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Unraveling the threads of vulnerability and resilience: Young men's journey through unintended fatherhood

Justine van de Beek¹, Violet Petit-Steeghs¹, Femke Hilverda¹, & Anna Petra Nieboer¹

¹Erasmus School of Health Policy and Management

Address correspondence to: Justine van de Beek, Erasmus School of Health Policy and Management, Socio-Medical Sciences, Burgemeester Oudlaan 50, 3062 PA Rotterdam (Netherlands). Email: vandebeek@eshpm.eur.nl

Abstract

Objective: This study investigates the interplay between vulnerability and resilience in young men who unexpectedly become fathers.

Background: While previous research has primarily focused on the vulnerable circumstances limiting young fathers' childcare involvement, recent studies indicate resilient adaptation to their new role. This study is the first to analyze both vulnerability and resilience as interconnected concepts in young fathers' lives.

Method: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 young, Dutch fathers. Transcripts were thematically analyzed to reveal forms of interrelatedness between vulnerability and resilience in their lives.

Results: Analysis revealed that young fathers grappled with aggravated vulnerability due to the adversity of unintended fatherhood. They coped with these vulnerable circumstances by cultivating a resilient attitude. This attitude, however, also led to limited emotional processing and disengagement with support. Their resilient attitude thus, paradoxically, risked perpetuating existing vulnerabilities.

Conclusion: This study highlights the interplay between resilience and vulnerability in young, unintentional fathers, underscoring the need for interventions assisting with the assemblage of support while recognizing and praising resilient attitudes.

Key words: fatherhood, young parenthood, unplanned pregnancy, adversity



1. Introduction

Young parenthood is linked to various disadvantageous outcomes, such as mental health problems for parents and pre-term delivery and low birth weight for children (Chen et al., 2007; Paranjothy et al., 2009). These disadvantageous outcomes following from young parenthood are likely associated with young parents' often-vulnerable backgrounds; as more young than older parents have low socioeconomic status and incomes, are unemployed, and live in social housing (Moffit & E-Risk Study Team, 2002). They also have less family stability, more commonly have problematic relationships with their parents and more often mental health disorders (Moffit & E-Risk Study Team, 2002). Likely linked to these problems, young parents are more likely to exhibit delinquent behavior and substance abuse (Kiselica & Kiselica, 2014).

Several studies indicate that young parenthood further heightens pre-existing socio-economic vulnerabilities (Berrington et al., 2005; Fletcher & Wolfe, 2012). These vulnerabilities put pressure on young parents' relationships and, as a consequence, fathers' childcare involvement (Kiselica & Kiselica, 2014). Younger fathers more often than older fathers live apart from their children, further complicating their involvement (Berrington et al., 2005; Lemay et al., 2010). Moreover, young men often become fathers as a result of an unintended pregnancy (Kagesten et al., 2015). Unintended pregnancy is defined as a pregnancy that is unwanted or mistimed (Campbell & Mosher, 2001). (Long-term) preparation in the case of unintended pregnancy likely lacks, and the news may be especially unwelcome and stressful to fathers (Reich & Brindis, 2006) as they ultimately do not decide on pregnancy termination or continuation. As a result, prejudicial views strongly suggest that young fathers are absent and do not take responsibility (Cammatt, 2014; Duncan, 2007).

A common focus in the scientific literature on young and unintended parenthood is (the prevention of) risks such as low paternal involvement (Brand et al., 2014; Breheny & Stephens, 2010). Findings suggest that paternal involvement in general contributes to overcoming the challenges that young families face. Shared parenting is associated with relationship happiness, parental competence, and closeness to children (Lamb, 2010), increasing parents' and children's well-being (Cabrera & Tamis-LeMonda, 2013; Keizer et al., 2020; Lamb, 2010; Marsiglio & Roy, 2012). As a result, paternal involvement positively influences a range of outcomes for children, such as birth weight (Alio et al., 2011) and the capacity for empathy, self-control, self-esteem, social maturity, life skills, and academic and occupational achievement later in life (Lamb, 2010).

To stimulate parental involvement, it is suggested that young fathers must be assisted in their new roles. Yet, various studies have shown that birth and young childcare professionals rarely involve fathers (Wells, 2016; Widarsson et al., 2015; Xue et al., 2018). In addition, masculinity-related values and experiences of vulnerability-related stigma may prevent young fathers from seeking professional support (Mnieszak et al., 2020). At the same time, young fathers show resilience by expressing their motivation to be involved and viewing their new role as a meaningful opportunity to improve their lives (Deslauriers & Kiselica, 2022; Gesell & Van Dijk, 2010; Lau Clayton, 2015; Lemay et al., 2010; Wilkes et al., 2012). Such expression of resilience in adapting to fatherhood can, however, also enhance their vulnerable circumstances, since it may mask their need for support. Existing literature studies often either focus on vulnerability or resilience in the case of young (unintended) fatherhood (e.g., Devault et al., 2008; Ricks, 2016).

Therefore, this qualitative study investigated the following research question: "*How do vulnerability and resilience interrelate in young men's unintended transition into fatherhood?*" The exploration of the interrelatedness between young father's vulnerability and resilience is essential, as important others may view young fathers as either vulnerable or resilient, omitting important parts of their realities. Such oversimplification likely leads to the offering of unsuitable support to young fathers, such as health professionals' overprotectiveness or inattention due to the belief that these fathers can cope by themselves.

The interrelation between vulnerability and resilience will be studied among Dutch young men who unintentionally became fathers. In 2023, fathers under the age of 25 made up 4% of all Dutch men fathering newborn children, a steady yearly percentage in recent years (CBS, 2024). Yet, the actual percentage of young fathers is likely higher as they are often not officially registered (Sniekers et al., 2023). Professional services aimed at these fathers are almost non-existent, though the range of services aimed at (young) mothers is quite extensive (Sniekers et al., 2023). Even though gaining insight into young fathers' needs and consequently adequately supporting them is highly likely to benefit both young parents and their offspring, little attention is given to this group in research and professional practice. To the best of our

knowledge, there exists only one other study on young fathers in the Netherlands, which primarily focused on attitudes and behaviors regarding contraception and abortion (Gesell & Van Dijk, 2010).

2. Theoretical approach

Vulnerability and resilience are distinct but related perspectives used to understand actors' reactions to (often unforeseen) adversity (Miller et al., 2010). Adversity can be defined as an event or circumstance that threatens development or well-being (Gavidia-Payne et al., 2015). The (unintended) transition into fatherhood among young men can be considered an adversity since young men often experience distress upon hearing the news of the pregnancy (Deslauriers & Kiselica, 2022). The concept of vulnerability tends to focus on problems and risks encountered due to adversity (Arora et al., 2015), whereas that of resilience focuses on strengths and opportunities in the context of adverse events (Ricks, 2016). Often referred to as a condition, vulnerability can imply a lack of agency, weakness, and inability to cope (Prowse, 2003). Resilience can be seen as a critical response to vulnerability, responding to the risk of vulnerability-based approaches to portray actors as passive victims (Miller et al., 2010). A focus on resilience defined narrowly as an individual trait can, on the other hand, lead to the overemphasis of actors' responsibility, known as "responsibilization" (Juhila & Raitakari, 2016), and the blaming of individuals in vulnerable circumstances for their lack of adaptation (Collins, 2010).

In this study, in which young fathers were the core unit of analysis, the concepts of vulnerability and resilience were addressed on an individual level. Vulnerability in individuals can be seen as an increased likelihood of experiencing adversity and its potential negative effects, and as an effect or symptom of adversity (Prowse, 2003). This conceptualization points to mutual reinforcement between adversity and vulnerability; individuals who experience adversity may become more vulnerable to negative effects when facing new adversities (Prowse, 2003). In the case of young fathers, vulnerability for example emerges from the poorer socio-economic backgrounds of men who have an increased likelihood of becoming a father at a young age. Furthermore, the event of becoming a father at a young age increases the odds of experiencing further socio-economic disadvantage, such as a higher likelihood of low educational qualifications, low earnings and unemployment (Berrington et al., 2005; Fletcher & Wolfe, 2012).

In contrast to the concept of vulnerability, the concept of individual resilience refers to long-term adaptation to adversity (Miller et al., 2010). Individual resilience can be interpreted as a process or an outcome (Miller-Graff, 2022). A resilient process is referred to as generative resilience, meaning recovery or the management of the resources needed to facilitate positive adaptation (Miller-Graff, 2022). Concrete examples of generative resilience are not illuminated in literature but could for instance entail the successful assemblage of different forms of support by young men to ease the (unintended) transition into fatherhood. Resilient outcomes are referred to as manifested resilience, meaning observable success in the long-term adaptation to adversity (Miller-Graff, 2022). Manifested resilience in the case of young men who unintentionally become fathers could for example consist of academic achievement (Luthar et al., 2000). The focus in this study was on generative resilience, allowing for a more dynamic process interpretation of resilience and bypassing the issue of deciding what exactly successful outcomes are for young fathers. Individuals' generative resilience has two main components: assets and actions (Miller-Graff, 2022). Assets are resources that enable individuals to experience resilience in adversity, such as material resources and social support and cohesion (Collins, 2010; Miller-Graff, 2022). The theoretical inclusion of assets is a commonality between the perspectives of vulnerability and resilience, as both acknowledge the importance of resources when dealing with adversity. In the generative resilience model, actions refer to individual behaviors that redress the effects of adversity (Miller-Graff, 2022). This model includes both assets and actions, which grants individuals more agency while not disallowing their circumstances. However, interpretations of resilient actions differ among authors: Miller-Graff (2022) refers to coping, appraisal, meaning making, and active participation, whereas Henley (2010) refers to the ability to access external resources such as new knowledge and support from family, peers, and colleagues. Moreover, Henley (2010) distinguishes between resilient actions and attitudes, with the latter referring to an individual's internal skills, attitudes, values, and perceptions (e.g., a hopeful, positive, and future-based orientation; confidence; independence; motivation; and self-appraisal). He argues that resilient attitudes and actions together form a person's total resilience competency, "the total skills and resources that they have developed and learned to access, in order to effectively cope and/or adapt in response to severely adverse events" (Henley, 2010, p.

303). In the case of young fathers, some signs of resilient actions, like meaning making, or attitudes, such as motivation were found in previous studies (Deslauriers & Kiselica, 2022; Gesell & Van Dijk, 2010; Lau Clayton, 2015; Lemay et al., 2010; Wilkes et al., 2012). However, in the theoretical literature on individual resilience (Henley, 2010; Miller-Graff, 2022) the interrelation between resilient attitudes, actions, and assets in order for an individual to experience generative resilience remains unclear.

Viewing young father's experiences through the lens of vulnerability and resilience allows us to broadly explore fathers' adaptation to their transition into unintended fatherhood. This approach is additional to other fatherhood research that often employs a gender and specifically masculinities perspective (Beglaubter, 2021; Brandth & Kvande, 2018; Eerola & Mykkänen, 2015). Although gender attitudes are one of the factors that predict the extent and manner of paternal involvement in the care for their child(ren) (Keizer, 2015), this approach limits attention to other relevant attitudes, actions, and resources that shape the father role of young men.

3. Methods

To obtain insights into how vulnerability and resilience interrelate in young father's experiences, qualitative research was used. A qualitative approach is valuable in capturing nuances in people's experiences and amplifying the voices of marginalized people (Collins, 2010).

3.1 Participants

Men were recruited who live in the Netherlands, were aged between 16–25 years and had experienced unintended fatherhood in the past 1.5 years to avoid recall bias (Hassan, 2005). Several recruitment strategies were used. Midwifery practices, soccer clubs, community centers, and youth work organizations in large Dutch cities and online influencers were contacted to help in disseminating our call for young fathers via (online) posters. Most participants were recruited through the Instagram page of a well-known young Dutch male television presenter, who posted our call twice. Other participants were recruited through snowball sampling via young mothers who were contacted about the broader research project via mother-and-child homes. We focused on recruiting young men with low educational levels, given the association of this characteristic with unintended pregnancies in women (Graaf et al., 2017) but also included highly educated young fathers to ensure diversity in the participants' backgrounds.

In total, 14 men aged between 17 and 26 years participated in this study. We aimed for participants with a maximum age of 25 but considering the challenging recruitment of this group, one father who had recently turned 26 before the interview was also included. The average age of participants at the time of the interview was 22 years. All fathers were first-time parents. The highest educational diploma that a majority (N=11) of the participants obtained was in (pre)vocational secondary education. Eleven participants were born in the Netherlands as were both their parents; the other 3 participants were of Surinamese descent. Furthermore, the majority of participants were in a romantic relationship with the mother of the child at the time of the interview (N=11), though for one of these participants his relationship status was ambiguous considering relational conflict and instability. Two of the other participants were never in a romantic relationship with the mother of their child, whereas one participant at the time of the interview had split up with the mother of his child.

3.2 Data collection

Insights into the experiences of young fathers were obtained through semi-structured interviews, as this approach provides a general structure of the interview ensuring the ability to compare between participants by the use of a guiding topic list, but also allows for flexibility to diverge from the topic in case topics of particular interest to participants emerge (Bryman, 2012). An interview guide structured by three chronological phases (pregnancy, childbirth, and fatherhood) was developed. For each phase, the fathers were asked about their experiences with their role as father and how they shaped their roles in their relationships with the children's mothers, significant others, and healthcare professionals. The interviewer focused on the challenges the fathers may have experienced and how they dealt with those experiences.

The interviews lasted 80 minutes on average and were conducted in Dutch and took place at locations preferred by the interviewees: their homes or nearby cafés ($n = 11$), online via Zoom ($n = 2$), and by telephone ($n = 1$). We were consciously flexible with the way in which the interviews were conducted, as participants often had challenging timetables due to the juggling of school, work, hobbies, and family life. The interview conducted by telephone, for instance, took place late in the evening. Non-face-to-face interviewing has been noted as an opportunity to obtain data from hard-to-reach groups such as young fathers, who would otherwise be difficult to access in person (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). Alternative ways of interviewing like online or by phone offered participants easy and accessible ways to partake in the research. No noteworthy differences were observed, for example in interview duration or participant openness, on the basis of interviewing method. All of the interviews took place from November 2021 till January 2022. They were audio recorded with participants' permission.

The interviewer sought to create a warm and safe environment by starting with an informal conversation, asking broad questions about the participants' day-to-day life. The participants could digress from the interview topics and seemed pleased to be able to share their stories. They often open-heartedly shared sensitive information, e.g., about severe conflict with the mothers of their children, or their mental illness or substance abuse. After the interview, each participant received a 30-euro gift card from a shop of their choice. Data collection was stopped when saturation was reached (Hennink et al., 2017) and thus no new themes in relation to vulnerability and resilience arose in the stories of the young fathers.

3.3 *Data analysis*

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were analyzed thematically. In line with Bryman's definition of thematic analysis (2012) relevant themes and subthemes in the form of repetition, metaphors, and analogies, similarities, and differences, were deduced from the coded segments. A combination of inductive and deductive coding was used to extract themes, as described by Braun & Clarke (2006). For deductive coding, codes were derived from the different elements of the concepts of vulnerability and resilience, complemented by elements of vulnerability and resilience described in previous empirical research on young fathers' experiences, such as financial worries or motivation. Additionally, inductive coding was performed by looking for other experiences of vulnerability and resilience not covered by the deductive codes, such as a felt emotional/social distance to others. For the coding process, the software program Atlas.ti (version 22.0.6.0) was used. Subsequently, themes regarding the interrelatedness between vulnerability and resilience in young fathers' lives were derived from the coded segments by using Windows Excel (version 2405) as a supporting tool. Both the coding process and the process of developing the themes were discussed repeatedly amongst the authors, ensuring inter-coder reliability (Bryman, 2012, p. 390).

3.4 *Ethical considerations*

Ethical approval was obtained from our faculty's (Erasmus School of Health Policy and Management) internal ethics commission (ETH2021-0110). By being flexible on when, where and how long the interviews should take place, the researchers took the potential vulnerable circumstances of the participants into consideration. Before the interviews, the participants were given written information about the aim of the study, the recording of the interviews, data handling, and their ability to withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason, as well as contact details for the researchers involved. The written information was presented in accessible language and by using symbols in text to accommodate different levels of language proficiency. The interviewer also verbally presented the main points of this information at the start of each interview. Written and verbal informed consent was then obtained. The consent forms, audio recordings and transcripts of the interviews were stored confidentially and were accessible only to the authors. Throughout the interviews, the researchers tried to communicate respectfully, refraining from showing normative standpoints, by posing open questions and summarizing respondents' answers in their own wordings. Appreciation for the time and effort of participants was shown by verbally thanking them, offering them refreshments during the interview at no expense and providing them with gift cards. We did not expect or encounter any potential risk or harm to participants. In contrast, we believe participants

experienced the interviews as valuable, as they expressed appreciation for telling their stories. Multiple participants indicated their social and professional networks showed limited attention to their experiences.

4. Results

The young fathers' stories about their unintended fatherhood showed various instances of vulnerability and resilience and how these are related. In relation to vulnerability, the interviewees described elements that demonstrated their vulnerable backgrounds. This vulnerability was aggravated due to the adversity of unintended pregnancy, causing distress in several forms. To manage this distress, the young fathers simultaneously cultivated a resilient attitude that facilitated coping. However, it also risked obstructing emotional processing and the uptake of the important asset of social support. These findings are discussed in detail below and supported by pseudonymized quotations.

4.1 *The adversity of unintended fatherhood*

The young fathers usually described their initial responses when hearing about the pregnancies using terms such as "panic," "powerlessness," and "shock"; several expressed an initial preference for abortion. Tom (24 years old) described his discovery of the pregnancy as following: "I called her up and asked her, 'Are you pregnant?' Silence. She said, 'Yes.' And then I...I had a severe panic attack. [...] Totally stressed, panicked. Not thinking straight." This common response to the news of pregnancy shows that most of these young fathers, at least in the beginning, experienced their unintended fatherhood as an adverse event that threatened their sense of stability. This sense of stability was often already fragile before the news of pregnancy, as most of the interviewees talked about various pre-existing mental health issues. Several interviewees indicated that they had mental health disorders such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), mood disorders, and coped with substance abuse before fatherhood. The adversity of unintended fatherhood often add even more pressure on young fathers' mental health by creating distress. Several types of distress as a consequence of unintended fatherhood emerged in conversations with young fathers, including insecurity, practical challenges, relational issues, and a lack of suitable support. This heightened vulnerability following the adversity of unintended fatherhood due to young men's often pre-existing vulnerable circumstances, points to the conceptualization of vulnerability in individuals as a mutual reinforcement between adversity and vulnerability.

4.2 *Distress due to insecurity*

Several of the young fathers interviewed described distress due to insecurity about their parenting skills. They often lacked role models because their fathers were either absent in their lives or they felt a limited connection to them. This was the most explicit for Raimundo (21 years old), who described he was angry at his father for committing suicide. In Gregory's (24 years old) case, his father was hardly involved in his upbringing: "Fatherhood was really something I didn't want at all, I was so scared, oh my god. [...] I didn't grow up with my own father, I'm in contact with him but not really...for me it was just something scary. I've never been able to experience up close what it is like [to be a dad]." For Tom (24 years old), distress during and after pregnancy was largely caused by his problematic relationship with his mother. He had not been in contact with her since he was 12 years old, citing her abusive behavior towards him in his youth that even led to child youth services being involved. He said: "I certainly had a lot of fear beforehand, like, shit I might turn into my mother. [...] There is always a voice in the back of your head that is afraid you will make the same mistakes. Still, even. Actually, weekly, I think shit, I want to do things better than she did."

These remarks by Raimundo, Gregory and Tom exemplify the reinforcing nature of adversity and vulnerability in young father's lives. The often-occurring adversity of an absent or even abusive parental figure early in life created a sense of vulnerability after experiencing the adversity of unintended fatherhood.

4.3 *Distress due to practical challenges*

Several interviewees also experienced distress due to practical challenges. Concerns about finances and housing were often at the forefront of young fathers' minds, indicating the sense of responsibility they felt in this regard. Koen (21 years old) for instance said, about tasks such as preparing the nursery and purchasing children's clothes: "We pretty much lived the entire pregnancy in stress, about how are we going to get this fixed, how are we going to get that fixed..." Along the same line, Jordi (18 years old) said: "It's always been my biggest concern, the finances, and I've always been occupied with it." Jordi's solution was "giving up his holidays" by working, as his full-time internship as part of his vocational secondary training left little time for other paid work. He summarized: "You're busy a lot. You're still in the process of becoming an adult, and you have to take care of a child, there's school, and you have to consider finances..."

Several of the young fathers also struggled with living with their parents (in law) or sometimes apart from their children's mothers. For instance, Siebe (24 years old), who still lived with his parents while his girlfriend lived with their child in a very small space, said, "Her house is too small [...] You just have to grab a sweater, or a coat and it already feels cluttered." This couple was purposely living apart, as the mother's social welfare benefit would be reduced by the government if they would live together. Riccardo (22 years old), who lived at his mother's place with his sister, the mother of his child, and his child, indicated: "The three of us shared a room. It was hard. Especially in the beginning, due to waking up every three hours. [...] You obviously want your own space, and you especially want that for the little one, her own room and a quiet place." Distress in young fathers thus also often arose from dormant worries about finances and housing, and small housing caused distress as a consequence of fast cluttering and a lack of privacy. Additionally, living in small spaces together or apart can also put pressure on young parents' relationships. If parents lived apart it usually meant the child resided with the mother, who would consequentially take up the lion's share of childcare, possibly causing friction in the relationship.

4.4 *Distress due to relational issues*

Young father's preoccupation with work and housing could also put pressure on the relationship between young parents, as Dave's story exemplifies. His girlfriend felt he was not fully present during pregnancy, as he was mainly preoccupied with working and saving money. He, however, viewed this as important preparation, especially as he felt his father was not financially responsible enough throughout his life. He said: "I wanted to ensure that we could afford it all. I really focused on that in the beginning. [...] That caused some tensions in the beginning. [name girlfriend] wanted to get more stuff. I let her worry a bit more about the child itself. [...] Maybe that was sort of a mechanism for me to not have to think about that [the child itself] yet."

Though in Dave's case these different expectations of the father role were eventually openly discussed and, in that way, resolved, some interviewees experienced more severe conflict in their relationships due to the mothers' disapproval of their behavior. This disapproval likely struck a nerve, as several of the young fathers were already struggling with insecurity. Anthony (22 years old), for example, described having a stressful romantic relationship with the mother of his child, characterized by conflict that already arose during pregnancy: "And then you get to the point where she thought I was doing a lot wrong, I had to do it differently. [...] I didn't help her, I didn't feel compassion for her, she said. [...] I'm really a sensitive guy, so I can't stand it when you complain like that. Why not just talk about it calmly instead of complaining, instead of saying that I won't be any use to my kids, I don't have time for that, you know what I mean?" This judgment led the mother of his child to regularly limit Anthony's involvement, something Gijs (24 years old) also experienced. The unintended pregnancy in his case arose from casual sexual encounters with the mother of his child and he was, to his great regret, hardly involved during the pregnancy. He described how this impacted his mental health: "I was just gaming and smoking weed. I did that every day. Just a bit of continuous numbing so I could get through the day. [...] [I felt] lifeless. No energy for anything, grumpy, irritable. Being really frustrated with people in traffic over very small things, when I don't get priority, calling people names, things like that. It's just your own unhappiness." The remarks made by Anthony and Gijs show how young fathers' conflict with their children's mothers, and particularly the mother's disapproval and gatekeeping of childcare involvement, aggravated their vulnerability by causing further distress.

4.5 *Distress due to a lack of (suitable) support*

Several interviewees also mentioned distress due to either a lack of support or unsatisfactory support from others. Young fathers sometimes discussed feelings of isolation in relation to (male) friends and peers. Many of their male friends were immersed in student life, going to school, partying, and having casual sexual relationships, and did not relate to fatherhood. These circumstances appeared to alienate several of the interviewees from their friends. Levi (24 years old) said: “I can’t really level with them [friends], that doesn’t help. [...] I don’t know if it’s due to COVID or having a child. [...] We’re the only young parents. [...] It’s hard to do stuff with friends. I’d like to have friends with children, but the difficult thing is most parents nowadays are like 40 years old.” Male friends’ understanding and ability to relate to their situations and be supportive was also limited. Tom (24 years old) said: “I wanted to talk about it, but nobody could give me advice because they didn’t experience it themselves. [...] I found that difficult sometimes. I couldn’t just, even when the little one arrived...I couldn’t just moan about it. These guys will just look at me like ‘I have no idea what you’re talking about.’”

Some of the young fathers also spoke about unsatisfactory support from family members, colleagues, and strangers with regard to childcare advice. This could best be described as unwanted interference. Lars, for instance, said: “And I, as a 22-year-old father, do not seem to be a capable father, so you get unsolicited opinions from everyone. ‘You shouldn’t do that, that is bad for you child’... I’ve heard so many things, if everything I’ve heard were bad, he [his son] would be long dead. [...] And that’s really something that I notice: because I’m younger, I seem inexperienced to other people, so they give their opinions, solicited or unsolicited.” Similarly, Stan (17 years old) said: “I was walking the pram around town and she [his daughter] was sleeping, she had a jacket on and a blanket over her, like, it was quite cold. [...] A lady comes toward me and says, ‘That’s not okay; she’s sweating all over,’ this and that. [...] She starts acting all mad at me, [saying] ‘You don’t take good care of your kid,’ this and that. So, I actually don’t say anything and just look at her. And I don’t know, she felt so intimidated that she just left. In such situations I can really fly off the handle.” When asked about situations in which they felt judged, the interviewees had difficulty providing concrete examples. Most cases involved a sense of anticipated judgment. For example, Tom (24 years old) spoke about an appointment with the midwife: “It was a nice midwife, but I felt embarrassed or something, I felt like in her eyes she saw two young people who had no idea what they were doing. Not that she made me feel that way, but I felt that way strongly, like I’m sitting here as a rookie.”

Some interviewees also described a lack of support from professionals. They described situations in which they were neglected by professionals, feeling like “outsiders,” distanced from the mothers, children, and professionals. For example, when Tom (24 years old) was asked whether professionals inquired about how he was doing, he said, “No, it was more focused on the child. [...] If I’m being honest, I’d like it if someone asked me how I am doing. I think everyone thinks so. [...] The father is not thought of [laughter].” Stan (17 years old) made a similar remark: “Often times the father is forgotten a bit. It’s all about the mother and the child.” He also reflected on his experience with a healthcare center to which children in the Netherlands go for developmental check-ups: “I’ve only gone to the first two appointments. [...] I have work, school, they always plan shitty dates here. I don’t know what that is, you can never say I want to meet on a Monday or a Thursday or something.”

Other times, support by professionals was considered unsatisfactory by young fathers, described as impersonal and distant. For instance, Stan (17 years old) said about his visit to the healthcare center, “It doesn’t really matter to me because they don’t give great tips. I feel like she [pediatrician] looks into her computer and reads from it, to be honest.” Anthony (22 years old) spoke about how a professional had told him about a guideline for the ideal amount of time fathers should spend caring for their children, which he experienced as insulting. This often-occurring lack of (satisfactory) support from important others and professionals around them aggravated young fathers’ vulnerability, as it aroused feelings of loneliness and alienation.

4.6 *A resilient attitude: Motivation, pragmatism and confidence*

Likely as a response to these challenging circumstances and the distress that followed, interviewees illustrated a resilient attitude characterized by motivation, pragmatism, and confidence. The lack of a parental role model among young fathers caused insecurity on the one hand, but on the other hand also motivated them to be better fathers. Raimundo (21 years old), who lost his father to suicide, said: “So that’s

why, how do you say this, I don't want to be like my father with my daughter. I really want to be a good dad." Tom (24 years old), after discussing the fear of repeating his mother's mistakes, said: "When you start talking about it, you realize it is within your own control. I have a strong character. So, I know, I will do this well and I want to do it differently." Other sources of motivation mentioned were the love they felt for their children and wanting to beat the stereotype of the absent young fathers, the latter being explained by Jordi (18 years old): "I want to prove people wrong. It's always been a motive for me. I always had a drive in me that when someone says you can't do it, then I prove that I can."

The interviewees further often indicated a certain sense of pragmatism in having to carry on. Some indicated going into "action mode" after overcoming their initial panicked reaction to the unintended pregnancy. Lars (22 years old), for instance, stated, "You just have to go on. I could really turn it [mental health issues] off at that moment. You have a goal." Other interviewees described this mode as a rush, a fighting mode. Tom indicated: "In any case, I have to be there for her [the mother of his child] and I have to [go on], even though I panicked a lot at that time." This sense of pragmatism extended towards learning about childcare, often described with the phrase "I'll just see how it goes." Besides resolving practical issues, interviewees indicated little other forms of preparation such as informational or emotional. Stan said, "Every month you have to learn something new and see how you solve a current problem. [...] So yeah, it's not like you can plan one month ahead." Dave (26 years old) indicated: "Preparation, yeah... I had heard a bit from my own parents and otherwise I was like, you know, every fool becomes a dad so to speak. Or can become a father. So, I thought, 'I have a pretty good head on my torso. It should be fine.'" Riccardo (22 years old) said, "I've always thought, 'We'll just do it. We'll just do it. Don't think, just do.'" In line with this attitude, the interviewees welcomed practical support from others; many spoke positively about receiving gifts, money, and babysitting, mainly from their parents and sometimes from professionals. Due to their own efforts, sometimes in combination with social and professional support, the interviewees were usually able to resolve practical challenges such as their finances, children's items and housing. Likely because their presence and these efforts contrasted with the limited involvement of their own fathers and the stereotype of the absent young father, the interviewees were quite confident about their fathering skills. The average self-rating of their fatherhood (range, 0–10) was 8.5. This motivation, pragmatism and confidence exemplified by young fathers likely provided the strength to carry on in circumstances often characterized by adversity and vulnerability. It matches the definition of a resilient attitude as attitudes, values and perceptions that help to cope with and adapt to adverse events.

4.7 Dark sides of a resilient attitude: Little emotional processing and social disengagement

Yet, another side of this resilient attitude also became visible. It seemed young fathers had little space or time to emotionally process the unintended transition into fatherhood and were reluctant to engage with (emotional) support from others. The pragmatic action mode that interviewees described risked taking a toll on their mental health, as there was little space for emotional processing. Negative emotions were often pushed aside in order to carry on in the moment and resolve practical issues. Some described these emotions resurfacing in full force after becoming fathers. For instance, Levi (24 years old) remarked: "I have the idea that during my vacation everything that has happened settled. Yeah, just the whole thing fell apart for me [...] You act on autopilot, and during the vacation it seems like all of a sudden you have the time to become aware of the situation you're in. [...] A few weeks ago, I couldn't do anything for school, I had the feeling I was completely stuck. Especially in the first period [after the birth of his child] I felt such immense powerlessness. When I was feeding him the bottle, I thought to myself, 'shoot me,' you know." Lars (22 years old) similarly said: "The blow came later because you get used to him, and then yeah Jesus, [he realizes] so many things are eating away at me. [...] He went to daycare; my girlfriend went back to work. Suddenly I was home alone. [...] I had more time for myself and started ruminating. [...] I'd wake up covered in sweat, didn't fall asleep well, had a slightly panicky feeling." These statements reveal a dark side of young fathers' resilient attitudes, namely their focus on resolving practical matters at hand, crowding out space for emotional processing.

Young fathers also regularly indicated that they were reluctant to ask for and to accept support from others, especially emotional support, likely given their experiences with the lack of suitable support from others and their strong sense of independence. For instance, when asked who he discussed fatherhood-related topics with, Stan (17 years old) said, "I'm not really close to people. I don't trust people very quickly. [...] To be honest, the person I have talked to most about fatherhood is you. [...] I don't talk much about my

emotions with other people.” Similarly, Gijs (24 years old) remarked: “I don’t know, maybe it’s from home or the past or something. But when I have a problem, then I’d rather stand in a corner so to speak. I solve it myself, and then I come out and want to talk about what I went through. Instead of moving together with people toward a solution.” In the same line, Raimundo described how he coped with feelings of depression by isolating himself. When asked if he ever received help or talked about these struggles, he said no. “I don’t know if it would help. I don’t like being open.” These remarks show that even though young fathers experienced distress in several ways, their resilient attitude hindered them from engaging with (emotional) support by others.

5. Discussion

In this study, 14 young fathers were interviewed to gain insight into the interrelation between vulnerability and resilience in relation to their unintended fatherhood. In previous studies, vulnerability and resilience have been discussed as separate concepts, describing the range of variability in each. This study shows that individuals can simultaneously exhibit some forms of vulnerability and resilience, and that these forms do not co-exist but interrelate. Specifically, our results show that young fathers’ resilient attitude cultivated in response to existing vulnerabilities can ultimately hamper resilience by limiting resilient actions and thereby assets. Although resilient attitudes, actions, and assets are distinguished in current literature (Henley, 2010; Miller-Graff, 2022), their interrelationships with each other and with the concept of vulnerability have not been addressed explicitly.

In line with previous research, the young fathers of this study often dealt with vulnerabilities before unintended pregnancy, such as an absent or abusive parental figure and mental health issues. Our study demonstrates that the adversity of unintended pregnancy enhances this vulnerability by increasing their distress. In addition to the existence of socioeconomic issues, mainly addressed in previous research (Berrington et al., 2005; Fletcher & Wolfe, 2012; Paranjothy et al., 2009), our study also indicates the burden during young fatherhood caused by psychological, practical and relational issues. Specifically, the alienation from male friends due to diverging life circumstances, did to the best of our knowledge not receive any attention in the context of young fatherhood.

The young fathers in our study managed these issues by cultivating a resilient attitude. In previous studies this resilient attitude of young fathers has only been described in terms of motivation (Deslauriers & Kiselica, 2022; Devault et al., 2008; Gesell & Van Dijk, 2010; Lau Clayton, 2015; Lemay et al., 2010; Wilkes et al., 2012) and that this motivation can be derived from the lack of a paternal role model (Gesell & Van Dijk, 2010; Paranjothy et al., 2009). Our study adds that in addition to a motivated attitude, young fathers also show confident and pragmatic attitudes. In addition, our study highlights that in contrast to Henley (2010) who defined confident and motivated attitudes as beneficial to resilience, these attitudes can enhance vulnerability. We showed that resilient attitudes in young fathers can block their resilient action, when defined as the ability to access external assets such as support (Henley, 2010). This reluctance to seek or accept support among young fathers was likely developed as a response to existing vulnerabilities in the form of a lack of suitable support from others. Another counterproductive effect of young father’s resilient attitudes was specifically shown in relation to the pragmatic attitude of young fathers. Their pragmatic attitude, consisting of a preoccupation with resolving practical challenges such as finances and housing, helped young fathers shift into action mode and largely resolve such issues. At the same time our findings show this preoccupation may also put pressure on young parents’ relationships. Mothers of young fathers’ children might expect or desire a different form of paternal involvement, which might cause frustration or disappointment and consequently conflict. Additionally, young fathers’ short-term focus on practical challenges might limit their space for emotional processing, risking possible mental health issues in the long term. In line, Mullainathan and Shafir (2013) describe the maintenance of existing vulnerabilities due to limited mental space when experiencing resource scarcity such as time and financial resources. Although Miller-Graf (2022) mentions coping in relation to resilient actions in passing, the literature currently contains little information on the ways in which coping with emotions impacts resilience. Our findings indicate that avoidant coping in regard to emotions (Nes & Segerstrom, 2008) can be a consequence of a resilient attitude, which might have a detrimental impact on resilience.

Although our approach did not center concepts such as gender or masculinity, our findings do suggest two links with this field of research. Firstly, gender role socialization likely plays a role in young fathers’

reluctance to engage with support. Mniszak et al. (2020) has previously reported that young fathers often avoid asking for help to adhere to traditional masculine values. Norms such as stoicism, self-reliance and restrictive emotionality arose from dominant models of male socialization in the Western world and have been found to be associated with less help-seeking behavior (Seidler et al., 2016). Secondly, young fathers' preoccupation with practical matters such as finances and housing resemble the still dominant conception of the father role in terms of breadwinning (Eerola & Mykkänen, 2015; Yarwood, 2011). We show that reluctance to seek help and a focus on breadwinning in young fathers are not merely products of gender socialization but also reflect responses to adversity. Reluctance to seek help is the flip side of a resilient attitude developed in response to the adversity of unintended fatherhood. A focus on breadwinning is also reflected in this resilient attitude, brought on by practical challenges in the form of financial and housing instability.

Our results suggest that health care professionals who provide support to young fathers should look beyond their vulnerable backgrounds. Young fathers appear to anticipate judgment from others, and thus are especially vulnerable to disengagement when they receive advice that they perceive as confirmation of such judgment, potentially reinforcing the stereotype of the absent young father (Cammatt, 2014; Duncan, 2007). Healthcare professionals should focus on assisting young fathers' resilient actions and assets while recognizing and showing appreciation for their resilient attitude. Consideration of how to communicate and interact with young fathers is also important regarding this matter. We found that this group is likely to decline support when experiencing unwanted interference, such as the receipt of information in a manner perceived as paternalistic. The young fathers interviewed in our study also described positive experiences with professionals, who they characterized as kind, humorous, playful, and trusting. Furthermore, we suggest a tailored approach to meeting the specific needs of these young men, for example in scheduling appointments (Seidler et al., 2016); the young fathers interviewed in our study spoke about professionals' lack of flexibility in this matter. In line with Kiselica and Kiselica (2014), we suggest that professionals explore options to deviate from traditional practices, such as by meeting young fathers outside of regular work hours or in informal, familiar settings. Moreover, the young fathers interviewed in our study emphasized a practical hands-on attitude in preparing for fatherhood. Professionals working with this group could start by taking a practical approach and delve into more informational and/or emotional matters after trust has been established. Male peer support groups centered on a practical activity, rather than solely talking, could also aid young fathers' openness and social connectedness (Kiselica & Kiselica, 2014). Healthcare professionals should be aware of such initiatives and refer fathers to those.

In terms of strengths and limitations, an important strength of this study was the group of participants consisting of 14 young Dutch unintentional fathers, a group that has often been found to be "hard to reach" (Davies, 2016). Young fathers are "hidden participants" in the sense that forms of institutional support through which they could be located and contacted, are lacking (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015). For instance, whereas mothers have client relationships with healthcare professionals, fathers do not. Moreover, young fathers face challenging circumstances, likely placing research participation at the bottom of their priority list. We approached these issues by recruiting young fathers via the Instagram account of a popular young male influencer and through the mothers of their children, who we were able to contact through more traditional routes. We were also flexible with interview locations and times and kept in contact informally by using the popular chat application WhatsApp. Efforts to ensure diversity in our sample led to the inclusion of only three young fathers with migration backgrounds, all of Surinamese descent. Data indicate that a large proportion of young (aged 12–25 years) parents in the Netherlands are of Surinamese, Antillean, and Moroccan descents (Graaf et al., 2017). Whether our findings on vulnerability and resilience are generalizable, especially to young fathers with Moroccan backgrounds (as unexpected pregnancy outside of marriage is condemned strongly in Moroccan culture; Capelli, 2019), remains unknown. As this topic is taboo in Moroccan culture, the recruitment of these young men may be especially challenging.

Furthermore, the three researchers who conducted the interviews were women. The participants may have related to male interviewers more easily, but they may have conformed less to traditional masculine behavior, e.g., by exhibiting more emotional closedness, in the presence of women than with other men (Broom et al., 2009; Kosygina, 2015). The participants' statements and openness about very personal and painful subjects suggest that the latter occurred. One young father, for instance, said he had never opened up about his fatherhood-related struggles before the interview.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights the interplay between vulnerability and resilience among young men who experienced unintended fatherhood. Contrary to prior literature that treats these concepts separately, our findings show that vulnerability and resilience are interrelated, with resilient attitudes developed in response to vulnerability possibly counteracting resilient actions and thereby affecting assets. These insights underline the need for healthcare professionals to adopt a nuanced and flexible approach in supporting young fathers, focusing on fostering resilient actions while acknowledging and validating their resilient attitudes. Tailored, practical, and non-judgmental interventions, alongside peer support groups, could be key to enhancing the support and engagement of this group.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Information in German

Deutscher Titel

Die Entwirrung von Verwundbarkeit und Resilienz: Die Wege junger Männer durch die ungewollte Vaterschaft

Zusammenfassung

Fragestellung: Diese Studie untersucht das Zusammenspiel von Vulnerabilität und Resilienz bei jungen Männern, die unerwartet Väter werden.

Hintergrund: Frühere Arbeiten konzentrierten sich hauptsächlich auf die vulnerablen Umstände, welche die Beteiligung junger Väter an der Kinderbetreuung einschränken, während neuere Studien auf eine resiliente Anpassung an ihre neue Rolle hindeuten. Diese Studie ist die erste, die Verwundbarkeit und Resilienz als miteinander verbundene Konzepte im Leben junger Väter analysiert.

Methode: Es wurden semi-strukturierte Interviews mit 14 jungen Vätern aus den Niederlanden durchgeführt. Die Transkripte wurden thematisch analysiert, um Formen der Wechselbeziehung zwischen Vulnerabilität und Resilienz in deren Leben aufzuzeigen.

Ergebnisse: Die Analyse zeigte, dass junge Väter mit einer erhöhten Vulnerabilität aufgrund der Widrigkeiten ungewollter Vaterschaft zu kämpfen hatten. Sie bewältigten diese, indem sie eine resiliente Haltung entwickelten. Diese Haltung führte jedoch auch zu einer eingeschränkten emotionalen Verarbeitung und einer Ablehnung von sozialer Unterstützung. Ihre resiliente Haltung birgt daher paradoxerweise das Risiko, bestehende Vulnerabilitäten aufrechtzuerhalten.

Schlussfolgerung: Diese Studie hebt das Zusammenspiel von Resilienz und Vulnerabilität bei jungen, ungewollten Vätern hervor und betont die Notwendigkeit von Interventionen, die sowohl die Suche nach sozialer Unterstützung fördern als auch das Annehmen einer resilienten Haltung anerkennen und würdigen.

Schlagwörter: Vaterschaft, Junge Elternschaft, Ungewollte Schwangerschaft, Widrigkeiten

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Justine van de Beek: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9709-5824>

Violet Petit-Steeghs: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9002-6826>

Femke Hilverda: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7542-4508>

Anna Petra Nieboer: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9676-0607>



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