

Notions of Fatherhood among Ethiopian Adolescents: Nature, Effects and Determinants

By Belay Tefera

Reviewed by Tesfaye Semela¹

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This is a review of a book entitled *Notions of Fatherhood among Ethiopian Adolescents: Nature, Effects and Determinants* written by Dr. Belay Tefera. Arguably, it is the first of its kind for the recently emerging Developmental and Social Psychology literature in Ethiopia. The book which is 208 pages-long (incl. index but excluding preliminary pages) is divided into two main parts, and consists of six chapters, 37 tables and 217 references. The short bibliographic list with respect to the local literature (only 19) suggests the infantile stage of knowledge production in the field of psychology in general. In this regard, I wish to commend Dr. Belay Tefera for being a source of inspiration to fellow Ethiopian academics and researchers working in various sub-fields of psychology.

The major trust of the book is to investigate identity development vis-à-vis fatherhood among Ethiopian adolescents. It is unique at least on two important counts. Firstly, it adds a wealth of empirical evidence to the western-dominated developmental psychology literature which marginalizes Africa though identity development is a function of location (i.e. culture) (Benson 2001). Secondly, it offers important

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insights into fatherhood as an object of identity formation from the perspective of Ethiopian adolescents. However, apart from its apparent usefulness in terms of adding to the existing literature, the fundamental purpose of the book is to clarify the complexity surrounding the conception of fatherhood as a sole masculine trait versus a combination of both femininity and masculinity.

Notions of Fatherhood among Ethiopian Adolescents: Nature, Effects and Determinants has two major parts. For the most part, the book is an outcome of empirical investigation. The data were generated on a sample of 534 adolescents drawn from Addis Ababa where ethno-cultural diversity is the rule rather than the exception. The sample had a mean age of 16.56 years with educational profile ranging from grade eight to first-year college. Part I is made up of three chapters which the author collectively labeled as “*Background*”. It begins by setting the research context discussing the demographic, socio-economic, and the gender segregation in collectivist culture, and the dire economic circumstances that further complicate adolescent identity formation. Then, he concludes the chapter with a section, entitled “*Storming the Stress*,” to highlight how identity search for Ethiopian adolescents is galvanized by the socio-cultural realities of being misunderstood by society on the one hand and the general environmental constraints on the other in striving to determine their life trajectories.

The second chapter presents Belay's critical examination of extant traditions, paradigms, and perspectives of adolescent identity development with a great deal of care and authority. Belay synthesized the behavioral, constructivist, cognitivist, feminist, and psychoanalytic perspectives of adolescent identity development in a very condensed, nonetheless comprehensive manner while at the same time skillfully squeezing out their contribution to forging the notions of fatherhood. This section makes important addition to the understanding of adolescent development in what the author calls “*collectivist societies*”. In so doing, the review explicitly demonstrates how the concepts of

“Masculinity/Femininity” (and in turn, the notions of fatherhood) could be shaped by the social, historical and political, and other contextual realities among others in the making of adolescents’ subjectivities and their psychological attributes.

Chapter Three is a culmination of Part I. It proposes a conceptual framework which emerged as a byproduct of the critical analyses of a relevant research literature. In the proposed conceptual model labeled as *Notions of Fatherhood for Ethiopian Adolescents* (p. 84), the author demonstrates the complex state affairs that come into play in forging identity. While doing so, he logically explicates the multi-layered (i.e. *micro*, *meso*, and *macro* levels) interaction of the factors that come into play in determining the notion of fatherhood. Notwithstanding the fact that the book was based on data gathered in the mid 1990s, the model which ensued from the theoretical analysis is still consistent with the most recent thinking that began to unfold in the late 1990s with ecological system perspective (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) and the contemporary framework of developmental systems theory (Lerner 2003; in Lerner, Easterbrooks & Mistry 2003:3), both of which stress the salience of person-context relations to understand adolescent identity development.

The Two Studies, as Belay collectively calls them, constitute two independent, nevertheless interrelated, empirical research reports presented in the fourth and fifth chapters to make up Part II. Appropriately entitled as *Fatherhood Identity Definition: Nature, Effects, and Determinants*, Chapter 4 covers 57-pages (Pages 89-156) which consists of huge amount of empirical data (presented in 28 tables). Its objectives are to (1) determine the existence of two distinct types of orientations (masculine and feminine), perspectives, and thoughts of fatherhood identity construction (nature); (2) investigate how far these components affect one another (effects of the femininity and masculinity components); and, (3) identify the personal, parental, and environmental factors affect notions of fatherhood (determinants). Overall, the chapter lives up to the claims it has already made in its title

since the purpose it set out to serve has been satisfactorily achieved with great deal of originality and methodological rigor.

Chapter 5: *Perception of Parental Involvement in Child Rearing Activities: Goals, Roles, and Way* presents Study II. This part of the book is basically meant to complement the preceding chapter in a sense that it intends to determine how identity as a would-be father could be constructed based on adolescents' perception of their parents' role as fathers and mothers. In unraveling the notion, distinction is made between *who they are* and *who they ought to be*. Thus, the *femininity* element of fatherhood which is found to creep into in the latter's case apparently shows the possible shift in the notions of fatherhood that can be attributable to environmental influences - a discussion which I will pick in a moment.

On top of examining why the notion of fatherhood traverses the boundaries of masculinity, the book provokes further research on how this conception manifests across individuals (adolescents) who possess varying degrees of cultural capital. Evidently, the notion of fatherhood (and the development of identity thereof) that children construct as they interact with their social and cultural milieus, first and for most, are shaped by the home environment. Hence, other things being the same, individual's identity forged in a family context where mothers are working (and educated) is likely to be more egalitarian (Tesfaye, 1996) and less likely to conceive fatherhood as typically traditional masculine trait characterized by *separation* (Gilligan, 1982) which is typical of patriarchal societies. Regardless of the influence of the micro context (family, peers, and significant others), the perspective of cultural psychology of self seems to powerfully explain why individual's identity is a function of *location* (emphasis added) – “What” and “who” you are, is a function of where you are (Benson 2001: 3). In other words, it can be argued that as much as adolescent's identity is constructed by globalization so does notions of fatherhood. More than ever Ethiopian adolescents are increasingly being exposed to Western

movies (both spoiling and educative), cable TV, propaganda, and the growing urbanization – owing to these and others not stated here, it is important to recognize to what extent their global and other identities come into play i.e. how much contribution do these factors make in their move away from a highly masculine-oriented to a more androgenic notion of fatherhood?

The key contributions of the book are both theoretical and practical. At the practical level, the salience of this research-based book relates to addressing gender issues that remain to challenge all aspects of social life. In particular, Belay's conclusion that the notions of fatherhood are inconsistent with the essentialist tradition, that posit fatherhood as an "outgrowth of masculinity" takes a central place. Moreover, his assertion: *Adolescents' notions of fatherhood are found to have masculinity with fully blown 'femininity'* (p. 181) apparently receives both theoretical and empirical support in the recent literature (e.g., Hyde, 2005; Spelke, 2005). For instance, in an empirical study, Hyde (2005) found gender similarities rather than differences in most gendered conceptions like mathematics achievement, aptitude and affect (see also Spelke, 2005) which was controversial until recently. This suggests the importance of location (i.e. culture) at the core in shaping the trajectories individuals, and in turn, their resulting identities. In view of this, Belay's findings that revealed the convergence of masculine and feminine roles in being a father among Ethiopian (in Addis Ababa) adolescents may well be extended to a similar convergence in adolescent identity formation with respect to career choice suggesting a mutual crossover of traditional career boundaries. While the possible reason for shifting gender roles to more androgynous views may be attributable to the fact that the sample was drawn from Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital (arguably the African capital) that offer a context of cosmopolitan and highly globalized character, Belay's book cannot offer conclusive evidence of a similar shift (or otherwise) that is in the making outside Addis Ababa. Perhaps this is an area where his next book (or by other scholars in the field) should attempt to find answers.

In view of the above, questions like how much do culture (collectivist) and economics (underdevelopment) contribute to the masculinization of fatherhood, and to what extent the notion of fatherhood changes (due to its' relative malleability) overtime are issues that need further clarification. In my opinion, to answer the above questions, beyond social constructivism which the author recommended for future research, the integrated study of person-context relations based on developmental system perspective (Lerner et al. 2003) might help us understand how identity development (including the notion of fatherhood) varies across individuals and overtime; and how individual-context relations impinge on their life trajectories.

However, there are some minor reservations about the book, which are more of form than content. This mainly concerns the assigning of a title for Chapter two and table layout. Though the book is understandably a result from a PhD work, the title assigned to Chapter two (i.e. "Literature Review") could have reflected the main theme of the subject. Few editorial matters related to formatting should have attracted the author's attention. For instance, tables that depict statistical outputs are unattractive to the reader. Some of the tables are too long without contributing much to the content presented or discussed. In addition, the author could have boosted the appearance by keeping the statistical figures to the minimum or placing them as notes below the respective tables.

To sum up, *Notions of Fatherhood among Ethiopian Adolescents: Nature, Effects, and Determinants* is a well written book deserving a high scholarly merit. Apart from its contribution to the fields of developmental, and social psychology, it represents a pioneering work by an Ethiopian developmental psychologist. It is a very useful reference book for graduate and postgraduate students, instructors and researchers in the fields of psychology and sociology.

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