

**Framing Fathers: How MTV's *16 & Pregnant* Depicts Parental  
Involvement**

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December 7, 2010

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This content analysis explores how young fathers are portrayed in the reality television series *16 & Pregnant* in order to document how their fatherhood roles are displayed to an audience. Through an analysis of seven episodes, each parent is coded for their physical presence and activities throughout the episode to provide a comparison for displays of parenting roles. The findings suggest that the father's role is underplayed, supporting the other-directed theory that fathers act in ways they have observed as appropriate behavior in society. The depiction of fathers on the show suggests they are less involved and less interested in their children, feeding into the absent father stereotype.*

The media is one institution that influences people's ideas about the norms and values about the society. MTV's *16 & Pregnant* focuses on the lives of young parents as they struggle with their new social roles and responsibilities. While this show is intended to educate its viewers about the effects of unprotected sex and teen pregnancy, it also sends a message about the seemingly differing roles of mother and father. The depiction of fathers in more negative lights reinforces the absentee father stereotype which therefore influences the society's ideas about how young fathers should act. When MTV's viewers watch *16 & Pregnant*, their relationships and ideas about parenthood are in turn affected by an other-directed attitude. This study shows how recently emerging shows such as *16 & Pregnant* fail to educate viewers on the father's experience, impacting how current and future fathers in society value parenting.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Past research has examined the portrayal of adolescent males in television and the portrayal of fathers in television, yet has not addressed the portrayal of young fathers in television.

### *Portrayal of Adolescent Males in Television 1970-1990*

Walsh and Ward (2008) found a higher percentage of male youth featured on television programs than female youth. Although many studies have been done on the effects of the media on adolescents, little research has been done on the portrayal of adolescents in the media. Sternglanz and Serbin (1974) found that in popular child-oriented programs (half of which included teenage casts) from the 1971-1972 television season, males were depicted as more aggressive and constructive/achieving. Similarly, Peirce (1989) studied characteristics of youth on television and discovered that child and adolescent male characters were positively associated with traits such as active, aggressive, rational, and unhappy. He identified male characters

engaging in various activities, including being both indoors and outdoors while the female characters were shown doing activities such as studying, reading, and helping around the house. Signorielli's (1997) research also found that male characters were more likely to be shown on the job and in business clothing or uniforms than their female counterparts. In addition, Barner (1999) found that males were much more likely than females to employ in activity, construction, dominance, aggression, and attention-seeking behaviors. Thus, research from the 1970s through the 1990s found that male characters have been portrayed as playing stereotypical gendered roles. Walsh and Ward (2008) admit that because of the limited research done on how adolescent males are portrayed in the media, it is difficult to conclude whether there has been an increase in gender differentiation, a decrease, or both, yet the studies done suggest that gender stereotypes are continually present.

#### *How Fathers Are Portrayed as Men in Television Sitcoms*

In non-reality television, men played and still play stereotypical roles of father and husband in sitcoms such as *Father Knows Best*, *The Cosby Show*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, and *The George Lopez Show*. Sitcoms have had an effect on fatherhood since the television first became a commonality in the American home, which is why it is important to study the changing portrayals of fatherhood since that era (Kelly 2009). Different studies have shown that compared to the mid and late 1950s and later years, television shows in the early 1950s depicted fathers as more diverse but less conforming and patriarchal (Kelly 2009; Pehlke II, Hennon, Radina, Kunalanka 2009). Frazer and Frazer (1993) note in their comparison of *Father Knows Best* and *The Cosby Show* that these two programs went beyond male solidarity to male centrality and superiority, which is evident even in the titles and introductions of the shows. The introductions show the audience that the father is the "in-control" central figure and suggest that each family

member develops their identity from their association with him (Frazer, Frazer 1993). In a similar study, Signorielli (1989) found that men in general are more likely to be older, in charge, have more high-status positions, and also be able to effectively combine employment with marriage.

Although sitcoms are meant to be humorous and appealing to audiences, research has shown that fathers have been continually portrayed as immature, foolish, or the “butt of others’ jokes” and have been portrayed more so with each ensuing decade in comparison to their female counterparts, with exception of the 1970s. (Kelly 2009; Pehlke II et. al. 2009). Likewise, Scharrer (2001) found that throughout time, female counterparts make more jokes at the expense of the father.

Interestingly, multiple researchers have noticed the differences of these portrayals between working-class and middle/upper-class fathers. Muriel Cantor (1990) identified that working-class fathers were either portrayed as both blundering and incompetent or as upwardly mobile. Similarly, Pehlke II, et. al. (2009) found that in comparison to middle-class fathers, working-class fathers were more regularly shown as inept and foolish. Additionally Pehlke II, et. al. (2009) found that although minority fathers were shown to be capable and involved with their families and exhibited some of the most affirmative examples of authoritative parenting found in this study, they were less likely to be shown as emotionally supportive or connected with their children. How fathers are portrayed interacting with their children offers a different perspective of the fatherhood image.

#### *How Fathers Are Portrayed with their Children in Television Sitcoms*

Although the general image of the father in television tends to be negative and perpetuate stereotypes, fathers can also be shown positively influencing their family members, especially

their children. Pehlke II, et. al. (2009) observed that positive and supportive communication between the fathers and their families, as well as quality time and teaching life lessons occurred frequently. Since this study is more recent, it is important to note that their sample appeared to place greater emphasis on father interaction and emotional bonding with family members than TV programming reported by previous researchers (Pehlke II et. al. 2009). Although fathers can be portrayed as unrefined, they have also been presented as committed to their family and interested in their children. Therefore, the overall portrayal of the father can vary as he acts out the stereotypical roles of a man as well as fulfilling his roles as a father. Unfortunately, no studies have been done on how a young father is portrayed in television.

#### *Lack of Young Fathers in Television*

Just as there are stereotypical behaviors shown in both adolescents as well as fathers, television can also display these same behaviors in young fathers. Additionally, just as these stereotypes don't always apply to adolescents and fathers in the real world, Robinson (1988) found that in many cases, stereotypes were not relevant and that young fathers, specifically teenagers, wanted to actively contribute as a parent. Robinson (1988) believes that because a teen father is still a child himself, he inevitably faces role conflict between adolescent and father. This conflict in roles may cause young fathers to be portrayed differently from fathers who are grown and have stable lives. Despite the fact that young fathers have been excluded from television shows until recently, young and teen parenting has always been in existence. To demonstrate, Klein (2005) discovered that boys are at an average age of sixteen when they first have intercourse, and half of teen pregnancies happen within the first six months of the initial sexual intercourse. It is surprising that little to no media coverage has been done until recently on young fathers when it is common and plays an important role in society. This study will be one of the

first to show how young fathers are portrayed in television and how this is similar or different from depictions of adolescent and/or adult fatherhood in television.

## THEORY

David Riesman is a modern sociological theorist who was interested in the relationship between social character and society. Riesman (1950) developed three types of directedness which he believed led to conformity throughout different time periods in America. The first in the historical sequence is tradition-directed, which goes hand in hand with the pre-modern era, the second is inter-directed which ties with modernity, and the third is other-directed that follows characteristics very similar to the postmodern era. He attributed other-directedness to an increase consumption of media. Riesman's theory of three types of directedness can be applied to television series about families from the 1950's to present day with the belief that other-directedness is still applicable. Father figures in television have exhibited all types of directedness, and how the other-directed character is not only more prominent today, but also reinforces the teen fatherhood stereotypes.

Degler (1963) interprets Riesman's first typology, tradition-directed, as man being "guided and channeled in his activities and thought by his society; simply because things have always been done in a given way and should still be performed in that way" (485). People conform by following traditional standards and base their behaviors and actions on what has been established over generations. In Riesman's (1950) words, he states that "the culture, in addition to its economic tasks, or as part of them, provides ritual, routine, and religion to occupy and to orient everyone" (11). If people did not conform, Riesman believes they felt shame. In terms of fatherhood in the media, men were once portrayed as tradition-directed in their family responsibilities. Dating back to the 1950's, shows such as *Father Knows Best*, *The Brady Bunch*,

and *Leave it to Beaver* exemplified the idealized suburban family in the United States. Many of the shows displayed a stereotypical American family with traditional family values. The fathers, specifically, followed tradition-directed roles in that they were invested in their children and family, valued hard work, and enjoyed a middle-class lifestyle. The parents were married, the father was the head of the household, and he was at the socially acceptable age for fatherhood. Television series such as these portrayed how traditional, functional American families were understood. Riesman's second directedness then relates to a new era of television series.

Riesman (1950) further argues that after tradition-directed comes inter-directed, which means people's conformity is ensured by an internalized set of goals. Like tradition-directed people, those who are inter-directed are still concerned with behavioral conformity, but "possess a somewhat greater degree of flexibility in adapting himself to ever changing requirements" (Riesman 1950: 16). Inter-directed people have a source of direction implanted in them by elders at a young age, which guide them toward "generalized but nonetheless inescapably destined goals" (Riesman 1950: 15). Riesman believes that non-conformity led to feelings of guilt. In other words, people experience negative feelings in both tradition-directed and inter-directed when conformity is not achieved.

This personality type is evident in television shows such as *Reba*, which is about an "individualistic and self-reliant" single-mother who is trying to raise her children and maintain a relationship with her cheating ex-husband and his new wife (Degler 1963: 485). Reba and her husband were tradition-directed in that the marriage and family values were instilled in them, but inter-directed in that their choices were more flexible because they had to adapt to unhappy circumstances. Although shows such as this challenged the family ideals and norms and introduced the idea of broken and dysfunctional relationships, they were still presented in a



fictional, comedic fashion. Although the show focuses more on Reba's experience, the father was still shown as being an equal part of the children's lives.

Riesman's (1950) other-directedness character continues to apply to television series today that portray more realistic, struggling families. Riesman's third and final typology is other-directed, meaning that people are constantly looking for re-affirmation from others. People make decisions based on other's behaviors, which Riesman relates directly to an increase consumption of media. Riesman believes that when people watch fake events, it impacts their real relationships, including ideas about childrearing. Other-directedness is reinforced because people are constantly paying attention to what other people do, what they say, and what they tell others to do. If people do not conform to this behavior, they will feel anxiety and concern about whether others like them. Degler (1963) cites that Riesman believed that "the other-directed [personality] has increasingly dominated the twentieth [century]," however, it almost entirely dominates the twenty-first as well (484).

Reality television is a relatively new phenomenon, especially in terms of parenthood and childrearing, and these types of shows exemplify "other-directed" personalities. Series including *16 & Pregnant* depict the real lives of men and women experiencing teenage pregnancy and parenting. These shows focus on the mother's experience, and although the father is commonly included in the show, his experience is downplayed. The portrayal of young fatherhood fits many of the stereotypes, demonstrating the other-directed personality. The decisions a young father makes are directly affected by what he has perceived as acceptable, male parenting behavior, which are not necessarily always negative. A young father may "choose a given way of acting because he is anxious to receive the approval of others," be that his peers, his friends, his parents, or others who interpret young fatherhood in the same manner (Heberle 1956: 34). The media has

consistently communicated that young fathers are absent, or uninvolved, leaving a dedicated young father as the exception rather than the rule (Robinson 1988: 22). Through young father portrayal, the media is also communicating the idea of hegemonic masculinity which “expresses the general idea of assumptions and beliefs about masculinity that have become common sense... that are presumed to have an imperative character in shaping consciousness, norms of conduct, affect, or desire” (Hanke 1998:195). This message has been internalized by youth today, so they demonstrate those behaviors in their real situations and relationships.

Riesman (1950) theorizes that “from the mass media as well as from their own peers children can easily learn what the norm of parental behavior is” (51). In this sense, other-directedness maintains a cycle of stereotypes. The young fathers in the reality shows are other-directed in that they are behaving in ways in which they have internalized to be typical young fatherhood behaviors, but they are reinforcing the message to their peers who are consuming their experiences and reactions. Interestingly, researchers have found “a strong tendency for children, especially boys, to identify with same-sex television characters” and “this identification of boys with television characters was positively related to perceptions of masculine attitudes” (Signorielli 1989: 341). This identification could affect male children’s perceptions about fatherhood as fatherhood relates to masculinity as well.

The applicability of other-directedness to all types of families is a common criticism of Riesman’s work. Other scholars have noted that Riesman’s other-directedness only applies to the American, metropolitan, upper-middle class and that the rural, working class is either ignored or deemed as still tradition or inter-directed (Degler 1963: 484; Heberle 1956: 34). In terms of young fatherhood, each person is different and personality types and reactions to pregnancy may differ based on other factors. Because other-directedness is influenced by the media, and more

commonly than not the media communicates negative images of young fatherhood, one would assume young fathers in reality shows are only other-directed if they react negatively. However, young fathers can still be other-directed even if they are only portrayed as behaving in a positive manner. The producers of reality television have the ability to construct the show by editing scenes to make any given person appear good or bad. In other words, producers decide how to frame young fathers by highlighting positive or negative behaviors. A young father may act both favorably and unfavorably, but may only be shown in certain lights so the audience will perceive him as entirely that way.

Since the father is shown less in the episodes overall, this also communicates that although he may participate, he is not as involved or important as the mother. With the increasing popularity of such television series, more men will be observing the negative behaviors of young fathers which may lead them to have other-directed personalities if they themselves encounter parenthood. Goffman theorizes that “women and men ‘read’ images of femininity and masculinity and then attempt to mimic them when giving a gender performance” (Alexander 2003: 539). In fact, “empirical evidence suggests that ideals of masculinity are affecting men’s and boys’ understanding of their self-identities and behaviors” (Alexander 2003: 538). While the fathers on *16 & Pregnant* could be exhibiting other-directedness because of their peers, friends, or other media messages, there has never before been such a popular media outlet that would affect them as much as this show could.

Over time the media portrayal of the images of fatherhood has changed; the fatherhood image has become less traditional and more realistic. In the mid to late 1950’s and beyond, the roles and responsibilities of the television father conformed to traditional views and interpretations of the period. Eventually shows began to address various family issues rather than

portraying the stereotypical all-American family. However, the father was still the head of the household and maintained his fatherly duties. Today, reality television has allowed a new perspective on family dynamics because the actual personal and intimate interactions are displayed for the world to see. The image of the father had changed significantly to include single-parent households, separation, divorce, and even teen dads. Young fatherhood as portrayed on television has made perhaps the largest contribution to the changing image of the father because it shows men who are still children themselves, unprepared to raise a child, and struggling to find that traditional fatherhood identity. Riesman's other-directedness theory helps explain reality television series depicting young fatherhood because those men commonly act on the information they have consumed about young fatherhood. When others watch these men displaying other-directedness, it in turn affects their relationships because they are paying attention to how other young dads are acting. This project will apply Riesman's theory to an analysis of young fathers as portrayed in reality shows.

## METHODOLOGY

This study is a content analysis of how teen fathers are portrayed in the media. A content analysis "is a technique for examining information, or content, in written or symbolic material" (Neuman 2007: 20). A content analysis was chosen in order to examine how much more or less any one parent is shown in reality television and how they are portrayed to the audience. The show *16 & Pregnant* is the only reality series that follows the lives of teenage mothers and fathers as they experience pregnancy and become first-time parents. Each season shows seven to ten mothers and/or couples from various places in the United States. The show began airing in June 2009 and the third season aired in October 2010. The show is designed to help prevent teen pregnancy by educating its viewers about the realities of young parenthood.

## *Sample*

The sample consisted of seven episodes from the first and second seasons of *16 & Pregnant*, which were randomly selected. Two of the episodes were from season one and five were from season two. The episodes were viewed online on the MTV website. A coding sheet was created, tested, and revised prior to gathering data. Each episode of *16 & Pregnant* is forty minutes long. Demographics including age, education status, living situations, relationship status and length, and employment status were all recorded.

Within the sample of episodes, one of the mothers was seventeen years of age at the time they were filmed and two were sixteen. The other mother's ages were not directly given but their years in high school were given instead: three of the mothers were seniors at the time they were filmed and one was a junior. One of the fathers was seventeen, one was eighteen, and five of their ages were not given or indicated through their year in school.

During the pregnancy, five of the mothers were enrolled in a high school, one dropped out to study for the GED, and one switched to home schooling. Four of the fathers' education status was not given and three of them were in high school during the pregnancy. Four of the young fathers were employed and three were not employed, and none of the teen mothers were employed.

During the pregnancy, two of the couples lived together with one of the couple's parent or parents and five of the couples lived separately with their respective parent or parents. Once the baby was born, five of the couples lived together with one of the couple's parent or parents and two of the couples live separately with their respective parent or parents.

Two of the couples were dating for one year or less when the pregnancy occurred, one couple was together for two years, one couple was together for three years, and three of the

couple's relationship length was not given. Two of these couples became engaged during the episode and five of the couples did not get engaged.

Additionally, there were two episodes coded in which the fathers were present during the first half and either not present, or sporadically present, during the second half because of a break-up and/or disinterest in the baby. It was important to include these episodes in the analysis because it communicated the social problem of the absentee father. The media is a reflection of the culture, so to exclude these episodes would be like excluding a reality of society. The activities of the parents were recorded (N=369), the parents' physical presence in the scene (N=924), as well as whether the parents were portrayed with friends, family, or alone in a scene was recorded (N=589). Additionally, conversations between the mother and father were also recorded (N=81).

### *Coding*

A copy of the coding sheet is attached Appendix A. Demographics, including ages of the parents, education/employment status, living situations, and any engagement or marriage plans were recorded. The episode was coded for physical presence in the scene and activities in which the parent was engaged. It was noted whether the scene was pre-baby or post-baby arrival. Parents were coded as alone or together, if their activity included friends or family, and if their activity was baby-related or not baby-related. A "baby-related activity" was considered doing any physical or emotional preparation for the baby, which included having serious conversations about the pregnancy, the baby him/herself, and labor. "At school," "at work," or "doing homework" was included as a separate category not only because was it separate from their personal lives, but it also demonstrated how their work ethic and responsibility was portrayed. Overall, each physical presence was coded with each new activity to retain consistency. There

may be discrepancies between the number of times the parents were in the scene together and the number of activities done together because the couple would not necessarily be doing the same activity.

After the birth of the child, similar categories of post-baby activities are coded, but in more detail. The mother or father was coded as “with” or “without” the baby. The term “with” means that one or both parents were shown physically interacting with or caring for the baby. When “with” the baby, the mother, father, or both were then coded for activities done strictly with the baby because that is what the audience saw. To be “without” the child means that the baby may have been in the same room with the parent(s) but was not being directly cared for by the parent or parents. In this case, the parent or parents is coded for who they were with and if they were or were not doing a baby-related activity.

When the parents were together, they were coded as “with” or “without” the baby and as doing the same/similar activities or as doing different activities. The term “same/similar activities” means both parents were doing or were interested in the same activity. For example, if one parent was playing with the baby and the other parent was also engaged in the playtime, they were coded as doing the same/similar activities.

The term “different activities” means the parents were engaged in different activities or interests. If the couple was “with” the baby but doing different activities, the parent directly caring for the child was coded as doing that activity, and the other parent’s activity was coded as “other.” For example, if one parent was feeding the baby, he/she will be coded as feeding the baby. If the other parent was shown sleeping in the same room, he/she would be coded as doing “other”. Once again, there may be discrepancies in numbers between the two tables because of differing activities when together. There may also be discrepancies because a parent may have

been shown multi-tasking (i.e. doing homework while holding the baby). This means that the physical presence was recorded once, but multiple activities may have been recorded during that scene.

### *Strengths and Weaknesses*

One strength of this study is the limited number of reality shows that depict teen parenthood. Thus, the show *16 & Pregnant* is representative of how teen fathers are portrayed in reality shows. Both a strength and a weakness of this study was that how teen fathers are portrayed in the media has never been studied before. This is a strength because this study introduces the topic to the sociological world and examines the issue of teen fatherhood portrayal. However, it is also a weakness because there are no other findings to compare with the results of this study. Another weakness is the small sample size of seven episodes. A larger sample size would allow for a more complete and reliable examination of the series *16 & Pregnant*.

## FINDINGS

### *Physical Presence in a Scene*

The subset of physical presence pre-baby is shown in Table 1 (see Appendix B). There were a total of 499 (54.0 percent). In Table 1, almost half of all the scenes coded showed the mother in the scene without the father. The mother and the father depicted in the scene together was the next most frequent, and the father in the scene without the mother was the least frequent. In other words, these figures indicate that the father was the least likely to be shown in the scene without the mother (10.2 percent) as compared to the mother in the scene without the father (48.5 percent) and both the mother and the father in the scene together (41.3 percent).



The subset of physical presence post-baby is shown in Table 2 (see Appendix B). There were a total of 425 (46.0 percent). Table 2 indicates that in 37.4 percent of scenes coded after the baby was born, the mother was shown with the child. The mother was without the child 19.5 percent of the scenes. This means that the mother was shown with or without the child for over half of the scenes coded (56.9 percent). The father was shown with the child (8.2 percent) only slightly more often than when he was without the child (6.4 percent), totaling 14.6 percent. The parents together with their child doing similar activities almost mirrors that number, making up 14.8 percent of the scenes coded.

### *The Company of the Parents*

The subset of who the parent or parents were with pre-baby which included baby-related activities is shown in Table 3 (see Appendix B). There were a total of 135 (22.9 percent). In Table 3, the mother was more often shown with family doing baby-related activities (39.4 percent) than the father (7.6 percent). However, the couple was shown with family doing baby-related activities slightly more than half the time (53.0 percent). The mother was also more often shown with friends doing baby-related activities (68.0 percent) than the father (8.0 percent). These findings may indicate that a greater emphasis was placed on portraying only the mother or the couple together as engaged in baby-related activities with friends or family. The father's interest and participation in preparing for the baby may have been played down because it was seemingly not as important, or sends a message that preparing for a baby, either physically or emotionally, is emasculating. This portrays the father as less involved in preparing for the baby than the mother, or that he could only be preparing when the mother was involved as well.

The subset of who the parent or parents were with pre-baby which included non baby-related activities is shown in Table 4 (see Appendix B). There were a total of 318 (54.0 percent).

Table 4 indicates that the mother was also shown not doing baby-related activities overall more than the father. Additionally, the mother was shown performing half of these activities (50.0 percent), the couple together was shown in 38.7 percent of these activities, and the father was shown in only 11.3 percent of these activities. This once again indicates that even when not engaged in baby-related activities, the mother's overall experience is still more valued than the father's or the couple's experiences together.

The subset of who the parent or parents were with post-baby which included baby-related activities is shown in Table 5 (see Appendix B). There were a total of 57 (9.7 percent). After the baby was born, the mother was shown with friends or family doing baby-related activities while the father wasn't shown with either. Thus, the mother is depicted as continuing to spend time talking about or preparing for the baby even after he/she is born. By contrast, the failure to show the father engaged in these activities depicts him as completely uninvolved in baby-related activities unless he is with the mother.

The subset of who the parent or parents were with post-baby which included non baby-related activities is shown in Table 6 (see Appendix B). There were a total of 79 (13.4 percent). The mother was shown engaging in every non baby-related activity more often than the father. Most significantly, this table demonstrates how much more often the mother is shown either alone or with her friends not doing baby-related activities. This communicates to the viewer that after the baby is born, the mother's experiences continue to be valued more even when she isn't doing activities that involve the baby.

### *Activities*

The subset of "other" activities the parent or parents were engaged in pre-baby, including school, work, doing homework, chores, and other is shown in Table 7 (see Appendix B). There

were a total of 49 (13.3 percent). Table 7 demonstrates that the mother was shown at school, work, or doing homework at a significantly greater rate than the father (74.4 percent and 11.6 percent, respectively). This may indicate that the mother was portrayed as more studious and focused on her school and/or work achievements, especially in preparation for the baby. In turn, the father is depicted as potentially more distracted and lazy in terms of getting his work done. This may show that the mothers' must take more responsibility while the fathers' get away with being less successful in their work and school efforts.

The subset of activities the parent or parents were engaged in when "with" baby is shown in Table 8 (see Appendix B). There were a total of 320 (86.7 percent). Table 8 indicates that in every activity involved in caring for the baby, the mother is shown doing these activities more often than the father. The mother was shown playing with, holding, or rocking the baby 59.7 percent of the time, while the father is shown doing these activities only 17.3 percent of the time. The couple was shown in these activities together more often than the father is shown alone (23.0 percent). The mother was shown feeding and/or burping the baby 78.3 percent of the time while the father was only shown doing this activity 13 percent of the time. Breastfeeding does need to be taken into consideration because it prevents the father from participating in the feeding. However, the significant difference in numbers still depicts the mother as taking on more responsibility and acting as the primary caretaker. In the scenes where the baby is being bathed, the mother is shown doing this activity 60 percent of the time, the parents are shown doing it together 40 percent of the time, but the father is never shown bathing the baby by himself. Once again, this may portray the mother as the more involved parent who takes responsibility for the baby's primary and basic needs.

## *Conversations*

Table 9 (see Appendix B) exhibits the topics of conversations strictly between the mother and father. There were a total of 81 (100 percent). Qualitative comments between the parents were recorded for each show. The mother was more likely to instigate conversation about the father's involvement and/or interest, whether it be positive or negative. For instance, one of the mothers, Chelsea, makes comments to her boyfriend Adam such as, "I feel like you don't care" and "you are her dad, don't you think you should help me?" (Season 2, Episode 4). Jenelle suggests to her boyfriend Andrew that he doesn't care about their baby if he doesn't care about her: "How can you care for the baby if you don't care for me?" (Season 2, Episode 1). The father was more likely to instigate conversation about employment and finances. One of the fathers, Skylar, suggests to the mother that "since we figured you'd be breastfeeding, we probably should start watching money even more" (Season 2, Episode 9). These were the two most significant findings, however the other numbers do not indicate that one person mentioned one topic considerably more than the other.

Conversations between the couple could also be abusive. One mother, Jenelle, suffers emotional abuse from the father when he tells her, "you're nothing but a damn piece of c\*\*\*\*" (Season 2, Episode 1). Another mother, Chelsea, was also portrayed as suffering emotional abuse from the father, Adam. A monumental part of the episode was when she received a text message from Adam stating "no i want u to feel like the most worthless stupid \*\*\*\* in the world u better beleive [sic] its so over for the rest of our lives ya fat stretch mark b\*\*\*\*\* tell me where and wen [sic] to sign the papers over for that mistake" (Season 2, Episode 4). The abusive comments made by the fathers are what bring attention to the show and these portrayals will be interpreted by those who are other-directed as the norm rather than the exception.

## DISCUSSION

These findings indicate that the media shows young parents struggling with the prospect of raising a child, yet focuses more on the mother's experience than the father's. Not only is the father shown physically present significantly less than the mother, but he is also shown not taking as much interest in the pregnancy as well as taking care of the baby less often than the mother. MTV may have catered to their audience because the majority of viewers are female. Therefore, a predominately female audience may be more interested in seeing the mother than the father.

Part of reality television is that the audience never sees the whole truth, only a constructed truth. The fact that MTV spends less time focusing on the father's emotions and lifestyle changes when expecting a child means that this show is reflecting a social problem rather than promoting change. While it is true that some of the fathers represented may have been absent, MTV did not take the opportunity to change the absentee father stereotype through those that were engaged in their child's life. The opportunity was available for the producer to spend equal time focusing on the emotional and physical responsibilities of parenthood by giving each parent adequate camera time. Although it seems like an attempt was made to focus solely on the father in some scenes, the findings still indicate that it was more important to give attention to the mother.

The way in which *16 & Pregnant* framed the fathers encourages an other-directed attitude from the audience. According to Riesman's (1950) other-directed theory, when people watch reality shows such as *16 & Pregnant*, it impacts their relationships and ideas. When the father is portrayed in a negative light, either by downplaying his experience or depicting his role as secondary to the mother's, the audience views these behaviors and intersect them with their

own ideas about fatherhood. This portrayal further sends the message that it is socially acceptable for fathers to be less invested in the relationship between himself and his baby and with the baby's mother. A responsible, caring, and committed father is seemingly the exception in today's society rather than the rule. Since the media is an institution that assists in socializing people and has a strong influence on the formation of societal norms, it is disappointing to find that instead of changing ideas about fatherhood, these shows further promote negative images and behaviors.

It would be impossible to change the way in which people interpret media's messages, but what can be changed is the way in which the information is presented. While it was MTV's intention to promote the realities of teen pregnancy, in the process it highlighted the mother's struggles with parenthood while downplayed or completely ignored how the father was struggling himself. At the end of each episode, each mother speaks directly to the audience about the challenges of parenting at a young age. While their speeches are an inspirational conclusion to each episode, it is difficult to justify why the father wasn't given the opportunity to reach out to the audience as well. The findings in this study are just one example of how the media feeds stereotypes about young fathers as well as how it can interfere and mold society's ideas about parenting ideals.

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APPENDIX A

CODING SHEET

Title of show: 16 & Pregnant, Season 1/Season 2 (circle one)

Episode # \_\_\_\_\_

Teen parent/s name/s:

Age of teen mother (if given): \_\_\_\_\_

Age of “teen” father (if given): \_\_\_\_\_

How long the couple was together before pregnancy occurred (if given) \_\_\_\_\_

Education status of mother throughout the episode: (circle all that apply)

- a. In a high school
- b. Alternative school
- c. Home school
- d. High school drop-out/no plans to return
- e. Taking time off/plans to return
- f. Obtained GED
- g. Graduated with a diploma
- h. College drop-out
- i. Enrolled in college

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

Education status of father throughout the episode: (circle all that apply)

- a. Enrolled in a high school
- b. Alternative school
- c. Home school
- d. High school drop-out/no plans to return
- e. Taking time off/plans to return
- f. Obtained GED
- g. Graduated with a diploma
- h. College drop-out
- i. Enrolled in college

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

What is their living situation *during* the pregnancy:

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What is their living situation *after* the pregnancy:

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Does the couple get engagement or married at any point throughout the episode?

Yes/No \_\_\_\_\_

Is the father employed? Yes/No

Is the mother employed? Yes/No

Physical presence in the episode before the baby is born

<i>Mother in the scene without the father</i>	
<i>Father in the scene without the mother</i>	
<i>Both mother and father in the scene together</i>	

Activities and Participation Pre-Baby

	<b><i>Mother's Activities</i></b>	<b><i>Father's Activities</i></b>	<b><i>Activities Done Together</i></b>
<i>With friends not doing baby-related activities</i>			
<i>With friends doing baby-related activities</i>			
<i>With parent(s) not doing baby-related activities</i>			
<i>With parent(s) doing baby-related activities</i>			
<i>Alone not doing baby-related activities</i>			
<i>Alone doing baby-related activities</i>			

<i>At school or work; doing homework</i>			
<i>Other</i>			

Physical presence in the episode after the baby is born

<i>Mother with the child</i>		
<i>Mother without the child</i>		
<i>Father with the child</i>		
<i>Father without the child</i>		
<i>Parents together, with child Same/similar activities</i>		
<i>Parents together, with child Different activities</i>		
<i>Parents together, without child Same/similar activities</i>		
<i>Parents together, without child Different activities</i>		

Activities and Participation Post-Baby

	<i><b>Mother's Activities</b></i>	<i><b>Father's Activities</b></i>	<i><b>Activities Done Together</b></i>
<i>With friends not doing baby-related activities</i>			
<i>With friends doing baby-related activities</i>			
<i>With parent(s) not doing baby-related activities</i>			
<i>With parent(s) doing baby-related activities</i>			
<i>Alone not doing baby-related activities</i>			

<i>Alone doing baby-related activities</i>			
<i>At school or work; doing homework</i>			
<i>Bathing the baby</i>			
<i>Getting up at night for the baby</i>			
<i>Feeding, burping the baby</i>			
<i>Playing with, holding, or rocking the baby</i>			
<i>Changing the baby's diaper</i>			
<i>Other</i>			

Arguments and Conversations between Mother and Father

Nature of Argument or Conversation	He instigated	She instigated	Total
<i>Mother/Father Relationship</i>			
<i>Employment/Finances</i>			
<i>School Attendance, Homework</i>			
<i>The baby him/herself (regret, changes, etc.)</i>			
<i>Father's Involvement/Interest</i>			
<i>Mother's Involvement/Interest</i>			
<i>Maternal/Paternal Grandparent Relationship</i>			
<i>Other (list)</i>			

APPENDIX B

TABLES

Table 1: Physical Presence in the episode pre-baby

<b>Mother without father</b>	242	48.5 %
<b>Both mother and father together</b>	206	41.3%
<b>Father without mother</b>	51	10.2%
<b>Total (n=499)</b>	499	100%

Table 2: Physical Presence in the episode post-baby

<b>Mother with the child</b>	159	37.4%
<b>Mother without the child</b>	83	19.5%
<b>Parents together, with child Same/similar activities</b>	63	14.8%
<b>Father with the child</b>	35	8.2%
<b>Parents together, without child Same/similar activities</b>	33	7.8%
<b>Father without the child</b>	27	6.4%
<b>Parents together, with child Different activities</b>	22	5.2%
<b>Parents together, without child Different activities</b>	3	0.7%
<b>Total (n=425)</b>	425	100%

Table 3: Baby-Related Activities and Participation Pre-Baby

	<b>Mother</b>	<b>Father</b>	<b>Together</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>With family</b>	26 (39.4%)	5 (7.6%)	35 (53.0%)	66 (48.9%)
<b>Alone</b>	1 (2.3%)	2 (4.5%)	41 (93.2%)	44 (32.6%)
<b>With friends</b>	17 (68.0%)	2 (8.0%)	6 (24.0%)	25 (18.5%)
<b>Total (n=135)</b>	44 (32.6%)	9 (6.7%)	82 (60.7%)	135 (100%)

Table 4: Non Baby-Related Activities and Participation Pre-Baby

	<b>Mother</b>	<b>Father</b>	<b>Together</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Alone</b>	63 (35.2%)	25 (14.0%)	91 (50.8%)	179 (56.3%)
<b>With family</b>	52 (66.7 %)	5 (6.4%)	21 (26.9%)	78 (24.5%)
<b>With friends</b>	44 (72.1%)	6 (9.8 %)	11 (18.0%)	61 (19.2%)
<b>Total (n=318)</b>	159 (50.0%)	36 (11.3%)	123 (38.7%)	318 (100%)

Table 5: Baby-Related Activities and Participation Post-Baby

	<b>Mother</b>	<b>Father</b>	<b>Together</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Alone</b>	15 (53.6%)	6 (21.4%)	7 (25.0%)	28 (49.1%)
<b>With family</b>	11 (64.7%)	0 (0.0%)	6 (35.3%)	17 (29.8%)
<b>With friends</b>	12 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	12 (21.1%)
<b>Total (n=57)</b>	38 (66.7%)	6 (10.5%)	13 (22.8%)	57 (100%)

Table 6: Non Baby-Related Activities and Participation Post-Baby

	<b>Mother</b>	<b>Father</b>	<b>Together</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Alone</b>	23 (40.4%)	18 (31.6%)	16 (28.1%)	57 (72.2%)
<b>With friends</b>	10 (76.9%)	3 (23.1%)	0 (0.0%)	13 (16.5%)
<b>With family</b>	4 (44.4%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (55.6%)	9 (11.4%)
<b>Total (n=79)</b>	37 (46.8%)	21 (26.6%)	21 (26.6%)	79 (100%)

Table 7: Other Activities Pre-Baby

	<b>Mother</b>	<b>Father</b>	<b>Together</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>At school or work; doing homework</b>	32 (74.4%)	5 (11.6%)	6 (14.0%)	43 (8.6%)
<b>Chores</b>	3 (75.0%)	1 (25.0%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (0.8%)
<b>Other</b>	0 (0.0%)	2 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (0.4%)
<b>Total (n=49)</b>	35 (71.4%)	8 (16.3 %)	6 (12.2 %)	49 (100%)

Table 8: Activities Done When “With” Baby

	<b>Mother</b>	<b>Father</b>	<b>Together</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Playing with, holding, or rocking the baby</b>	114 (59.7%)	33 (17.3%)	44 (23.0%)	191 (59.7%)
<b>Feeding, burping the baby</b>	36 (78.3%)	6 (13.0%)	4 (8.7%)	46 (14.4%)
<b>At school or work; doing homework</b>	17 (77.3%)	5 (22.7%)	0 (0.0%)	22 (6.9%)
<b>Changing the baby’s diaper</b>	15 (71.4%)	3 (14.3%)	3 (14.3%)	21 (6.6%)
<b>Other</b>	7 (46.7%)	8 (53.3%)	0 (0.0%)	15 (4.7%)
<b>Getting up at night for the baby</b>	9 (81.8%)	2 (18.2%)	0 (0.0%)	11 (3.4%)
<b>Chores</b>	5 (55.6%)	3 (33.3%)	1 (11.1%)	9 (2.8%)
<b>Bathing the baby</b>	3 (60.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (40.0%)	5 (1.6%)
<b>Total (n=320)</b>	206 (64.4%)	60 (18.8%)	54 (16.9%)	320 (100%)

Table 9: Conversations between the Mother and Father

	<b>He instigated</b>	<b>She instigated</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Mother/Father Relationship</b>	9 (45.0%)	11 (55.0%)	20 (24.7%)
<b>The baby him/herself</b>	7 (43.8%)	9 (56.3%)	16 (19.8%)
<b>Father's Involvement/Interest</b>	1 (6.7%)	14 (93.3%)	15 (18.5%)
<b>Employment/Finances</b>	9 (90.0%)	1 (10.0%)	10 (12.3%)
<b>Other</b>	1 (14.3%)	6 (85.7%)	7 (8.6%)
<b>School Attendance, Homework</b>	3 (60.0%)	2 (40.0%)	5 (6.2%)
<b>Maternal/Paternal Grandparent Relationship</b>	2 (40.0%)	3 (60.0%)	5 (6.2%)
<b>Mother's Involvement/Interest</b>	2 (66.7%)	1 (33.3%)	3 (3.7%)
<b>Total (N=81)</b>	34 (42.0%)	47 (58.0%)	81 (100%)