectations of the fatherhood role. Although individually expressed by the participants, men's role expectations were shaped by their experiences with their own fathers and with meanings that others in their cultures assigned to fatherhood. The generative themes that emerged from men's narratives are a reflection of the role expectations they developed as a function of interactions with others who inhabit that role. Becoming ready for fatherhood involves translating role expectations into an approach to fatherhood that is responsive to the contexts in which men are situated. It is through this translation that men begin to develop their identities as fathers. At its most basic, the father identity refers to a mere acknowledgement that they are men who have a child. Most men—certainly all involved in this study—ascribe much more meaning to that identity as it pertains to their stance and goals for their involvement with their children. These meanings are the socially-constructed role expectations they have developed for fatherhood through interactions with their own fathers and other personal experiences. Whereas role describes the expectations society holds for a father, identity refers to a man's personal expectations for the role and how he understands himself to be within that role. Readiness lies within identity. It is here that men ask the questions: Who do I want to be as a father? Can I do it? These questions and the path to their answers form an ontological inquiry as well as one that is grounded in the contexts the men observe around them. Upon learning that they have become fathers, men compare their ability to meet their expectations for the fatherhood role with their contextual portfolios.

Researchers focusing on intentionality have attempted to understand the transition to fatherhood for low-income men. An important oversight of the intentionality studies to date is that they have focused on a single factor—partner relational status—to draw conclusions about decisions to become parents. There are, however, a myriad of other factors surrounding men as they make procreative decisions. In understanding a person’s intentions to have children, it is necessary to look beyond the status of the parents’ relationship and understand the decision in a larger context. Part of that larger context is the concept of readiness for fatherhood. Whereas intention refers to the decision to have a child, the present study seeks to understand how men conceptualize their readiness to enact the fatherhood role. Readiness, as conceptualized in the current study, is an evaluation of one’s ability to meet these expectations. Fatherhood readiness is similar to the concept of coping efficacy identified by psychological research. Coping efficacy is “the cognitive and behavioral efforts used to manage specific external and internal demands, appraised as taxing or exceeding a person’s resources” (Levy-Shiff, Dimitrovsky, Shulman, & Har-Even, 1998). Because young, low-income men face challenging contexts, coping efficacy may be a useful lens to understand their experiences as they transition to fatherhood.

The limited research on fatherhood readiness has not discussed the role that knowledge about the paternity of a child plays in the development of a sense of readiness. The extant body of literature has primarily focused on married fathers. Less is known, however, about unmarried men. For the men who have been represented in the extant research, the paternity of the child is assumed—usually as a function their

relationship status. For unmarried young men, especially those involved in non-committed relationships, one cannot make such an assumption, as there may be greater uncertainty about the parentage of a child. This has particularly important implications because men who father children out of wedlock at a young age are more likely to have children with various partners (Manlove, Logan, Ikramulla, Holcombe, 2008). The instability of these relationships may contribute to fathers being uncertain about the paternity of multiple children and compromise their readiness to become involved in raising their children. Whereas knowledge was assumed in prior studies, the current study notes that conclusive knowledge about the paternity of a child is an important factor for men, which has implications for how they construct a sense of readiness for fatherhood.

The present study's focus on young men contributes to the growing body of literature that examines the period between adolescence and adulthood. Arnett (2004) refers to this time as "emerging adulthood," which is characterized by a transition to taking responsibility for one's actions and their consequences, decision making, and becoming financially independent, all tasks that signify having attained-self sufficiency. With these opportunities for growth, emerging adulthood may also be a period of instability as young people negotiate shifting educational and career paths as well as romantic relationships. Although Arnett found that few emerging adults believe that becoming a parent is a necessary marker of adulthood, the transition to adulthood and to parenthood occurs simultaneously for a significant number of men—especially low-income men (Sonneston, Pleck, and Ku, 1993). Palkovitz (2002) notes that the transition to fatherhood may encourage fathers to begin making

lifestyle changes. The present study supports this finding but also finds that young men believe that these changes are supported by their development of maturity. This may suggest that maturity and fatherhood readiness are reciprocally related—as men become more mature they feel more ready for fatherhood and as they develop fatherhood readiness they become more mature.

Marsiglio's (2000) model of how young men construct their procreative identities offers a framework for understanding fatherhood readiness. This model divides procreative identity into global and situated constructs and the findings of the current analysis support the dual-nature of men's fatherhood-related identities. Marsiglio posits that in light of becoming aware of their biological ability to father a child, young men develop attitudes, feelings, and impressions of themselves as generative beings, a *procreative consciousness* (Marsiglio, 2008). As a global concept, procreative consciousness guides acute procreative decisions as well as more general, amorphous ideas about what it means to be a father. *Procreative responsibility* is a subset of procreative consciousness that speaks to men's procreative decisions and their "perceived level of obligation to fulfill their social fatherhood roles" (Marsiglio, 2001, p. 125). The construct of procreative responsibility is situated in the contexts that surround a father and a man develops an idea of how to enact his procreative consciousness specific to the situations in which he is involved. As a narrative that is contextually responsive to specific situations, decided readiness may spring from a man's procreative responsibility. Trial readiness, however, sits under the larger umbrella of procreative consciousness as it struggles to

translate the role expectations of fatherhood into a cohesive understanding of how one will father in light of one's contexts.

Although Marsiglio suggests that procreative identities are situated, he does not explore how various contexts influence the construction of these identities. Furthermore, because Marsiglio recruited a representative sample of men for his study, the unique experiences of low-income or minority men with their challenging contexts may not have fully represented by his findings. The findings of the current study indicate that the contexts in which men find themselves often make it extremely difficult for men to develop a "situated" idea of fatherhood readiness that reconciles men's philosophical ideas of fatherhood with the contexts around them.

#### Implications for Policy and Practice

Few studies have examined how young, low-income men—or men in general—translate their global role expectations of fatherhood into an identity that speaks to how they perceive themselves in relation to their current contexts (internal and external). The current study expands on Marsiglio's (2000) work by highlighting the role that knowledge plays in the development of fatherhood readiness. As men learn and believe that they have become fathers, they translate those role expectations into personal expectations, behaviors, and identities that take into consideration the resources and constraints offered by their current situations.

Prior studies have cited motivation as an important factor in father involvement and policies have been constructed to encourage engagement by developing men's motivations to be involved with their children (Waller, 2009). The findings of the present study indicate, however, that fathers' readiness may be an

important factor influencing their parenthood engagement—even preceding their motivations to be involved. Readiness for fatherhood likely has implications for how men enact the fatherhood role. Although prior studies have identified factors that contribute to father involvement, few have attempted to understand the connection between readiness and involvement. Prior studies on readiness that have drawn from samples of married men have not considered father involvement as an implication of the findings (Cowan, 1988). The dimensions of readiness outlined by this study may coincide with differences in fatherhood involvement. Men who are certain that they have fathered a child that has been attributed to them and perceive themselves to compare favorably against their expectations for the dimensions of readiness may enact the fatherhood role differently than fathers who are uncertain of their children’s paternity and are not as confident about their station.

The present study’s implications for fatherhood involvement are especially important in light of the growing appeal of intentionality research. These studies have framed intention as dependent on fathers’ relationships with their partners and found correlations to their involvement with their children (England & Edin, 2007; Gager, McLanahan, & Gleib, 2002). The findings of the current study, however, challenge their conclusions about the determining effect of fathers’ relationships with their partners on intention and involvement. The conclusions drawn about relationship status and the decisions of become parents may miss several important intervening factors. This study suggests that the status of the relationship impacts men’s acknowledgment of paternity. This belief combined with their perceived ability to meet their fatherhood role expectations contributes to readiness. Therefore, men’s

own assessments and the meanings they assign to paternity are dramatically important for the formation of readiness. The current study supports the position that readiness is preparedness to translate one's role expectations into a conceptualization of fatherhood that is responsive to the contextual factors in which a man is embedded. The present investigation begins to expand intention beyond a decision based on partner relationship status. Further study is needed to explore the connections among readiness, intention, and involvement.

In light of the finding that there are several readiness narratives that young, low-income men may experience during the transition to fatherhood, policymakers and program designers may begin to tailor their approaches to reach men falling within a category. The most easily accessible group of fathers for policymakers and program designers are the trial-ready men who are awaiting confirmation of the paternity of their children. Providing access to paternity testing for these men will resolve the ambiguity about the paternity and may help them transition to making decisive efforts towards preparing for the fatherhood role. Policymakers, however, have primarily been interested in paternity establishment as a means to offset the costs of welfare programs through child support (Sonnesten & Holcomb, 1993; Miller, 1999; Bartfield, 2003). The past 40 years have seen increasingly rigorous federal efforts to establish paternity with recent legislation aimed at promoting paternity establishment at the time of birth (Mincy, Garfinkel, & Nepomnyaschy, 2005). However, paternity cannot always be established at the time of birth or may be contested at a later point. In these cases, paternity may be established through DNA testing—court-ordered or otherwise. Some men were aware of programs that

provided free paternity testing but noted that these programs were only available to fathers during the first months of their children's lives. Private DNA testing was prohibitively expensive for some men, which left them in a state of uncertainty about the parentage of their children—thus inhibiting their development of readiness for fatherhood. Policymakers should consider programs that subsidize paternity testing for low-income men as conclusive paternity knowledge coincides with men beginning to develop a sense of readiness for fatherhood.

The majority of men in the present study perceived their contexts negatively in relation to raising children and this influenced their constructions of fatherhood readiness. Policymakers and program designers desiring to improve fatherhood involvement may target trial ready men who are uncertain about their contexts. The findings of the present study indicate that a significant proportion of young, low-income men experience uncertainty about their contexts' conduciveness to raising children. By helping men learn how to negotiate their contexts effectively, programs may empower men to gain a sense of readiness for fatherhood and become more involved with their children. Programs aimed at promoting father involvement should continue to empower men to improve their contexts through job placement assistance, providing access to educational opportunities and vocational training, as well as psychosocial education about negotiating partner relationships. Prior studies have noted that attending parent education classes may promote competence by informing prospective attendees of the challenges they are likely to face as they make the transition to parenthood as well as strategies to cope with these difficulties. Parenting classes also support the development of competence by teaching parents the practical

skills necessary for caring for children (i.e. changing, diapers, what to do when a baby is crying, how to cope with a colicky baby) (Gager, McLanahan, & Gleib, 2002). In order to help men gain perceived capacity for provision—at least temporarily—fatherhood programs can serve their participants by helping men learn how to negotiate the social service system. Accessing the resources available through social services may help men bridge the gap between their expectations for being able to provide resources for their children and the challenging context in which they father. Through education and empowerment, low-income men whose contextual portfolios are not amenable to fatherhood involvement may develop skills, knowledge, and perspectives that help them become ready for fatherhood.

#### Limitations

The sampling method employed for the study may limit the generalizability of the findings. Although all participants involved with the programs were invited to give interviews, the racial and ethnic homogeneity among the participants should be considered. In particular, Latino men were underrepresented in the sample. The disproportionate sample may, in part, be due to the geographic locations of the various programs. The programs were located in predominately African American neighborhoods and participants generally lived in close proximity to the meeting places. Roy's (2004) finding that urban fathers often limited their daily travels to a geographic area within a few blocks of their homes due to wariness of people in other areas, avoidance of encounters with police, and fears of violence may help explain the constricted sample. Further study is needed to determine the similarities and

differences in the experiences of fatherhood readiness among different racial and ethnic groups.

The limited perspectives represented in the current study challenge the validity of the findings. As valuable as fathers' self assessments are for understanding fathers' experiences, mothers' reports of their partners' transition to fatherhood would be helpful for gaining an additional perspective of men's fatherhood readiness. The findings of the study suggest that readiness is a fluid experience for fathers—the interviews, however, only capture fathers' perspectives at a given point in time. Furthermore, men were asked to reflect on their past experiences transitioning to fatherhood, thus exposing the study to retrospective biases. Although researchers attempted to overcome this limitation by restricting the age range of the sample at the time of interview so as to limit the time between their transition to fatherhood and their recollection of that period, their narratives of the past and present are bound within the perspectives they had at the time of the interview. Future research should include mothers' perspectives and examine fathers' lives and transitions longitudinally.

That participants were recruited exclusively from fatherhood programs may challenge the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the men who agreed to give interviews generally tended to be among those who were more actively involved with the activities of their respective programs. While the curricula and format of each program differed, all were interested in improving and supporting fathers' involvement with their children. As participants in these programs, the interviewees' experiences of fatherhood may be different than non-participants'. The participants

were recruited exclusively from fatherhood programs and those who participated tended to be more actively involved with the activities of their respective programs. This may have created homogeneity among the study participants that may not correspond to larger society. The absence of the “lack of readiness” narrative in the findings of the current study may reflect participant’s self-identification as fathers and their subsequent engagement in fatherhood programs. Conversely, men’s lack of fatherhood readiness may keep them from becoming consistently involved in fatherhood programs, hence their lack of representation in the findings of this study. The difficulties we encountered in securing a large, heterogeneous sample of low-income men are not unique to the current study. Researchers should continue to develop strategies for attracting and retaining low-income, urban men so that their experiences may be adequately represented in scientific literature.

## Conclusion

As a psychosocial construct, readiness for fatherhood offers an intermediate concept that helps explain the associations between father involvement and partner relationship status and employment identified by prior research. Knowledge that one is a father influences how men construct fatherhood, which may have implications for their father involvement. The findings of this study suggest that policies that provide men access to paternity establishment resources may help them develop a sense of readiness for fatherhood. The findings also imply that policies surrounding child support and material support should be reconsidered as these factors may influence fathers’ sense of readiness and their engagement with their children. The current study’s findings also imply that policymakers and program designers should consider

ways to support the development of maturity among young fathers in light of their developmental position and the environmental challenges they face. As researchers and policymakers continue their efforts to understand and assist fathers, readiness and the factors that promote it should be the subject of future investigation and investment. By understanding readiness and its related concepts, the positive outcomes linked to father involvement can be realized for a greater number of children.

# Appendices

## Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter



2003 Lee Building  
College Park, Maryland 20742-5129  
301.405-2112 TOLL FREE 1.800.475.FAX  
irb@um.edu  
www.institutesr.ch.umd.edu/IRB

August 10, 2009

### MEMORANDUM

*Application Approval Justification*

**To:** Dr. Keval Roy  
Human Waters  
Family Science

**From:** Joseph M. Smith, MA, CIM   
IRB Manager  
University of Maryland, College Park

**Re:** **IRB Application Number:** 09-0522  
**Project Title:** "Psychosocial Dimensions of Fatherhood Readiness Among Low-Income Young Fathers"

**Approval Date:** August 10, 2009

**Expiration Date:** August 10, 2012

**Type of Application:** Initial

**Type of Research:** Exempt

**Type of Review for Application:** Exempt

The University of Maryland, College Park Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved your IRB application. The research was approved in accordance with the University IRB policies and procedures and 45 CFR 46, the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects. Please include the above-cited IRB application number in any future communications with our office regarding this research.

**Recruitment/Consent:** For research requiring written informed consent, the IRB-approved and stamped informed consent document is enclosed. The expiration date for IRB approval has been stamped on the informed consent document. Please keep copies of the consent forms used for this research for three years after the completion of the research.

**Continuing Review:** If you intend to continue to collect data from human subjects or to analyze private, identifiable data collected from human subjects, after the expiration date for this approval (indicated above), you must submit a renewal application to the IRB Office at least 45 days before the approval expiration date. If IRB approval of your project expires, all human subject research activities including the enrollment of new subjects, data collection, and analysis of identifiable private information must stop until the renewal application is approved by the IRB.

**Modifications:** Any changes to the approved protocol must be approved by the IRB before the change is implemented, except when a change is necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects. If you would like to modify the approved protocol, please submit an addendum request to the IRB Office. The instructions for submitting a request are posted on the IRB web site at [http://www.umresearch.umdsu.edu/IRB/IRB\\_Addendum%20Protocol.htm](http://www.umresearch.umdsu.edu/IRB/IRB_Addendum%20Protocol.htm)

**Unanticipated Problems Involving Risks:** You must promptly report any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others to the IRB Manager at 301-465-0678 or [jrsmith@umresearch.umdsu.edu](mailto:jrsmith@umresearch.umdsu.edu).

**Student Researchers:** Unless otherwise requested, this IRB approval document was sent to the Principal Investigator (PI). The PI should pass on the approval document or a copy to the student researchers. This IRB approval document may be a requirement for student researchers applying for graduation. The IRB may not be able to provide copies of the approval documents if several years have passed since the date of the original approval.

**Additional Information:** Please contact the IRB Office at 301-465-4212 if you have any IRB-related questions or concerns.

Page 1 of 2  
Initials \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM  
Patterns of Father Involvement in Families Study  
Dr. Kevin Roy, Principal Investigator  
Purdue University  
Department of Child Development and Family Studies

**Purpose of Research**

The purpose of this research is to explore how fathers' involvement in their children's lives changes over time.

**Specific Procedures to be Used**

If you choose to participate in this research on father involvement, you will participate in two interview sessions. The first session will be conducted at a chosen site, and another session will be conducted approximately two weeks later. Each session will be tape-recorded. Cassette tapes will be locked in a secure cabinet in the principal investigator's office. After they are transcribed, they will be erased.

**Duration of Participation**

You agree to participate in a ninety-minute interview, as well as another ninety-minute interview, which will be scheduled within a few weeks of the first interview.

**Benefits to the Individual**

You may benefit from interview sessions on father involvement through discussion, identification, and critical examination of challenges that fathers face everyday.

**Risks to the Individual**

You will experience little to no risk by participating in this research, beyond what you would experience in any situation that uses personal experience with activities to generate discussions. While you may experience mild discomfort when discussing some topics, your participation in activities is optional. You may also choose not to answer certain interview questions or not to share personal thoughts or experiences with others.

**Compensation**

As a participant, you will be paid \$20 in your choice of cash or grocery vouchers for each interview session.

**Confidentiality**

The information gathered is for research purposes only. Cassette tape recordings of interview sessions will be maintained in a locked cabinet by the principal investigator, and will be erased upon transcription. The following specific procedures will be utilized to protect confidentiality:

Your interview will be assigned an in-house number, which will be used exclusively on transcript documents and tape identification; There will be one unique written list of in-house numbers and participants, which will be kept in a locked, secure place in the principal investigator's office, separate from data and signed consent forms; Interview transcripts will also mask identifying information (such as your residence, employment, family member history) through use of pseudonyms;

Any information regarding criminal history cannot be used against you; The list will be retained for only six months, following the project to ensure that the data is entered. At this time, even the last list will be destroyed.

There are two exceptions to strict confidentiality. Research staff are required to report a) any knowledge of injury or potential injury to oneself or another person, and 2.) knowledge or suspicion of child abuse or neglect. You should understand that your name, social security number, and address may be provided to the business office of Purdue University for the purposes of facilitating payment for participation in this study.

**Voluntary Nature of Participation**

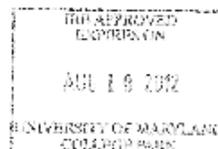
You do not have to participate in this research project. If you agree to participate, you can withdraw your participation at any time without penalty.

**Human Subject Statement:**

If you have any questions about this research project, contact Dr. Kevin Roy at 765-494-3312. If you have concerns about the treatment of research participants, contact the Committee on the Use of Human Research Subjects at Purdue University, 610 Purdue Mail, Hoyde Hall Room 307, West Lafayette, IN 47907-2040. The phone number for the Committee's secretary is (765) 494-5942. The email address is [irb@purdue.edu](mailto:irb@purdue.edu).

I HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO READ THIS CONSENT FORM, ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROJECT AND AM PREPARED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT.

_____	_____
Participant's Signature	Date
_____	
Participant's Name	
_____	_____
Researcher's Signature	Date



## Appendix B: Interview Protocol

- Where do you live right now?
- What's the neighborhood like?
- How many kids do you have?
- Do you have paternity?
- How is your relationship with your kid(s)?
- How did you feel when you found out that your partner was pregnant?
- What makes somebody a good father?
- Who taught you to be a good father?
- What is the best age to become a father?
- How do you show your love to your children?
- How is your relationship with the mother(s) of your children?
- What does it mean to be a responsible father?
- What is the most important aspect of being a father?
- What is the best age to become a father?
- Do you have other family in the area?
- If you needed help or advice, who would you turn to?
- Where did you live when you were in grade school?
- How was school for you? In elementary school? In high school?
- Who was the most important person in your life when you were growing up?
- When did you move out of the house?
- What has it been like to get a job and keep it?

- Do you feel excluded from the job market?
- How did you become involved in this fatherhood program?
- What are your greatest fears as a father?
- What is your greatest hope as a father?
- How do you hope to improve as a father?
- What are your greatest successes as a father?

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