

# Perspectives about paternity by young male university students from the northern region of the state of Rio Grande do Sul\*

PERSPECTIVAS DE JOVENS UNIVERSITÁRIOS DA REGIÃO NORTE DO RIO GRANDE DO SUL EM RELAÇÃO À PATERNIDADE

LAS PERSPECTIVAS DE JÓVENES UNIVERSITARIOS DE LA REGIÓN NORTE DEL ESTADO DE RIO GRANDE DO SUL EN RELACIÓN A LA PATERNIDAD

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## ABSTRACT

Young men's view about paternity and the involvement with their future children is a bonding issue that is still incipient in our reality. The objective of this descriptive, qualitative and exploratory study was to study the perspectives that young male university students from the northern region of Rio Grande do Sul have about paternity, study their view about how they were raised and educated for paternity, and identify how the institutions (family, peers, school) influence their development and way of thinking. The study was performed at Universidade Regional Integrada do Alto Uruguai e das Missões, in Rio Grande do Sul, with eight young male university students. Subjects' ages ranged between 20 and 24 years. Data collection took place by focal group and interviews. Thematic analysis of the data appointed the importance of the family, the father's role, financial stability, the importance of the female partner, the role of matrimony, and the way of being a father while building their lives and paternity.

## KEY WORDS:

Paternity.  
Students.  
Family.  
Sex education.

## RESUMO

A visão do jovem em relação à paternidade e envolvimento com futuros filhos tem sido um assunto de veiculação ainda incipiente na nossa realidade. Este estudo, descritivo, qualitativo e exploratório, teve como objetivos estudar as perspectivas de jovens universitários da Região Norte do Rio Grande do Sul quanto à paternidade, estudar sua visão em relação à sua criação e educação para a paternidade e identificar como as instituições (família, grupo de amigos, escola) influenciam no seu desenvolvimento e modo de pensar. Realizou-se na Universidade Regional Integrada do Alto Uruguai e das Missões, RS, com oito jovens universitários com idades entre 20 e 24 anos. Os dados coletados por grupo focal e entrevistas foram analisados mediante análise temática e apontaram para relevância da família, o papel do pai, estabilidade financeira, a importância da companheira, o papel do matrimônio e o jeito de ser pai na construção de suas vidas e paternidade.

## DESCRIPTORIOS:

Paternidade.  
Estudantes.  
Família.  
Educação sexual.

## RESUMEN

La visión del joven en relación a la paternidad y la relación con futuros hijos es un asunto que ha aparecido de forma reciente e incipiente en nuestra realidad. Este estudio, descriptivo, cualitativo y exploratorio, tuvo como objetivos: estudiar las perspectivas de los jóvenes universitarios de la Región Norte de Rio Grande do Sul, en lo que se refiere a la paternidad; estudiar su visión en relación a su creación y educación para la paternidad e identificar como las instituciones (familia, grupo de amigos, escuela) influyen en su desarrollo y modo de pensar. Se realizó en la Universidad Regional Integrada del Alto Uruguay y de las Misiones, en Rio Grande do Sul, con ocho jóvenes universitarios con edades entre 20 y 24 años. Los datos recolectados, por grupo focal y entrevistas, fueron analizados mediante análisis temático y apuntaron para la relevancia de la familia; el papel del padre, la estabilidad financiera, la importancia de la compañera, el papel del matrimonio y la forma de ser padre en la construcción de sus vidas e paternidad.

## DESCRIPTORIOS:

Paternidad.  
Estudiantes.  
Familia.  
Educación sexual.

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## INTRODUCTION

A person's youth is a phase of transition from childhood to a period of preparation to enter adult age, essentially consisting of the youths' preparation for the modern roles involving their profession, marriage, political citizenship and others, and also to face a series of choices and decisions<sup>(1)</sup>. In this moment of their life cycle, young people attribute several meanings to their activities and interact with a number of institutions, like their school and family, where they establish symbolic contacts constituted by the adult world<sup>(2)</sup>. In this study, the word *youth* is used to refer to male individuals who are preparing themselves to enter the work market. It should be highlighted that the word *youth*, regarding the generation concept, is controversial in terms of the period of time it refers to and, therefore, this term has different forms according to the local dynamics and specific interest of particular groups. This controversy, regarding whom the term refers to, is essential when affirming youth policies and it functions as a common denominator for the aspects that permit knowledge about the idea of youth: entering the job market, experiencing paternity, having marking biological and cultural features, and that youth, in the concept of generation, would be the age group responsible for determining, in the most vehement way, the rhythm of history<sup>(3)</sup>.

Working as professors for some time, the authors have noticed that, when young people enter university, they bring along a body of knowledge that is incipient in terms of values, attitudes, and education for life, all of which are needed to play the many roles they will take up in society. In the case of young men, these behaviors can have further repercussions in both personal and professional aspects when they assume roles as: family head, breadwinner, caregiver and parent who raises his children. Hence, these roles should be studied. There are many concerns, which encouraged the authors to think about their roles as mothers, health professionals, educators, and citizens involved with this particular population, which needs a closer look at their education, self-assertion, involvement, and preparation for paternity.

It was observed that there are fewer studies that focus on male participation in key-dimensions, like paternity, compared to studies dedicated to women. This is associated to the fact that it is more natural for women to be considered responsible for raising their children; therefore, when the paternity issue is addressed, it is usually, according to the feminine view, which contributes to the idea that women are the only ones responsible for pregnancy and taking care of children<sup>(4)</sup>. This supports the fact that it is rare for studies to investigate men's participation, responsibility and desires in the reproduction process<sup>(5)</sup>. Another finding is that studies focused on adolescents refer to those who have

already experienced paternity and not on future fathers, as done in the present study.

Therefore, it is understood that constructing a place in society for paternity implies giving children and adolescents (and youths) an opportunity to speak up and express their desires, which would provide them with the right to participate in the construction of their own human fate<sup>(6)</sup>. Schools also have an important role in the youths' education, providing children and adolescents with knowledge in addition to what they learn from their families, mediating discussions about sexuality, sexual initiation, their involvement with reproduction, maternity and paternity. In this context, the professors, in spite of their noticing the need to be more open to addressing questions related to sexuality, still lack the appropriate support to work on these issues<sup>(7)</sup>.

In this study, the choice to focus on young university students originated from questions regarding the researchers' role in educational institutions, since they have observed that, usually, little attention is given to themes regarding education for life, considering that courses are still content-oriented. The researchers decided to study this issue with young university students from the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, and learn about their perspectives regarding paternity to encourage reflections and, thus, discover strategies that would contribute to form young men committed to their own life, and to the lives of their family and children. In addition, this study also aimed to encourage a review about men's role in the family and, perhaps, appoint some directions in the education of boys, which could contribute to their becoming more committed and involved with their family roles. It is believed that, in an attempt to support educators and health professionals, this study can trigger reflexive and critical thinking about the education and health services offered to the youth, with special attention to issues related to a responsible and committed paternity, with a view to cooperating in the development of both young men and their future family.

Reviewing men's new family role demands reconsideration about the education of children and adolescents and about how it has taken place in their families. Furthermore, it will take some time for those involved to introduce the current changes. This study particularly addresses the young men and women involved. One of these transformations refers to young men's role as a father, which demands different abilities and commitments from them. The current social, cultural and economic changes have required men to participate more actively in family life, especially in terms of raising the children. Therefore, a new model-father has emerged and has received several denominations, such as new father, fathering, father-mother and others. The fact is that a new paternity model is underway<sup>(8)</sup> and there is a

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need to direct special attention to the boys' education, considering the new demands posed on men<sup>(9)</sup>.

## OBJECTIVES

To study the perspectives of young male university students from Northern Rio Grande do Sul in terms of paternity, and their view regarding their development and education for paternity, as well as to identify how the institutions (family, friends, school) affect their development and their thoughts concerning paternity.

## METHOD

The study was performed at a university in the city of Frederico Westphalen, in the Médio Alto Uruguai Region of Northern Rio Grande do Sul state. This region was colonized by Italian, German and Polish immigrants, and is formed by 30 cities, including Frederico Westphalen, with a total of 183,927 inhabitants<sup>(10)</sup>. The investigation occurred from September to October 2006, with eight young university students, who met the following inclusion criteria: age between 20 and 24 years, being a regular student of one of the courses at Universidade Regional Integrada do Alto Uruguai (URI) and at the URI-Missions on Frederico Westphalen Campus, and live in the Médio Alto Uruguai Region. Subjects were excluded if they lived away from the studied region. The bioethical considerations complied with National Health Council Resolution 196<sup>(11)</sup> regarding research involving human beings. Furthermore, the study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Institution, being registered under number 0056-06H. Participants signed the Free and Informed Consent Form.

Data collection was performed through individual interviews and technical focus group sessions, which is a way to collect data directly from the statements of a group about their experiences and perceptions regarding a particular theme. The group was coordinated by the moderator (one of the researchers), with help from the collaborators. In addition, two meetings were held, and the discussions were triggered by the word *paternity*. There was also a photo exhibition, showing children, young people involved with children, marriage, children and their parents, and parents taking care of their children. A guiding topic was used, comprising the central themes and the research issues<sup>(12)</sup>. The individual interviews did not offer great contribution because they did not provide any additional information on the theme or present any new approaches, considering that the group presented its opinions and perceptions to the fullest extent. As per their agreement, the participants' statements were recorded and later transcribed by the collaborators. In order to keep the participants' identification anonymous, they were identified in the following way: letter S, for subject, G for group, and I for interview. In addition, numbers 1 through 8 were used to identify the subjects' statements. Data analysis was performed using thematic content analysis<sup>(13)</sup>.

## RESULTS

By characterizing the young individuals, it was possible to understand their positions, perhaps due to the particular aspects of the region where they came from. Subjects attended the following undergraduate courses: Pharmacy, Agro-zootechny, Nursing, Mathematics, and Philosophy. The young university students live in calm cities, with many trees, with no malls, theaters, movie theaters, or night clubs. This might imply that their forms of entertainment differ from those of young people living in big cities. A majority of these young individuals participate in the religious group of the Young Leadership Course (*Curso de Liderança Juvenil*). The course holds youth meetings with spiritual reunions to think and discuss about issues related to religion and family. In these meetings, they practice friendship, respect for others, autonomy and solidarity. The meetings are permeated with prayers, music and songs. A second choice for these young individuals is to participate in traditionalist groups. These groups, also referred to as nativists, meet to practice typical dances of that region, referred to as *gaúcha*, to play musical instruments, participate in events and other activities. The group members become friends, and show respect and companionship with each other. It should be highlighted that these two characteristics are strong in the studied region, i.e., families have an expressive religious trait and cultivate the *gaúcha* traditions. Nowadays, these young people's favorite leisure activities, as per their reports, are meeting with friends, sports, watching TV and reading. Some of them still attend parties and dances with their friends at weekends. Regarding the participants' families, the fathers work as truck drivers, merchants, bakers, and many are farmers. As for the mothers, most are housewives (only two have jobs), reinforcing the characteristics of a traditional family. The traditional model is understood as a group composed by father, mother and their biological children. There are specific gender roles in the group, i.e. the father is the breadwinner, while the mother is responsible for the house chores and taking care of the children<sup>(14)</sup>. Another characteristic is that they are small families, with an average 2.5 children per family. Family income was above two minimum salaries. It should be emphasized that most parents had not completed the primary education level, and only one couple completed the secondary level (high school).

### ***The youths' view of family and boys' education: the influence on their perception of paternity, sexuality and women's role.***

It should be noted that the young participants come from traditional families, comprising the father, mother, and most have siblings. This situation implies that, in that region, there is a family structure that provides a closer relationship between parents and their children, specifically because of the aforementioned characteristics. In their perspectives on paternity, the young university students believe that the positive outcomes of bringing up their chil-

dren depend on the constitution of families composed by men and women, and also defend that marriage establishes that union. All participants, during the focal group sessions, reported their desire to get married. The importance of the family was strongly reported by the participants, as shown in the following statements:

The family is the basis for everything, you will follow that guidance. Later you will obtain a broader view. You will be able to discuss it with your friends. You can go to school and discuss about it. I think it should be an open discussion (S1G1).

The family gives you education, character, everything, education comes from your home, from your father and your mother, who give you knowledge since you're little, it is the basis of the character they will teach you, the family initiates your learning and we complete it ourselves (S2I).

The family, from these young individual's perspective, takes most responsibility for giving children the first lessons about culture, values, and socialization rules in their development. Despite all the different definitions of family, it is still an essential reference to people, and its main role is to build people's identity through the attachments they develop with their parents and children<sup>(8)</sup>. The youths evidenced and reported that, at some moment in their lives, there was a lack of dialogue between parents and children, with some emphasis on their father's absence, and that this is an important factor in their education.

In their statements, the young university students report that the way boys are educated can affect their view about paternity. The almost total lack of education for a healthy sexuality, in the different life stages, should be dealt with using articulated efforts with a view to building policies and supporting practices<sup>(15)</sup>. Hence, it is observed there is a need to focus on the boys since, today, for the family to survive and live in harmony, men and women, together with their children, should share house chores, and also contribute to support the house and family.

Boys used to have more freedom, and they still do. It will depend on each family [their education]... And I think girls mature a lot faster than boys (S1I).

There is a belief that the way a family educates boys is intimately related to its culture and educational values, which is associated with the behavior that the young and adult men will have regarding paternity, women and children. We consider that studies in this area that assure the theoretical gender perspective and work with the complex interaction between gender and other social dimensions (ethnicity, socioeconomic groups, and age, for instance) can make fundamental contributions to reveal men and women's negotiation and decision-making processes regarding sexual and reproductive health<sup>(16)</sup>.

In the focal group sessions, when the sexuality issue was addressed, the discussions were interrupted. The young participants looked at each other, and showed a certain

difficulty to talk about their understanding, causing laughter and some discomfort in the group. Apparently, there is an exclusive association of the sexuality issue with sexual intercourse, which, in turn, is still seen as a joke and a reason for making fun of friends. In the field of sexuality and reproduction, men have little knowledge and wish for more, so they turn to friends for that knowledge, but they usually have little or none to share<sup>(17)</sup>.

When you talk with the boys about something serious like this, it ends up turning into a joke (S1G2).

I think sexuality starts too early now, too premature, in the past, when you were fifteen, you would go out to a party, and nowadays the parents, they take their children who are twelve, thirteen, they take them to a house of prostitution (S5G1).

Because sexuality is a theme with social relevance and intrinsically related with lifestyles and people's behavior, there is a need to understand and consider its different life stages, since it continues being reinforced by some social institutions, permeated with prejudice and taboos, increasing the family's difficulties in addressing this subject with their children. It is believed that it can be discussed not only within the family, but also in fundamental, secondary and higher education institutions. It is important for these institutions to provide space for dialogues to take place among children, young people and teachers, since it is believed that this could, with time and education, change their view regarding sexuality, seeing it as something good and pleasant in our lives.

The woman's role was included as a sub-category, based on the relevance the youths attributed to it in their discussions at several moments during the group and individual interviews. It was clear there was an association between the woman's and the man's role in the family.

It is known that, as of the feminist movement, women have conquered, little by little, some places that contributed in several decisions of their lives, such as, for instance, the search for work outside the family environment, using birth control, and others. These conquests have caused and still generate some conflicts in the family and in society. However, the participants emphasized the important role that women have in the family and in their work environment, as shown in the statement below:

If women are more competent, it is just fair that she takes this place. I'm not against women, I support her being independent, but the father also has to participate more in raising the children (S5I).

At the same time as the youth understand how important it is for women to seek their place in the job market (independence), they reinforce the need for women to be involved, or actually be the main person responsible for raising and educating the children, with the father's participation. It is observed that some changes should be made with regard to the way men are addressed about health

and prevention issues. In addition, including women in the discussions about male issues and vice-versa could help to change their perspectives regarding gender differences and health care<sup>(18)</sup>. In this sense, the authors believe that it is important to encourage this discussion among students from elementary school until university. However, it should be emphasized that teachers should develop strategies and deeper knowledge regarding this issue in order to promote this *talk*.

### ***The influence of the school, media and friends in the youth's development***

It is known that people are affected by the several experiences they have had. This factor, which comprises school, media and friends, can influence, directly or indirectly, the construction of a person's identity. Therefore, it can be stated that these contributions can be positive or negative depending on the other associated interferences, such as education, culture, and beliefs. Hence, supposedly, school, family and media are aspects that should follow the changes that constantly occur in society, so as to adapt to them in the best possible way, in addition to experiencing them and translating them into educational activities. The media (spoken and written), present in everyone's daily lives, can have a positive or negative effect, depending on the interpretation made by the individual, family and school.

I think that parents are the main responsible for not differentiating what is right for their child should watch on TV... If the boy is about ten years old, his father can sit with him to watch some bad shows on TV and teach him [the son] about it, about the consequence of what they are watching (S8G1).

The media usually shows more bad than good examples. But you can still take advantage of the situation, as long as you have an idea of what is right and what is wrong. It is important to know what you can do and what you can't watch (S3G2).

The participants' statements reinforce the idea about the negative and positive sides of the media, emphasizing how important it is for parents to select the TV shows their children are allowed to watch. It is known that the media (TV) presents a number of different programs exhibited at different times, which means it is impossible for parents to rigorously control what their children watch.

The participants believe that the school is being inefficient in its role for two reasons. First, because it is not prepared for all the discussions presented by the youth; and, second, because it does not make an effort to make the family its ally in the youth's learning process. This is observed in the following statement:

The school doesn't talk much about it [*sexuality, reproduction, paternity*] either (S31). Nowadays they only teach the basics... But today there are many teachers who don't even want to be involved. They go to school, teach their class, and leave (S61).

It is observed that school and family need to get closer in order to benefit human beings, seeking to improve the conditions of the educative development of all, regardless of their social and economical class, religion and ethnics. Some key points should be considered, like the many forms one can live his or her sexuality, the different options of sexual partners, pregnancy, paternity, maternity. This should be done to permit young people to become adults who know about the different realities they can face in their lives, and, most of all, so they can be happy and live well with the choices they made. The study found that the participants include paternity in their plans for the future, but there is little talk about it between the youth and their families.

It is something different; it is a subject hard to talk about. It is an interesting thing. You leave that world of yours. You stop thinking about your future, as for paternity, it is something you'll think about later. First, you think about your graduation so you can work, and then you think about this subject (S11).

It was found that the young people in this study consider they are not prepared for this responsibility. In fact, they often showed they do not even talk about this possibility.

The keyword, paternity, which was used as the triggering theme in the focal group sessions, caused reflections that had not happened in their lives so far. In fact, the participants were surprised when this theme was addressed. The participants' reaction was interpreted as if the paternity subject was related only with their parents, and this reality was too far away from the moment they were living. In the beginning of their reports, the only reference to paternity they made was their experience with their fathers. They did not add any information about themselves as future fathers.

Participants stated their own fathers as examples in the construction of their life courses, but also involved their mothers, which they consider an important connection for family life and structure. Through their words, they showed they care and respect their parents very much, despite their having previously stated that, when younger, there were some arguments between them and that they shared different opinions. Today, youths are able to understand their father's position, emphasizing the importance of their father's actions for their own education.

When they were asked about the elements that they imagined would be different between the way their fathers are and their own way, the answers were the following:

Compared to my father, I think I'll try to enjoy things better, if I consider them right, and correct some things I consider wrong, any possible mistake so I don't repeat that mistake in the future, and try to always improve the good things (S11).

It is noticed that these young people wish to have a structured family, have children, help educate and take care of them, and share the house chores with their partner. They believe this is the best way to raise and educate their

children for life. The family, as observed, is a regular part of their lives, as shown in the following report:

It's the best example you have to give to your child, it is the example of my family, I think it would be the best example for him. My family gave me education, taught me values, taught me and showed me the difficulties of getting something in life and taught me to value what they do for me and for my brothers (S8G2).

These considerations show the importance of investing in children, who are the future youth and possible parents, providing them with knowledge about the different stages in a human being's life, and, perhaps, helping to build a happy family.

The study subjects showed their feelings and expectations regarding paternity. They appeared to be sensitive to their father's figure, as well as to their future position in paternity. It was clear they wish to have children, but they are concerned with their financial situation and, among other factors, with the difficulty to raise and educate children nowadays. When they were asked what it means to be a father, they gave the following statements:

About having a family, first you have to find a wife, a partner, and be sure about what you want, because if you become a father before there is a strong family structure formed by yourself and your partner, then you aren't giving a good example, in my opinion, you might not be financially prepared either to raise that child, so first you have to guarantee that the child will have a good life (S3G1).

These youths made interesting statements regarding their perspective about their desire to be a father since, because they showed a certain level of maturity, they mentioned aspects like the importance of having professional preparation, choosing a partner and having a good financial situation, and also of choosing the right time for this experience.

Today, I wouldn't have the necessary conditions to be a father because I depend on my parents, I still don't work, my parents live in another city and I live here, so I am fully dependent on their support, if I have a child, and this will happen, the first thing I would have to do is to quit college and find a job, so in my case I don't have the necessary conditions (S1G2).

They mentioned they do not feel prepared to have children at this moment of their lives, and that they do not know how to educate and connect to that child, despite their stating that, in the future, they intend to have a family. It was noticed that the youths' feelings and plans suggest their concern with building a career and a family after making a plan and organizing their professional life.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Developing this study was very important and provided us with a new view on this theme. Family and education

are paths that can characterize this youth, confirming the presuppositions that parents, youths, and health professionals still find it difficult to talk about issues that, one way or another, address sexuality, sexual orientation, sexual or reproductive health, and paternity.

By studying these youths' perspectives about paternity, it was found that this subject is not part of their education at any instance, i.e. in the family environment, among peers, or at school. Another interesting fact was the way they reported how they were raised, focusing on the father figure as an example to be followed, but with expectations that surpass what they had been offered. They wish to be different fathers, indicating they want to be better fathers than their own.

As for the media, these youths were more emphatic on the negative contributions it can have on building their father figure. However, it might also help them to think differently, and serve as indicators for debates and positions regarding this subject.

The school, an institution that cooperates in building the individual's identity, did not appear as a facilitator or instigator of their thoughts about life, from the youths' point of view. They reported that the school could make a much more significant contribution to the youths' education and preparation for different commitments in life. In their reports, the youths mentioned that the university has the role of offering opportunities for these discussions, thus performing its educational and constructive role in the students' lives, not only regarding the work market, but considering them as people who need support in the different stages of life.

It becomes essential to reflect about the methods used to educate and raise boys, which comprise the family, school, media, and society, and the places that are assigned to children, youths, women and men regarding reproduction, and about educating and taking care of children, considering that society now demands men to assume roles that were once assumed by women and legitimated by the society.

It was found that these youths want to be prepared and have the necessary financial, emotional, and affective conditions to face this stage in life. They wish to be devoted fathers committed to raising their children. They believe that this is the only form of having happy children, i.e. to experience a responsible and committed paternity. We believe that this event will differentiate youths from men, i.e., either being ready to be the breadwinner of a family or, in addition to the possibility of sharing the financial responsibilities with a partner, commit to and become involved with educating and raising their children.

This study did not exhaust the theme. On the contrary, it points at many other questions for further research. What commitments do youth-dedicated Public Policies make towards discussing the themes of maternity and paternity

from the youths' point of view? Do families that live in interior-state cities have different concerns with raising children compared to families living in big cities? Does addressing sexual health or any related themes have any effect on an individual's previous knowledge? What is the importance

that other professionals have in discussions and in planning programs for men's and male adolescents' health? These are some of the questions that emerged, and which we believe are of interest to all those involved with the commitment to people's quality of life.

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