

Complex Lives

Young Motherhood, Homelessness and Partner Relationships

Research has focused on identifying commonalities amongst women who give birth whilst young. This article, which reports on how young mothers experience and understand their relationships with the fathers of their children, seeks to convey the heterogeneity of young mothers and their lives. It draws upon interviews with 24 young women who experienced motherhood within the context of homelessness in Australia. For some, motherhood had preceded, or indeed provoked, homelessness; for others pregnancy had occurred during, or subsequent to, a period of homelessness. This article explores the ways in which partner relationships intersected with the experience of motherhood. The interviews highlighted the diverse and shifting nature of young women's relationships with the fathers of their children and demonstrated that categorizing young mothers as single or partnered obscures the more complex reality of lived experience. Expectations of partners varied greatly. Most of the young mothers grew up in single parent households and some regarded partners as extraneous. A key feature of many of the young mothers' stories was that of "growing up" and fulfilling the responsibilities of parenthood. The fathers were similarly expected to take on the role of fatherhood. For several young women, motherhood was associated with a newfound sense of agency and independence which impacted on their existing relationships and their views about relationships in the future.

Nicole and Tim* have been together since Nicole was 14. Nicole says they were both rejected by their parents as children. They were homeless at 15 and stuck together during hard times while Nicole completed school and Tim did his apprenticeship. Nicole says "Me and Tim really wanted to have kids together because we always knew that, regardless of our relationship together, we'd always be friends—best friends.... He was my one constant." At 18 Nicole became pregnant. "We just, you know, brushed it under the rug because

we were in denial.... It wasn't really reality for Tim, like, it didn't really hit home with him until I had her." However, they prepared for the baby together and Tim attended the birth. But a few months after the baby was born they "stopped being partners" for a while. In Nicole's words "we grew up together, we grew apart at the same time ... we decided it was best for the baby if we didn't live together full on." Tim continued to see his daughter, however, and when Nicole found accommodation he offered to move back in to help with the rent. "He wanted to be closer to the baby anyway." Nicole isn't sure whether they are a couple. The relationship isn't sexual but she says she falls into the role of housewife. She wants to become more independent in case Tim finds a new partner and can no longer share the rental costs and says if she found a new partner, "Tim would have a mental breakdown." Their future is unclear, although they seem to be becoming closer. "He's talking about getting married. I think it's too late for that ... we've had a baby together. We've been together for such a long time, we share everything. So I don't think you can get much more married than that."

Introduction

All too often the categories "young mothers," "teen mothers," and "adolescent mothers" are employed in the community, in the media, in research, and in policy and practice in ways that obscure the individual circumstances of those young women who give birth when young. Only recently have researchers in the field highlighted the importance of unpacking these terms and recognizing the wide variety of circumstances in which young women give birth and parent (Kelly, 1999; Luker 1996; McMahan, 1995; Schofield, 1994). Differences in relation to pregnancy intention, socio-economic situation, culture, age and developmental stage, understandings of self, world views, life trajectories, and of course relationships, interconnect and contribute to the ways young women experience motherhood. These aspects are played out within the broader context of social, economic and political landscapes.

Little has been written about those who father children to young mothers. When fathers do become the subject of research, the focus has tended to be on their demographics (Kiernan, 1997; Tan and Quinlivan, 2004) and ongoing involvement with or support of their children (Gavin *et al.*, 2002; Rhein *et al.*, 1997). Some studies have focused on whether young single mothers are likely to establish lasting relationships in later life, others have looked at whether partnered young mothers fare better, socio-economically, and in relation to wellbeing, than those who are sole parents (Bunting and McAuley, 2004; Coley, 1998; Roye and Balk, 1996). The dynamics of the relationships has received scant attention.

In this article I focus directly on the relationships of young mothers with their babies' fathers. Inevitably this touches upon relationships between the fathers and their children, however this subject is too extensive to be dealt with here. I will draw upon stories told by 24 young mothers in order not only to

uncover any common findings regarding relationships with men but also to illustrate the complexity of these relationships in the lives of this group of young women and how this intersected with their experience of motherhood.

Description of the study

This article draws upon a one-year study undertaken in Melbourne, Australia, in which semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 young mothers (aged between 17 and 26 at the time of interview) who had experienced homelessness. The key focus of the study was the impact of motherhood upon homelessness. The participants were recruited through homelessness accommodation and support services. In Australia, the term “homelessness” is commonly employed to encompass a range of situations from street-based living to unstable housing. Histories of homelessness among the young women varied greatly, with some experiencing only a brief period of homelessness and others cycling in and out of homelessness over a longer period. A minority spent extended periods without stable accommodation. Most had left home by the age of 16. All of the young women were relatively stably accommodated at the time of interview, although most were in temporarily supported “transitional” accommodation. Previous research with young people experiencing homelessness found that they identified living in such accommodation as a form of homelessness (Mallett *et al.*, 2006).

Of the 24 young women interviewed, most had one child (n=18), two had two children, three had three and one was pregnant with her first child. Of those who were already mothers, five were also pregnant. They were aged between 15 and 23 at the time their first baby was born, although many had had earlier miscarriages, stillbirths or terminations. The average maternal age at first birth was 19.

Relationship status: Shifting and complex

Intimate partner relationships are infinitely various, differing in form, meaning, longevity and stability, intensity, importance, and provision of emotional rewards or deficits, to name but a few varying aspects. However, this diversity is often overlooked when we speak of young mothers’ relationships. When we attempt to conceive of these relationships we immediately confront the risk of over-simplification at the most fundamental level—that of partnership status. Studies commonly note young women’s partnership status; however, stating numbers of single and partnered women masks the complexity that is lived experience, reducing a continuum of intimacy and a range of living circumstances to a misleading binary division. Such a reduction also obscures the fluidity of relationships. Young women experience and conceive of relationships in widely disparate ways. Here I take young mothers’ nominated partner status as a starting point to explore the complexity of their lived experience.

Eleven of the 24 young women interviewed reported having partners at the time of the interview, 12 described themselves as single, and Nicole, whose

story begins this article, was unable to say whether she was single or partnered. Nine of the eleven said they were in a relationship with the father of their youngest child (five mothers had children to two different men) and two said they were with a new partner. This article focuses on the relationships young women shared with the fathers of their children.

Nicole's story highlights the complexity of relationships between young mothers and the fathers of their children. Nicole's relationship with her baby's father has waxed and waned and changed in nature over five years, during which period, as Nicole says, they have grown up. They share a continuing bond forged through a long relationship and a lack of connection to others. This was one of the most lasting, albeit transforming, relationships represented in the study; however, several other young women had ongoing or "off and on again" relationships based upon similarly strong bonds and in the context of minimal or absent family relationships.

For the young women in the study, maintaining an intimate partner relationship with the fathers of their children did not always correlate with living together, and living apart was not always indicative of a lack of romantic attachment. In a quote that provides an example of the less than conventional ways in which relationships were enacted, one young woman who described herself as partnered said: "So when he hasn't got anywhere to stay, he pretty much stays at our house. And I sleep in the same room as the baby.... He's there pretty much every day"(Amy).

Of the eleven women who defined themselves as partnered, six—two of whom were married—lived with their partners at the time of the interview. A further three had partners who lived with them some of the time. These shifting accommodation arrangements were sometimes due to periods of incarceration—six said that the fathers of their children were currently, or had in the past been, in jail. Their own or their partners' homelessness also affected whether they lived jointly or separately. The constraints of government funded youth accommodation led to involuntary separation in some cases. Pragmatism, emotional ties, or a combination of both (as in Nicole's case) commonly played a part in decisions about living arrangements. Where pragmatism led to shared accommodation between ex-partners, this sometimes led to the renewal of sexual or romantic relationships. An ex-partner's vulnerability to homelessness adds to the likelihood of a less clear break, as even separated women felt an obligation to accommodate homeless partners for short periods when asked. This was sometimes at significant cost, for example when the fathers had problematic patterns of drug use or exhibited violent behaviour that caused distress and jeopardized the accommodation, throwing young mothers back into homelessness.

Living apart from partners was also sometimes the result of other practical barriers, usually associated with poverty, such as overcrowding (if sharing the family home) or inability to access affordable housing. Loss of jobs in the unskilled labour market has created an environment where many of the

fathers struggled to find employment and secure rental accommodation. Few of the mothers were attempting to enter the job market due to the age of their children, but they were similarly poorly positioned in the rental market due to poverty and discrimination.

Given that many of the pregnancies occurred during the years when relationships are often relatively short-term it is unsurprising that more than half of the mothers were no longer in relationships with the fathers of their children. Other studies have found similar rates of relationship breakdown (e.g. Speak, Cameron and Gilroy, 1997). Of course relationships continued or ended for many reasons but the advent of parenthood, with its subsequent expectations of roles and its responsibilities, figured strongly as a contributing factor in the reports of several young women.

Roles and responsibilities

Children were conceived within the full range of intimate relationships and young women entered into motherhood with a wide variety of expectations around the roles and responsibilities of the fathers of their children. Most of those who described themselves as partnered spoke of their relationships in fairly positive terms; three were planning or contemplating marriage. In a couple of cases, young women attributed their exit from homelessness to their establishment of relationships with their partners. A few of the young women reported that their partners were very supportive; others were less effusive and appeared less emotionally connected with their partners. Several were critical of the level of support they received with parenting, although they appeared to be resigned to the situation. Of course, some men were unaware that they had fathered children or had absented themselves during the pregnancy or soon after the birth.

Tyson's father doesn't know he exists. Jarrah's father, he took off I think I was about six months pregnant. Okay, he still messages and stuff... He promised to come and see him when I gave birth, and he didn't do that. (Yasmin)

For some of those who described themselves as single, initial expectations of an ongoing relationship had not been realized.

I thought "why not"... at the time I thought that me and him would be really good together "cause we just got back together and everything was fine. And we loved the idea of being pregnant, so in the end it was grouch, but ... as soon as I had the baby, he just started going out and taking drugs and that was it. (Kim)

Those who had been in less secure relationships suspected from the start that the fathers would play little or no role in their lives or those of their children.

It was pretty easy deciding to keep him. I just decided I really didn't care what his father was going to do. He's already got a two-year-old daughter and he doesn't see her much. (Natasha)

Natasha was just one of several young mothers who spoke of partners as extraneous, views they had formed in response to their recent experience with their partners or ex-partners or had held over time.

I do remember as a child always saying and envisioning myself, well being a young mum and a young single mum I think mainly because having only grown up with my single mum. (Holly)

Almost all of the young women in the study had grown up without their fathers. Nineteen had parents who had separated while they were children; several had either no knowledge of their birth fathers or had only met them in later life. Most had little or no contact with their fathers and only four out of 24 gave an unequivocal yes when asked whether they could turn to their father for any kind of support—16 responded with a flat “no.” One young mother observed that there weren’t any male role models in her life and commented “I don’t know how to take men, how to handle men.” These family backgrounds may have contributed to their view of fathers/partners as unnecessary. However, some young women said that their own fatherless childhoods had led them to view the presence of fathers in children’s lives, if not partners in their own, as important. The men who father children with young women commonly come from similar backgrounds to those women (Coley and Chase-Lansdale, 1998; Pirog-Good, 1995; Tan and Quinlivan, 2004). Young mothers often reported that the fathers of their children came from disrupted and often violent family backgrounds where negative experiences of fathering or a lack of fathering were common; this is a frequent finding (Quinlivan and Condon, 2005; Tan and Quinlivan, 2004). Further research is needed to ascertain how this may contribute to young fathers’ views on partnering and parenthood.

A key feature of young women’s stories was that of “growing up” and becoming responsible. In discussing their own process of maturation young women often made comparisons between themselves—taking on responsibility—and the fathers of their children—being irresponsible and immature. A few young women, including Nicole, told a slight variation of this story—wherein she and her partner were growing up together. However, in all these narratives, young mothers still commonly felt they had taken on their new roles and responsibilities before the fathers had.

I said, “Look, if you want to put drugs and friends and partying first that’s fine, I can deal with the independence of being a mum on my own”. But it took him a few months to realize that “oh, she’s right this time.” (Tamara)

Agency and independence

Tamara was only one of several young women who issued their partners with ultimatums in regard to what they deemed irresponsible or unacceptable behaviour. Termination of the relationship when the partner failed to change his behaviour was not uncommon. Clearly, the view of young mothers as being routinely abandoned by their babies' fathers is an over-simplification that fails to take account of the agency of young women (Davies, McKinnon and Rains, 1999). The findings of this research support Davies, McKinnon and Rains's contention that "pregnancy and motherhood became a frame within which [young mothers] engaged in an active reassessment of the baby-father as a partner and a father" (1999: 40).

Some young mothers were better placed than others to take action in the light of negative re-assessments. The nature of the relationship, the young mother's circumstances, in particular the availability of resources and alternate support, together with levels of self-confidence, self-esteem and sense of agency all affected their ability to exert some control within their relationships. Those with a strong supportive connection with at least one parent tended to be better positioned to take an active role. Alyssa had a very close relationship with her mother and sisters. She demonstrated a strong sense of self-entitlement and independence when she ended a long-term relationship after her partner's infidelity resulted in concurrent pregnancies. She stated:

I know he felt "She's having my baby, she's not going anywhere" so I thought I can't have anyone walk over me like that. I want to show my daughter to be strong as a woman, to walk away even though you do love that person. I needed him at that time and he wasn't there for me so I thought he will never be there for me. (Alyssa)

Some of the young women had been able to exercise little control in their lives, including their sexual and reproductive lives, over a long period. Several had grown up in State care and had felt disempowered by the experience. Many had grown up with violence—three disclosed sexual abuse from stepfamily members and eight reported family violence. Eight also reported violence from the fathers of their children. Two pregnancies were known to be, and two others were suspected to be, the result of rape. One young woman whose partner had regularly raped her felt she had no choice but to have the baby.

He didn't give me a choice. He goes he doesn't want me to have an abortion because he'll regret it in the end. But then he's not ready for a baby but he might be nine months down the track. (Yasmin)

Yasmin said that her past drug dependence had contributed to her sense of a lack of control over life so far. In her case, rape and family rejection had

preceded her heroin addiction. She told of having a series of boyfriends, some violent, to whom she'd felt obligated in a narrative in which relationships (and four pregnancies) were things that happened to her rather than events involving active engagement. Other studies have reported similar passivity around ability to affect the course of life (Morehead and Soriano, 2005). Given the backgrounds of the young women in this study, in which poverty severely constrained opportunities and family breakup and violence were commonly experienced, low expectations around ability to impact on life's direction or outcomes would not be surprising. However, Yasmin's story was not typical; a number of young women had demonstrated considerable levels of agency. This was so even in cases where relationships had been characterized by mutual drug dependence and/or violence,

I couldn't handle being slammed against walls anymore ... and I didn't want my girls growing up remembering everything ... I want them to have a good life. (Hannah)

Motherhood became the frame for re-assessment and the impetus for action. Several mothers described an often newfound belief in their ability to be independent.

It's been on and off for years. It took me to stand on my own two feet and realize I didn't need him or the crap that came with him. I learnt to walk away—I'd had enough (Megan)

Even Nicole, whose relationship was in a kind of limbo, identified the need to be independent and had taken steps towards establishing financial independence.

Future relationships

Overall, the young women interviewed expressed the view that their children were the most important people in their lives now and caring for them and providing them with opportunities took precedence over all other aspects of life. When asked about hopes for the future those who were without partners appeared disinterested in forming new relationships. Only one expressed a desire to have a partner, reflecting that it was difficult to go out and meet other men when you had a young child. Another said she would like to create a family for her son's sake but she couldn't envisage it happening. Two were adamant that they wanted to remain single. This disinterest may, of course, be related to the high level of involvement with their children characteristic of the early years of parenting.

Several expressed a concern that becoming involved with another man may undermine their newfound sense of agency and independence. A common theme was that of protecting themselves and their children by trying to have some control over the relationships they may form in the future. They

indicated that if they did consider having a relationship they would be more selective about who they got involved with in the future. This wariness was sometimes due to having negative experiences in the past and sometimes due to a newly identified need for stability prompted by motherhood. Yasmin and Alyssa were concerned both that their children may be confused about their parentage should they embark on a new relationship and about the possibility of negative repercussions for themselves and their children if those new relationships broke up.

Right now I'm not interested in another boyfriend... I've got my daughter; I can't bring another man home.... Say I do find another boyfriend next week and he's good to me for five years, and then after them five years, you know, he does something dramatic then it's not only gonna break my heart, it's gonna be my daughter's too. (Alyssa)

Conclusion

Listening to the stories of young mothers' lives is a salient reminder that this is not a homogeneous group, and research which fails to recognize, and distinguish between, the widely differing backgrounds and circumstances of young mothers will fail to provide the data necessary to devise appropriate responses to those young mothers who struggle in difficult circumstances to achieve their goal of a good life for their children. Young women's relationships with the fathers of their children are both positive and negative, often simultaneously. They can assist young women to exit—or catapult them back into—homelessness. These findings confirm that we cannot continue to carry out research around young motherhood without acknowledging that motherhood is a social process whereby relationships rather than the characteristics or circumstances of individual players—the mothers, the fathers—are key to outcomes. Finding out how young women experience and perceive these relationships and how this may influence concrete consequences such as homelessness and affect sense of self, including self-esteem, sense of agency and independence, is critical to devising appropriate policy and practice responses to support young mothers in our communities.

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*Pseudonyms have been used throughout

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