How young, disadvantaged fathers are affected by socioeconomic and relational barriers: a UK-based qualitative study

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This article is based on the interviews of nine young, socially disadvantaged fathers from the UK. Young fathers are more likely to experience socioeconomic deprivation and disrupted pathways towards parenthood, which affect their participation in socially accepted trajectories of ‘father involvement’. Whilst this has received some attention in research, studies have largely neglected to examine the lived experiences of such fathers directly. The current article aims to address this gap, building upon the limited body of research that exists exploring the impact of socioeconomic and relational barriers on father involvement. In this study, three interrelated themes demonstrate the cyclical nature of generational disadvantage, reduced socioeconomic circumstances and disrupted relationships, providing a different perspective on the decreased levels of involvement exhibited by young fathers in prior research. The findings also enlighten our understanding of how these fathers can be better supported in policy and practice, thereby contributing to current academic debate.

Key words disadvantaged fathers • young fathers • relationships • socioeconomic status

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Introduction

Neale and Davies (2015) begin their article ‘Seeing young fathers in a different way’ with a powerful quote taken from a member of the UK parliament:

‘I think it’s absolutely outrageous that so many young men in our society feel they can go out, get women pregnant, allow them to have children, make them bring them up by themselves, often on benefits, and then just disappear. It is utterly shocking and I hope […] the ministers will get hold
of some of these feckless fathers, drag them off, make them work, put them in chains if necessary [...]’ (David Davies MP, 12 November 2013, House of Commons; Cornack, 2013, cited in Neale and Davies, 2015: 309)

In contrast to the above statement, this article aims to provide a nuanced insight into the complicated and multifaceted nature of father involvement relative to youth and disadvantage. Social and economic disadvantage is significantly linked to decreased family functioning and health, increased stressful life events and poorer child outcomes (DfE, 2015; Research and Geospatial Information, 2015). Consistent with this, patterns of father involvement have been evidenced to change relative to education, employment and other sociodemographic variables, including age (Arditti et al, 2019; Henz, 2019). Studies examining large-scale data sets from both the UK and the US, for example, have shown that younger fathers are more likely to be non-resident and exhibit lower levels of involvement, when compared with older fathers of a higher socioeconomic status (Castillo et al, 2011; Flouri et al, 2016; Opondo et al, 2016). Young, predominantly disadvantaged fathers have been consequently portrayed in a negative light and stereotyped in the media (Waller, 2010; Johnson, 2015; Neale and Davies, 2015; Neale, 2016). While statistical patterns concerning socioeconomic status, age and father involvement suggest negative outcomes, more needs to be done to understand these links, explored from the perspectives of young, disadvantaged fathers themselves.

**Literature Review**

Defined as young fathers, men entering parenthood before the age of 25 tend to be more socioeconomically disadvantaged than those who become fathers at a later age (Sigle-Rushton, 2005), incurring additional challenges to their experience and practice of fatherhood (Reynolds, 2009; Bourne and Ryan, 2012; Neale and Davies, 2015; Dermott, 2016; Brandon et al, 2017). In line with this, young fathers are at an increased risk of unemployment by the age of 30 (Public Health England, 2019), yet they are predominantly seen as ‘financial providers’ and little more when mentioned in UK policy (Gillies, 2005; Neale and Davies, 2015; Cundy, 2016; Neale, 2016). Moreover, while young parenthood has long been regarded a social policy issue, young fathers have been widely ignored within social research (Neale and Davies, 2015; Clayton, 2016), with little known about their circumstances, nor how this affects their involvement as fathers (Neale et al, 2015; Neale and Davies, 2015). Giving consideration to the ‘cycle of disadvantage’ hypothesis (Gillies, 2005), what we do know is that young fathers are more likely to have come from socioeconomically disadvantaged circumstances themselves (Assini-Meytin et al, 2019), as evidenced by UK national cohort data from as far back as the 1940s (Kiernan, 1992; Sigle-Rushton, 2005).

Neale et al’s (2015) UK-based Following Young Fathers study supports such findings, tracking the lives of 31 young fathers as a means of better understanding how and why young men enter early parenthood and how their ability to parent is shaped. While the study did not focus on disadvantaged fathers per se, the majority of the sample had experienced varying degrees of socioeconomic deprivation and were from low-income families, reporting family troubles as part of their upbringing and disengagement from school. Additionally, a sub-sample of young offender
fathers were from highly disadvantaged families, with poor social and family support systems (Ladlow and Neale, 2016). Likewise, a smaller sample of young fathers from Cater and Coleman’s (2006) UK-based study were found to have all had problems in school, while most had grown up without a stable father figure – the latter increasing the likelihood of becoming an absent father in adulthood when factoring in socioeconomic deprivation (Pougnet et al, 2012). Similar associations between a background in care and difficulties engaging with fatherhood have also been shown (Tyrer et al, 2005; Rogers, 2011; Gypen et al, 2017).

Reflecting these disadvantages, a high proportion of young men who go on to father children at an early age experience financial difficulties. Disrupted educational and employment pathways, reduced welfare entitlements, and an insecure financial climate in the UK of course contribute towards this financial insecurity (Neale and Davies, 2015), but it is also worth considering the impact that unplanned pregnancy has on young fathers’ preparedness. Statistics show that the majority of teenage pregnancies are unplanned (ONS, 2019), with studies demonstrating that young fathers rarely anticipate early parenthood (Neale et al, 2015).

Henceforth, the pressures of economic disadvantage and poverty are thought to enhance psychological distress and parental conflict (Cheadle et al, 2010; Pote et al, 2019), perhaps in combination with limited familiarity with healthy relationships and family functioning throughout childhood, and a general lack of readiness. Conceivably, young parenthood is also strongly associated with lone parenthood (Public Health England, 2019; Neale et al, 2015; Cundy, 2016), which is important because the quality of the parental relationship post-separation is a core determinant of non-resident fathers’ involvement (Allen and Daly, 2007; Fagan and Barnett, 2003), with said relationships shown to be more fragmented in disadvantaged communities (Bourne and Ryan, 2012; Pote et al, 2019). It is also worth highlighting that ‘lone’ but ‘involved’ fathers have a tendency to fall under the radar in both research and policy (Gatrell et al, 2015), relegating young, disadvantaged and non-resident fathers virtually invisible.

The evidence presented here thus far points towards an array of socioeconomic and relational challenges, which appear to hamper the experience and involvement of young fathers. The discussed literature therefore demonstrates that prior to even becoming fathers, a large proportion of young men who are brought up within financially disadvantaged and fragmented family environments tend to fall into a cycle which perpetuates similar circumstances; post pregnancy they then carry the additional weight of fatherhood. Generational disadvantages then continue as a consequence, where research suggests that ‘at risk’ children from families of a lower socioeconomic status benefit more from father involvement (Sarkadi et al, 2008). In light of this, Neale and Davies (2015) highlight that a deficiency in resources relative to age mean young fathers are often perceived as less capable and responsible, where the combination of socioeconomic, environmental and unstable family circumstances create very real obstacles to socially accepted trajectories of father involvement.

The findings presented in this article build on the work of Neale et al (2015) and others (Cater and Coleman, 2006; Bourne and Ryan, 2012; Cundy, 2016), whose research provides valuable knowledge concerning young, predominantly disadvantaged, fathers. However, these studies do not directly examine how and why disadvantage impedes father involvement via the interconnected socioeconomic, familial and
relational systems; this is an area where there is currently limited evidence to develop interventions and policies to support young, disadvantaged fathers. This neglected area of fatherhood research requires more attention, and the study reported on in this article is actually part of a wider research project exploring father involvement within disadvantaged communities through the perspectives of fathers, mothers and family professionals. This article explores the experiences of young, disadvantaged fathers themselves, as a means of better understanding how and why their involvement might be affected within a socioeconomically disadvantaged environment, and how they can be better understood and supported in the future.

Methods

Recruitment and sample

This article is based on the interviews of nine, biological, young fathers. The sample included both resident and non-resident fathers, living in the most deprived areas of Luton, a town in the south of the UK with higher levels of disadvantage than the national average (Public Health England, 2019). Initially, recruitment proved to be challenging on account of the limited attendance of young fathers at children's centres. The fathers were eventually recruited through a local youth centre that offered a service specifically for young, disadvantaged parents. The support worker who had responsibility for supporting these young men was essential to the recruitment process, identifying appropriate participants based on their areas of residence in Luton. After it was established that they met the inclusion criteria, the fathers were given an information sheet and asked if they were willing to take part. Interviews were arranged by the support worker for those fathers who were interested, and were conducted at the youth centre by the first author. Relative to the issues with recruitment, there were initial reservations about how open the fathers would be to discussing their histories and experiences. However, in spite of any uncertainties, the young fathers interviewed for this study were intuitive, responsive and welcoming, even when they were honestly discussing incidences of domestic violence and inconsistent father involvement on their part, with the interviews lasting on average one hour.

The fathers’ ages ranged between 20 and 25 years. A third were on income support (n=3); nearly half had no educational qualifications (n=5), followed by GCSEs¹ (n=3), and a non-disclosure (n=1). Almost half were employed full time (n=4); followed by long-term unemployed (>27 weeks) (n=3); short-term unemployed (<27 weeks) (n=1); and part-time employed (n=1). A third were living rent free (which they described as ‘sofa surfing’) (n=3); a further third were privately renting (n=3); followed by renting from a family member (n=2); and living in council-provided accommodation (n=1). Just under half were not living with their child (n=4); one had only recently begun living with their child as an emergency measure (n=1); and the rest were resident fathers (n=4). Just over half were not in a relationship and living apart from the mother (n=5); one father was not in a relationship but had recently begun living with the mother through an emergency situation (n=1); one father was in a relationship but not living with the mother (n=1); and the remainder were in a relationship and living with the mother (n=2). A small number had children with more than one mother (n=2). Finally, just over half were White British (n=5), followed by Mixed White and Black (n=2), Asian (n=1) and Other as classified by
themselves (n=1). Ethical approval was granted by the Institute for Health Research Ethics Committee at the University of Bedfordshire.

**Analysis**

It was imperative that the experiences and views of the fathers in this study were reported as accurately and thoughtfully as possible. For this reason, reflexive thematic analysis was employed. A method used by researchers who aim to ‘give voices’ to socially marginalised groups (Braun et al, 2017). This method of analysis also requires transparency about the researcher’s role as listener and interpreter (Binder et al, 2012); this required the first author to spend time reflecting on her own experience of fathering, as well as her social position as an academic researcher relative to the vulnerable and disadvantaged sample. Consequently, it is acknowledged that the first author’s viewpoint and interpretation may have been shaped by: (1) her experience of having an actively involved father in childhood, and not yet being a parent herself in adulthood; and 2) her empirical understanding of the topic based on the literature. Regarding these reflections, her ability to identify and explore patterns within the data came from a theoretical, and somewhat lived, understanding of what an ‘involved’ father is, and how this is shaped in an ecological sense. As such, although it is believed that she did not have a consciously driven, biased perspective on the subject, it is recognised that she approached the topic from a completely different position from that of the participants, being an ‘outsider’ who could not truly appreciate the lived realities of being a young and disadvantaged father.

Furthermore, before the coding started, a meeting between the first and second author took place in which selected transcripts were reviewed, discussed and coded separately for comparison. While this coding exercise is not necessary for a reflexive approach, in which researcher judgement drives the coding (Braun et al, 2017), it aided the first author when coding the remaining interviews. Codes were labelled based on the first author’s interpretation of what they appeared to show, as opposed to a fixed ‘coding framework’. For each interview the codes were organised into overarching concepts/code categories, which were subsequently arranged into themes. A key theme was defined based on two main considerations: (1) presentation and prevalence across all interviews; and (2) relevance to the study aim in its capacity to provide novel or interesting insights. In this sense, the three key themes reported in this article provide important acumen that enhance our knowledge of the challenges faced by young fathers living in socially disadvantaged communities. Pseudonyms have been used when describing fathers’ circumstances and gender-neutral names were chosen as aliases for any children mentioned.

**Results**

**Difficult and fragmented family backgrounds**

The accounts given by the fathers of their own childhoods demonstrate the profound impact of their formative experiences in influencing their parenting styles and attitudes, as demonstrated in prior research (Storhaug and Sobo-Allen, 2018). Just over half of the sample grew up without an involved and present father figure, ranging from completely absent to emotionally distant fathers, who commonly left when
the participants were young children. Additionally, two of the fathers spent periods of time in care during childhood, and while some did have father figures who were present they nonetheless grew up in a volatile home environment, characterised by parental conflict and eventual separation. Consistent with the compensation hypothesis (Coltrane, 1996), narratives of ‘It’s motivated me to give my child everything I didn’t have,’ or ‘I want to be a better dad than mine was to me,’ were implied by most of the fathers, echoing Neale and Davies’ (2015) statement that the majority of young fathers want to be involved in their children’s lives despite their circumstances. Daniel, a single father of one, for example, grew up without a father and has been separated from the mother of his child since pregnancy, struggling for a significant period of time to gain any form of access to his child as a result of relationship disputes. Daniel’s desire for involvement appears to be grounded in his own childhood experience, which is evidenced in his motivation to overcome these relationship barriers (highlighted by previous authors as a key obstacle for young, low-income, non-resident fathers: Bourne and Ryan, 2012): “I had my father, then he kept disappearing, coming back, that’s probably why I was so, like, adamant to be a part of Alex’s life because I know what it’s like to only have one parent.”

Similar examples in the sample mirrored Daniel’s experience, where a difficult home life and/or absent father was a motivational force towards greater involvement. However, there were also examples of a discrepancy between the desire to be a ‘better father’ and father involvement in reality. There is evidence to suggest an intergenerational link between having an absent father in childhood and repeating the same pattern in adulthood; the prevalence is increased in socioeconomically deprived communities (Pougnet et al, 2012). Confirming this pattern, some of the fathers did acknowledge, to a greater or lesser degree, that they were not as involved as they could have been at various times. Moreover, the concept of ‘multi-partnered fertility’ also has associations with socioeconomic disadvantage and age (Carlson and Furstenberg, 2006; Manlove et al, 2008). Tom, a father of several children by several mothers, recounts his childhood experience: “My dad didn’t wanna know who I was, [eventually, I] ended up living with my dad until I put myself in care because I didn’t wanna live with them, so I was in care and then that’s how I met my first-baby mum.”

Tom’s experience demonstrates a multitude of disadvantages faced from an early age, of which there are a number of elements to consider. First, Tom’s father appeared to show little interest in getting to know him as a child, indicating that Tom did not have a present father figure while he was growing up. Second, when Tom eventually met his father and began living with him (for reasons undisclosed), he voluntarily put himself in care, implying that his father’s home environment was inadequate. Third, it was in local authority care that Tom met the mother of his first child, leading him to become a young father. Linked to the latter point, Tom’s experience with young parenthood is concurrent with an analysis linking adverse childhood experiences, early sexual initiation (that is, earlier than 16 years of age) and unintended teenage pregnancy (Ford et al, 2016). Taking this into account, Tom’s involvement as a father might have been shaped in a negative sense by poor role modelling, having an absent father during childhood (Pougnet et al, 2012), and spending time in care (Tyrer et al, 2005). However, where Tom recounts his doubts over whether he could cope with fatherhood, he reflects on his earlier ‘mistakes’, demonstrating a desire to be better than his own father was to him,
and a better father than he has been in the past, alluding to the fact that his current circumstances are also hindering his involvement:

‘I didn’t think I could cope but I did wanna have a kid, and to tell you the truth, I didn’t wanna be like my dad was to me – I’ve got a goal for once, I’m ready and sorted wise, I wanna be a better dad to all of my kids to make sure they are proud of me as their dad.’

It has also been suggested that men experiencing violence in childhood go on to repeat the same actions in adulthood via learnt behaviour and trauma pathways (Bevan and Higgins, 2002), where exposure is more likely to lead to externalised aggression and hostility for boys than girls (Holt et al, 2008). Conflict within the home was described by three of the interviewed fathers, including accounts of father-on-son violence and father-on-mother violence. One of these three fathers, Mark, discusses how this may affect his fathering practices. Looking to the future, Mark expresses his concern that, because of his own father’s methods of discipline, it may be harder for him to distinguish the line between appropriate discipline and physical abuse:

‘My dad used to smack my mum about, my dad obviously treated me a little bit on the harsh side, old Jamaican thing, and obviously at that age you can’t really process all that in your body, so that messed me up quite a lot – when Parker starts answering back and I have to tell Parker about different things then that’s gonna be difficult, there’s thin lines between abuse and discipline and I grew up knowing that.’

Mark’s experience of domestic violence also links with the following theme exploring unstable socioeconomic circumstances, where, as a result of this abuse, Mark’s family unit was negatively affected, directly contributing towards his disengagement from school and involvement with crime.

**Unstable socioeconomic circumstances**

The majority of the fathers alluded to difficult and unstable socioeconomic circumstances, confirming similar research on young fathers (Sigle-Rushton, 2005; Cater and Coleman, 2006; Bourne and Ryan, 2012; Neale et al, 2015; Clayton, 2016). It was Gillies (2005) who proposed that limited opportunities in childhood foster a ‘cycle of deprivation’, dissecting how childhood experiences feed into educational attainment and future employment prospects. Consistent with this postulation, five of the interviewed fathers mentioned obstacles to employment, including not having any educational qualifications and poor CVs. Mark, for example, endured his father’s violence and witnessed the negative impact it had on his mother, ultimately leaving him responsible for his younger sibling, thereby disrupting his own education:

‘Mum messed up now ’cause of what I just gone through [with his father], what she’s gone through, she can’t cope, she broke down, lock herself in her bedroom, depression, anxiety, the lot, they pill-ed her up so she couldn’t even cook dinner, had to look after my little brother, stopped going to school, all that kind of stuff, so I stayed selling drugs and I was very good at it, I was violent.’
Chris, a single father to two different mothers, described a similar pattern, implying that a hostile home environment – characterised by parental conflict – combined with a subsequent lack of attention to his education, led to youth offending. Chris explains how he has now ‘turned his life around’, a common sentiment among those fathers previously involved with crime, and consistent with similar studies looking at young fathers and youth offending (Cater and Coleman, 2006; Ladlow and Neale, 2016):

‘My upbringing wasn’t the best, my mum and dad used to fight when I was younger, I was immersed in drugs, I used to live in [a particularly disadvantaged borough] and if you know about that, that’s pretty deep, so I was kind of brought up that way and after I had a child my friend got killed and my other friend went to jail, all in the same week, I kind of changed my life, but up until then it was all hanging around with the wrong people, going out till late, doing the wrong things, 45 per cent attendance in high school.’

In terms of employment, four fathers were working full time, one was employed part time and four were unemployed. Cameron had been unemployed for the longest period at five years, where his background of living in care and limited education are likely to have affected his job prospects (Tyrer et al, 2005; Rogers, 2011). In fact, all the fathers interviewed had experienced sporadic and unstable employment histories, characterised by unskilled, part-time and agency-style work. Nevertheless, being able to provide was important to most of the fathers in this study, confirming traditional ‘breadwinning’ concepts of fathering presented in prior studies (Braun et al, 2011; Goldberg et al, 2013; Gatrell et al, 2015; Shirani, 2015).

Viewed as a means of facilitating opportunities and experiences for their children, as well as offering better childhoods than the ones they experienced themselves, this finding also adds weight to the compensation hypothesis (Coltrane, 1996). Being unable to work was frustrating for fathers who wanted to provide for their families but could not due to unemployment, as documented previously (Bourne and Ryan, 2012), with young fathers themselves viewing financial provision as synonymous with ‘good fathering’, even if it conflicted with their present realities (Shirani, 2015). Concurrently, Neale and Davies (2015) point out that the limited resources of young fathers mean they are often viewed as irresponsible and inadequate parents. Will, an unemployed father of two, for example, describes an internal conflict between what he wants for his children and what he is able to provide. Demonstrating the pressures of such societal expectations, he states:

‘I need the money, I want to take [my children] out, you know what I’m saying, show them the world man, can’t do that by sitting on my arse people go, like, I’m a dad, I should be out there working but like if you can’t get there then what can you do.’

Similarly, Max, an unemployed father of three who has not worked since becoming a parent, described the negative impact that financial worries have had on his mental health, preventing him from seeking work. Moreover, Max’s depression has affected his involvement as a father, which intensifies a sense of helplessness:
‘I got really depressed because [I] kept losing the money, I was struggling, and since then I’ve been on sick, I’m on ESA [Employment and Support Allowance] for severe depression and anxiety and stuff like that, I’m asleep now a lot during the day, obviously I’m missing out a lot on what the kids are doing, I’m missing out on taking them to school or nursery, seeing what they’re doing, so it’s really affecting me a lot.’

Employment opportunities and household income also directly affect living circumstances, with the situations of the fathers ranging from privately renting, ‘sofa surfing’/homelessness, living in council accommodation and living with family. Some of these situations reflect generally poorer standards of housing, demonstrating an inability to afford independent living. This is similar to the findings of Melrose’s (2011) Luton-based study on the effects of poverty, where the experience of financial strain was found to affect not only family living standards but also health. Regarding the impact of poverty on these fathers and the cyclical nature of disadvantage, Max also divulged that poor living conditions had had a negative impact on his family’s physical and mental health leading to the intervention of social services (inadvertently creating further issues for Max as a father): ‘My oldest kept going hospital because of mould and damp issues with breathing problems, so then they moved us into a two-bed house.’

Finally, only four of the nine fathers were living with their child(ren) permanently, further demonstrating circumstances that would inevitably affect the frequency with which they see their children, and highlighting the prevalence of relationship breakdown among younger parents (Public Health England, 2019). Reflecting a combination of parental separation and difficult living circumstances, Daniel had only recently begun living with his child due to his ex-partner being evicted from her family home, requiring him to take her in for the benefit of their child:

‘Angela has been kicked out the house, so she had nowhere to go and obviously she called me and I was obviously willing to help out, I didn’t want Jamie [child] on the street, so now she’s with us until social can find her a house.’

Complicated relationships with the mothers

The fathers’ family backgrounds and socioeconomic circumstances provide a foundation for understanding how their relationships with the mothers of their children may have been negatively affected by adverse living conditions and economic strain (Bourne and Ryan, 2012; Pote et al, 2019), the poor relations witnessed between their own parents (Bevan and Higgins, 2002), and a lack of appropriate role models during childhood (Pougnet et al, 2012). According to the Department for Education (DfE, 2015), lone parent status is considerably higher in disadvantaged families, and especially so for young parents (Public Health England, 2019). As shown in previous research demonstrating the central influence of the couple relationship on father involvement (Allen and Daly, 2007; Clapton, 2013), the relationships described by the interviewed fathers were greatly affected by an array of factors, including living circumstances. Half of the fathers in this study were
Louisa Donald et al

non-resident and all expressed feelings of animosity towards their ex-partners, with their relationships spanning from mild conflict to domestic violence. Incidentally, it was common among this sample for relationship problems to begin during the prenatal period – considered to be a highly stressful time characterised by rapid change (Department of Health, 2014) – and potentially exacerbated by the fact that seven of the pregnancies were unplanned.

Four of the fathers in this study described fleeting relationships, ending before the births of their children. Conversely, their experiences were quite different from those who remained in a relationship with the mother during this time. Dean, a single father who has had repeated contact with social services over child access, provides evidence of this, where he felt his strained relationship left him excluded throughout his ex-partner’s pregnancy. However, it is worth noting that Dean suffered with mental health issues and admits to physically assaulting the mother of his child during this period. It is therefore possible that this denial of access was due to Dean’s behaviour, rather than his ex-partner; this is consistent with Thomas and Holmes’ (2020) study, whereby higher levels of paternal depression were associated with increased perceptions and experiences of maternal gatekeeping, as the mother withdrew contact. Nonetheless, the fact that Dean believes his ex-partner used their child as a ‘weapon’ – presumably to hurt him; coupled with domestic violence, demonstrates the detrimental impact that poor parental relations can have on father involvement (Allen and Daly, 2007), and the power of the mother as gatekeeper (Pruett et al, 2007): “When she fell pregnant, she kind of used the baby on me like as a weapon, I had a restraining order so I couldn’t really see her [the mother].”

In contrast, for two of these four fathers whose relationships ended during pregnancy, separation caused them to be disinterested and disengaged when their involvement was wanted by the mothers. Incidentally, these two fathers, who both had difficult childhoods, also had children with more than one partner, which has been linked to lower socioeconomic status and disjointed family backgrounds (Manlove et al, 2008), and poorer relationship quality (Carlson and Furstenberg, 2006). One of these fathers, Chris, described how he was disengaged during the pregnancy of his first child; the result of tension between himself and his ex-partner due to her infidelity. Further complications ensued when he quickly started a new relationship, which resulted in another pregnancy, while his ex-partner was still pregnant. Feeling that they had ‘rushed into’ parenthood when describing his more recent relationship, Chris recounts that he had ‘doubts’ about it working long term: “We rushed it, we kind of went through our ups and downs during the pregnancy and it was unbalanced, so it just generally made me have doubts about the whole situation.”

Ultimately the relationship broke down as a result of domestic disputes, leaving Chris with limited access to the child from his second relationship. Consistent with this case, post-pregnancy, the fathers in our sample who were no longer in relationships with the mothers appeared to be on particularly bad terms with them, although almost all of those interviewed described having confrontational relationships to varying degrees. Additionally, on-and-off relationships, termed ‘relationship churning’ (Halpern-Meekin and Turney, 2017), were common. Will, for example, who had witnessed many arguments between his parents when he was growing up, recounted his experience of conflict in his own long-term, on-and-off relationship: “There’s been full-blown arguments and everything like that, like it’s just been heated, me and my baby mamma, it’s just complicated at times, been with her on and off.”
It appears the more that complications and conflicts were present, the more father involvement was curtailed, either through the mothers’ gatekeeping or the fathers’ own lack of engagement. Chris, for example, explained that the mother of his first child, with whom he ended the relationship during her pregnancy, dictates when he can and cannot see their child: “Jeanne [the mother] likes the control of having that ‘You can’t sleep with Robin [child] tonight, you’re not staying here tonight,’ she likes that, she likes telling me what I can do with our child.”

Having multi-partnered children also created relationship issues and additional barriers for Tom and the child he knew least, consistent with the findings of authors such as Carlson and Furstenberg (2006). Tom’s account directly demonstrates how multi-partnered fertility can obstruct a father’s involvement, making their ability to parent that much more complicated:

‘When I was with my youngest child’s mum there was a problem every time I went to see Reece [middle child] – I shouldn’t let anybody get in the way with my relationship with my child, I’d tell her “Look, I wanna see Reece,” the one I haven’t seen, and I’d talk to her and we’d try and sort something out, but every time it happened my youngest child’s mum would always think that we [ex-partner and mother to Reece] was having sex and this and that behind her [back], so she’d always put me off seeing my child.’

In three cases, poor parental relations had led to domestic incidents, resulting in the involvement of social services. One of these fathers had experienced domestic violence in his own childhood, further suggesting intergenerational links (Bevan and Higgins, 2002; Rubenstein and Stover, 2016). Another of these fathers, Ashton, described his outlook: if a father has a ‘good partner’ who is supportive, understanding and cooperative, his experience as a father will be more rewarding; if a father has a ‘bad partner’ who is unsupportive, difficult and uncooperative, his experience will be more challenging: “A good partner, there’s nothing challenging about it [fatherhood], if there’s a bad partner you’ve a lot of challenges.”

Discussion

Opposing the view put forward in the opening quote by David Davies, our study establishes a variety of unique and varying obstacles that hinder young and disadvantaged fathers’ parental involvement, leading to the negative stereotypes described. Gendered parenting roles, rooted in historical and societal ideologies of what it means to be fathers and mothers (Doucet, 2006; Miller, 2011), have already left fathers considerably undervalued and unsupported when compared to mothers (Neale and Davies, 2015). This leaves marginalised fathers increasingly sidelined in socioeconomically deprived communities, as they struggle against negative social stereotypes perpetuated by economic and familial barriers, for which they receive little to no support (Neale and Davies, 2015). In light of this circumstance, while Lamb and Lewis (2007) regard motivation as a key driver of father involvement (Clapton, 2013), in this study we see that it is arguably harder to be motivated and to have sufficient involvement, even when motivated, if a young father is living apart from his child, working through a fraught relationship with the mother of his child, and/or constrained by a range of socioeconomic and familial circumstances linked to the unpreparedness of an unintended pregnancy.
The findings demonstrate how the fathers had been affected by their formative childhood experiences, confirming previous research concerning young fathers’ socioeconomic and family backgrounds (Kiernan, 1992; Sigle-Rushton, 2005; Cater and Coleman, 2006; Neale and Davies, 2015; Ladlow and Neale, 2016; Cundy, 2016). On the one hand, a number of the fathers in this study grew up with an absent father, and viewed this as a motivating factor in taking a different approach by being an active parent, in support of the compensation hypothesis (Coltrane, 1996). On the other hand, this desire to compensate for one’s own childhood and experience of being parented was not always manifested, with some fathers having sporadic, inconsistent and minimal roles in their children’s lives at various points, demonstrating the impact of generational effects (Pleck, 1997; Pougnet et al, 2012). Furthermore, two of the young men with absent fathers were from a care background; one was long-term unemployed, facing difficult transitions to adulthood (Rogers, 2011), and the other struggled to see his children, as well as having an unstable educational and employment history (Gypen et al, 2017).

The findings also suggest that a challenging childhood propagates a ‘cycle of disadvantage’ (Gillies, 2005), with those who viewed themselves as involved fathers despite their difficult backgrounds continuing to be socioeconomically disadvantaged due to limited educational and employment opportunities. The participants were recruited from areas of high deprivation, and a service that had been designed specifically for young, underprivileged men, in which the high rates of unemployment, poor educational attainment and unstable living circumstances were consistent with prior research on young fathers (Sigle-Rushton, 2005; Cater and Coleman, 2006; Neale et al, 2015; Cundy, 2016). The second theme is therefore intrinsically linked to the first, which explored the fathers’ unstable backgrounds. This demonstrates how limited socioeconomic resources can affect young fathers in a multitude of ways, further tying in with the third theme which looks at the foundations upon which they have built their relationships with the mothers of their children. All of this of course provides further support for Neale and Davies’ (2015) argument that an amalgamation of socioeconomic, environmental and family barriers impedes the involvement of young fathers, in addition to shaping societal impressions of them. Unsurprisingly, unemployment and financial issues were a source of much frustration for these fathers, where being the provider was seen as fundamental to the role of ‘father’ regardless of income. This finding reflects the ‘good father’ construct, which has been shaped largely by historical and societal ideals centred on the provider father (Braun et al, 2011; Miller, 2011; Goldberg et al, 2013). This is deemed to be a limited view of fathering by various researchers (Pleck, 2007; Sarkadi et al, 2008; Eraranta and Moisander, 2011).

Morgan (2002) argues that father involvement can only be understood in the context of other relationships. As evidenced in this article, the formative relationships experienced in childhood are vital to understanding father involvement, motivation and understanding. As young men, the quality of the relationship fathers have with the mothers of their children then further determines the degree and quality of their involvement (Allen and Daly, 2007; Clayton, 2016; Tang et al, 2016). Consistent with prior research reporting a link between father residency, age, income and education (Castillo et al, 2011; Towe-Goodman et al, 2014; DfE, 2015), only three of the young fathers interviewed were permanently living with the mothers and children, and only four of nine were in relationships with the mothers. As such, strained relationships...
and complications were common, exacerbated by environmental stressors (Pote et al., 2019). Moreover, these strained relationships affected the fathers’ involvement during pregnancy and thereafter, which was also found in Neale et al.’s (2015) study.

In consideration of the aforementioned, this study illuminates our understanding of the pathways which lead to the onset, maintenance and experience of young and disadvantaged fatherhood, contributing insight into how the various subsystems – made up of geographic, cultural, socioeconomic and familial components – outlined in (Bronfenbrenner’s 1986) ecological theory work in ‘reality’ to mould such trajectories. This study therefore increases our comprehension of how an accumulation of economic, familial and relational adversities snowball to preserve and continue the multitude of disadvantages which affect father involvement, from a lived, as well as theoretical, perspective.

Adding to this in a practical sense, this article provides both timely and necessary knowledge that can be utilised by researchers and professionals arguing for increased, targeted interventions and service support. Continuing and expanding on elements of the Following Young Fathers study (Neale et al., 2015), which explored the young father’s journey in ‘real time’, this article highlights the need for a retrospective ecological outlook, which considers how a young father is affected by a variety of interwoven systems shaped by upbringings rooted in disadvantage. This includes relationship-building work, where the precarious and volatile situations described by the fathers in this article highlight a need for relationship counselling that considers the relationship within an ecological context, as shaped by the fathers’ earliest experiences of relationships, the strains of socioeconomic disadvantage, and the unpreparedness that an unintended pregnancy brings. This also entails professionals working in family and healthcare sectors applying a more nuanced approach, based on the specific struggles these young men endure.

It is important that we continue our efforts to represent young fathers’ voices through studies such as this, despite the well-known challenges associated with their recruitment and retainment in both research and service uptake (Page et al., 2008). Though ‘hard to reach’, the insight provided by the fathers in this study was invaluable, thought provoking and worthwhile, yet their experiences would not have been heard without the support of the young fathers’ support worker at the local youth centre from which the participants were recruited. It is therefore recommended that researchers go through small, community-based organisations that support young – and commonly disadvantaged – men, and parents specifically, for future-related studies.

Nonetheless, self-selection is of course a limitation of qualitative studies, and may be a particular issue here due to the sensitive subject matter. Despite the various obstacles explored in the three themes, the young fathers demonstrated a strong desire for involvement, even those who had been inconsistent in the past, had children by multiple mothers, or had experienced family difficulties. The participants who agreed to be interviewed were likely to be those with more positive views of fatherhood and keen to give favourable accounts of themselves. Additionally, the young men interviewed were willing to take part despite their difficult circumstances, perhaps due in part to having the support of the youth centre from which they were recruited. Alternatively, there will be many young fathers in similar, if not worse, circumstances who have no support, despite their multiple needs (Mniszak et al., 2020). In line with this, Page et al (2008) found that the greatest barrier professionals faced when trying to engage young fathers was their identification, where the high volume of
parental separation meant fathers were either unwilling to engage in childcare duties or prevented from doing so by ex-partners.

To conclude, while they are defined by their vulnerability, the accounts of the young fathers in this study demonstrate an awareness of, and desire to conform to, societal expectations of paternal involvement. Concomitantly, in what is an under-researched yet important area of enquiry, the in-depth, qualitative insights presented in this article enlighten us of the personal challenges faced by young, disadvantaged fathers, and the subsequent sensitivity and complexities which ought to be considered in future research and practice. This study is not, as it could be interpreted, justifying a multitude of reasons for the behaviour of young, ‘feckless’ fathers.

**Note**

1 GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education) are exams taken in the UK at 15 to 16 years of age.

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**Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

**References**


