

THE MEANING OF FATHERHOOD FOR MEN

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Introduction

Family patterns are changing rapidly in the United States. The decline in marriage has been accompanied by a rise in divorce and a decline in the likelihood of marriage following a divorce, which has only been partially countered by the rise in cohabitation. Moreover, the traditionally very close link between marriage and childbearing has weakened, with corresponding increases in the proportion of children born out-of-wedlock, either in nonmarital cohabitation or outside of a union altogether. Such changes, inevitably, shift the roles of men and women, not only in relation to each other, but also in relation to their children. These changes in family patterns signal a weaker commitment of women to men and of men to women; a weaker commitment by the partners to their relationship; and very possibly a weaker commitment to their children.

It is evident from these documented trends that women, and disproportionately men, are increasingly rejecting the conventional roles and obligations of a traditional family. The rise in divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing has been paralleled by low levels of financial and social support provided by absent fathers to their children. Conflicting evidence shows that, on the one hand, there are men who increasingly view children and fatherhood primarily as nothing but responsibility and obligation, and, on the other hand, there are men who emphasize the role of children as a source of meaning, happiness, and stability.

Research has also shown that children are increasingly seen as interfering with the spousal relationship (Veroff, Douvan, and Kulka, 1981). While young men and women in the U.S. claim to value marriage and children, their attitudes toward family formation, and the rising cost of child rearing appear to be in conflict with their increasing materialism and increasing aspirations for expensive consumer goods (Crimmins, Easterlin, and Saito, 1991). Importantly, adolescent males are significantly more likely than females to value such goods and rate owning such goods as very important, suggesting a higher priority of spending for themselves rather than providing for the expenses of a family (Crimmins, Easterlin, and Saito, 1991).

Before we proceed further, a few clarifications are in order. A man becomes a *father* when he has his first child; this status is fixed, such that, once a man becomes a father he is always a father. He may subsequently have more children, or his responsibilities and activities may change due to divorce, or children leaving home, or for other reasons, but he is always a father. *Fatherhood*, then, is a status attained by having a child and is irrevocable (unless an only child dies). In the contemporary research literature, the term fatherhood is used interchangeably with the term *fathering* which includes, beyond the procreative act itself, all the childrearing roles, activities, duties, and responsibilities that fathers are expected to perform and fulfill. Furthermore, while these definitions once implied *biological* fathers only, with the rapid changes in the family structure they came to include non-biological fathers as well. We follow the common practice in the research literature and use "fatherhood" to include childrearing responsibilities and fathering activities as well, regardless of whether they are carried out by biological or nonbiological fathers.

The next point to explore is, whose concept of fatherhood we are interested. While there are several perspectives that are equally relevant e.g., the mother's, the child's, the society's, for the purposes of this document we, almost exclusively, focus on "the meaning of fatherhood for men," as defined by men.

A final point is how to operationalize "meaning." One approach is to examine attitude-driven dimensions of what men think and believe fatherhood means to them. Another approach is to focus on the behavior-driven aspects and to examine what men think they should be doing (e.g., parenting roles, responsibilities, duties), and what they actually are doing. Which approach is taken depends on which definition of fatherhood we adopt. If we stay with fatherhood as the status of being a father, then the meaning of fatherhood derives from the attitudinal perspective. If we adopt the definition of fatherhood that includes fathering activities, then the meaning of fatherhood includes the behavioral perspective as well. The common practice in the research field seems to be to tie the meaning of fatherhood to the roles men should play, often as defined by men, women, and children. We base much of what we say on this supposition.

The Knowledge We Have

Research and evidence on fatherhood is far more abundant now than it has ever been; thousands of research papers and articles on related topics have been published over the last quarter of a century. Several excellent reviews and compilations have summarized the literature rather comprehensively. We draw heavily from these reviews and a few seminal works to present a summary of what is known about the "the meaning of fatherhood for men." In doing so, we emphasize two emerging themes: the changing role of fathers over time, and the arising of two seemingly conflicting trends -- the nurturing, caring, emotionally attuned father who enters fatherhood consciously and performs his duties conscientiously versus those who may not have wanted to become fathers, who deny paternity, who are absent from the home, and shirk their parental responsibility and obligations.

The Historical Account

It is clear from an essay by Demos (1986) outlining the changing role of fathers in western societies over the past several centuries that the pattern of change is not linear but much of it has occurred in the twentieth century. Further, the changing role of fathers is only a part of the larger changes in the American family, succinctly summarized by Cherlin (1981) and others (e.g., Thornton and Freedman, 1983).

In the traditional model of fatherhood, fathers played a dominant role in the lives of their children, assuming a broad range of responsibilities defining and supervising the children's development. Domestic control was largely in the hands of men; wives were expected to defer to husbands on matters of childrearing. A father's moral role persisted through childhood into adult life. His influence was pervasive and usually exceeded the mother's responsibilities over the child (Rotundo, 1985). In the beginning of the nineteenth century, with the shift away from an agrarian to an industrial mode of production, the paternal control over children began to erode. As men's economic roles increasingly drew them outside the home and into the market place, women extended their sphere of domestic influence (Filene, 1986; Lasch, 1977). An increase of

affective ties within the family reshaped the nature of parenthood and parent-child relations (Shorter 1975; Stone, 1979). The change in the family and parental division of labor was the beginning of a shift in the balance of power within the family.

The spatial separation of work and home helped revise marital and parental roles. For fathers, this was the beginning of an almost exclusive emphasis on economic responsibilities, which naturally, curtailed the men's day-to-day contact with their children. Demos (1986) writes that the separation of work and family life led to the disappearance of certain key elements of traditional fatherhood (e.g., father as moral overseer), and to the transformation of others (e.g., father as role model). Men still continued to act as disciplinarians in the family, but their removal from the home weakened their tie to the emotional bonds that form between generations in a family (Rotundo, 1985). The father now derived his status from the outside world, from his place in the market place. His occupational standing, his economic power established not only his authority in the home, but his worthiness as a husband and father as well. With this movement from ascribed value to achieved value throughout the nineteenth century, an erosion in the role of the fathers began. Convincing evidence of this shift is the change in custody practices. Until about the mid-nineteenth century, custody following marital disruption was typically awarded to fathers; by the end of the century children increasingly remained with their mothers when marriages dissolved. Early in the twentieth century, the practice of granting custody to mothers was sanctified in the doctrine of "the tender years" which held that the children's interests were best served when they were raised by their mothers, whose parenting skills were ordinarily superior to those of their husbands.

This is not to say that fathers completely relinquished their authority. On the contrary some fathers were probably unwilling to cede so much of their children's supervision to the mothers and became more involved in the day-to-day upbringing of the children. It seems likely, however, that the number of these actively involved fathers declined throughout the nineteenth century (Filene, 1986), and a more distant and detached style of fatherhood role, restricted largely to the role of fathers as "good providers," emerged.

With the possible exception of the Depression and war years, when many men were unable to live-up to this image, the image of the father as good provider remained intact through the second World War years, until the men returned from the war (Benson, 1968). During the Depression years, the strict division of labor that existed heretofore was abandoned by necessity as women were forced to take up a more active economic role, and men were obliged to share domestic chores. But it seems this was a temporary setback, as the post-World War II period appeared to strengthen the traditional family by strengthening the gender-based division of labor in the family, despite expanding economic roles of women during the war years.

This domestic order remained basically unchallenged until the late 1960s and early 1970s when the confluence of a number of trends fundamentally transformed the family. Economists, sociologists, and demographers continue to debate the exact determinants of this change and argue on how much weight to assign to cultural versus structural factors. Feminist scholars contend that the domestic accord regulating the division of labor within the family was already problematic, long before the so-called feminist revolution. Barbara Ehrenreich (1983) argued that concurrent with, if not prior to, the reawakening of feminist consciousness men were experiencing their own resentments about the burdens of the good provider role. She contends that as early as in the 1950s men were gradually retreating from this role because they felt socially and emotionally imprisoned by the narrowly defined masculine role and were interested in shedding the exclusive responsibilities of providing for their families, independent of the feminist discontent. What followed, Ehrenreich argues, was a male revolt that occurred in tandem with the feminist revolution of the 1970s, both of which helped reorder domestic life and produced a family form singularly different from the traditional model that had emerged in the late nineteenth century.

In contrast to this weighty account of cultural discontent, economists argue that it was the economic expansion of service jobs and growth of wage rates for female employment that drew women into the labor force, and forced a change in the domestic order. Sociologists and demographers provide differing accounts based on declining fertility rates and increasing divorce rates as well as rising educational levels of women which made work outside the home more attractive than full-time mothering. Regardless of which explanation is more credible, it is clear that the changes in the family and the decline of the good-provider role came about when social structural changes converged with ideological shifts in gender roles. Furstenberg (1988) states that these changes were in effect sociologically "over-determined," meaning that changes in the family and in the meaning of fatherhood would have happened even if some of the social structural or ideological changes had not occurred when they did.

The Contemporary Perspective

As we've stated above, the contemporary picture of fatherhood as reflected by the current research is one of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. On the one hand we have the nurturant, caring, emotionally attuned parents who are changing diapers, reading bed-time stories, or shooting hoops with the kids, all the while bringing home the bacon. On the other hand we have men who deny their paternity, and we have absent fathers, fathers who are not absent but have no involvement with their kids, and men who shirk their obligations and refuse to support their children. What accounts for this discordant picture?

The contradiction emerges directly from the historical account we've just presented. As men escaped from the excessive burdens of the good provider role, they were also freed to participate more fully in the family. Yet, they had also been freed to flee from commitment and from family responsibilities altogether. To the extent that married men have internalized the "full participation" paradigm, when they divorce and typically are expected or able to fulfill only the "good provider" role, resentment sets in. This, then, can lead to total rejection of all roles (i.e., "If I can't have the fun part of the father role, then I don't want any"). Evidence for the flight from commitment and responsibility is provided by the decline in the marriage rate and the rise in the divorce rate. The parallel rise in cohabitation also reflects men's and women's unwillingness to commit to and support a traditional family. Let us briefly review what is known about the retreat from paternal obligations; then we shall review the evidence on the increasing involvement of fathers with their children and the consequences for children and spouses.

Esgebeen and Uhlenberg (1985) have documented the declining involvement of men in families between the 1960-1980 period using data from the 1960, and 1970 decennial censuses and the 1980 Current Population Survey. They estimated a 43 percent decline in the average number of years that men between the ages 20 to 49 spend in families with young children falling from 12.3 years on average in 1960 to just 7.0 years in 1980. Later marriage, reduced fertility, and increasing rates of marital dissolution have all contributed to this sharp decline. Esgebeen and Uhlenberg interpret these results to mean that the opportunity cost of fatherhood is rising as the social pressure for men to become fathers declines. In essence, fatherhood is becoming a more voluntary role that requires a greater degree of personal and economic sacrifice. Now, if this were the case, as more sacrifice is required, fewer men would assume this role, and those who choose to make this sacrifice will be a highly self-selected group among the most committed and dedicated. Yet, this view is not consistent with much of the available evidence. For example, we know that a growing proportion of couples who conceive out of wedlock elect not to marry (O'Connell and Rogers, 1984). There is a widespread reluctance among unmarried fathers to assume economic responsibility for the children they have sired. The proportion of unmarried men who contribute to the support of their children has declined over the past few decades. We also have evidence that many males simply do not even acknowledge the existence of children they do not see or support. A majority of all men who are required to pay child support do not fully comply, and a significant proportion of men leave their wife or partner without any child support agreement or arrangement. Furthermore, often the amount of payment is so low that it only rarely pulls children out of poverty. More disturbingly, studies of men's ability to pay child support have found that most fathers could comply with court orders and still live quite well after doing so (Weitzman, 1985).

While there is a fairly common belief that men do not pay child support because of insufficient support and intractable problem may well be that there is a very loose psychological attachment between noncustodial fathers and their children. Statistics on the amount of contact between noncustodial fathers and their children is alarmingly low, particularly after a lengthy separation (Mott, 1983; Furstenberg, 1991; Marsiglio, 1998). The provision of child support is also closely related to the amount of contact with the children, which in turn is strongly associated with men's socioeconomic position (Seltzer, Schaeffer, and Charng, 1989). Significantly, and surprisingly, support and contact figures for never married fathers appear to be as high as the figures for men who were once wed to the mothers. If these figures continue to hold, then there is not much advantage gained by the children of noncustodial fathers for having been born in wedlock.

Research on the more caring, nurturing, emotionally and physically involved fatherhood is no less abundant. The growing child-developmental literature on fatherhood has focused largely on the consequences of such involvement especially during infancy and early childhood for their cognitive and emotional gains. While it would be a seemingly obvious proposition to most of us, that fathers' consistent and substantial involvement in child care would benefit the child, this appears to have not been well established. The relationship between paternal involvement and children's well-being seems to be mediated by a number of other conditions that involve the father, the mother, and the child. In other words, increased paternal involvement does not automatically result in improved child outcomes. Nor is it clear whether the father's involvement provides unique nurturance that can not be as readily provided by substitute caregivers.

A more unresolved question is the extent to which fathers actually involve themselves in child care. It appears, from a variety of data sources, that most fathers still do very little child care, especially when the children are very young. To be sure, there has been a change in the meaning of fatherhood, as reflected in both the attitude and the behavior of fathers, largely as a result of a general shift in less gender-specific family roles (Thornton and Freedman, 1983; Stein, 1984). But, Pleck (1985) and others, who have done extensive research on this question, has concluded that most of these changes have been relatively modest. It appears that, especially among younger people, men have reduced the hours they spend at work in favor of home activities while women have followed the opposite course. There is a corresponding increase in the amount of time spent by men on activities that have traditionally been performed by women (Juster and Stafford, 1985). Pleck's analysis of time diaries also show that fathers spend substantially more time in domestic and child care activities in households when mothers are employed, but that men still fall far short of assuming an equal load. More interestingly, men in families with young children do less than those in households with no children or with older children. Baydar and Brooks-Gunn (1991) argue that even when men do spend a substantial amount of time with their children, the quality of involvement is not high, and therefore fathers' involvement is not an important or necessary element of children's development. A number of others (e.g., Lamb, 1976, 1877; Gunsberg, 1982) argue that resident fathers do play a significant role in their children's growth and development. Evidence from studies of fatherhood after divorce or separation shows much the same pattern, except generally noncustodial fathers are found to be even more marginal. Typically, fathers, if they remain at the scene at all, play a recreational rather than an instrumental role in their children's lives. Clearly, the effects of a number of confounding factors need to be disentangled before we can get a clear picture of the magnitude of change in the fathering patterns and its effects on children. In sum, there seems to be compelling evidence of a change in the contemporary meaning of fatherhood for men, but not so much that men have become equal partners in parenthood.

The Future of Fatherhood

The only thing we can say with some confidence on the current status of fatherhood research is that there is very little consensus and much of the work is heavily value laden. Having said that, we hasten to add, that the lack of consensus on the "meaning of fatherhood" among researchers is not surprising because there is no consensus among the fathers, the mothers, or the children, either. In fact, these discrepant views of fatherhood by the interested parties lie at the root of the political squabbles in the family arena. Furthermore, such differences are an important predictor of marital and relationship dissolution, as well as how successfully children are raised following such relationship transitions.

One thing is for sure, a change has occurred in the way fatherhood is viewed and practiced. It is hard to imagine a scenario that would restore the form of family that was common a generation or two ago. It is not only unlikely that the traditional roles could be restored, but also further changes will undoubtedly occur in the roles of women and men. For example, if the proportion of working mothers with young children continue to increase, there will be more pressure on fathers (or others) to share more of the child care. The real question is whether men's attitudes and behavior will fall in line (willingly or grudgingly) as they are increasingly pressured by their partners and the society at large to help out more, or whether will they simply flee. Convincing fathers to assume a greater share of child rearing responsibilities might prove to be a more formidable task when the children are not born and raised in traditional two-parent intact families.

There is a fair amount of agreement on the "flight from commitment," the male version of liberation (Ehrenreich, 1983), and the end of the "good provider" role, but not on its "legitimate successor" primarily because it "has not yet appeared on the scene" (Bernard, 1981). Demos (1986) and Rotundo (1985) in separate assessments of the future of fatherhood express similar apprehensions about the growing trends toward absence of fathers from families and their apparent unwillingness to support their children when they live apart. Rotundo sees this as a dramatic defiance of the notions of "modern fatherhood" that is "consistent with "an extreme strain of male individualism that reacts to family responsibility as a quiet form of tyranny."

The optimistic view in the research literature is one of a rising interest in fatherhood, and the emergence of a "new" father. This new father is androgynous and a full partner in parenthood. Not everyone seems to share this view. Rotundo and others question whether the androgynous fatherhood will emerge as the predominant model, even in the middle class where it seems to have been championed the most. For example, Lamb et al. (1987) distinguish three different aspects of paternal involvement in child rearing: *availability*, representing the lowest level of involvement; *interaction*, an intermediate level of involvement, and *responsibility*, the highest level of involvement. National level data indicate that while there has been a slight increase in the level of involvement, as late as at the end of the 1980s, paternal involvement in childrearing has remained dismally low (Lye, 1991). Fathers are *available* only a few hours a day, and certainly much less (roughly one-third to one-half as long) than are mothers; fathers rarely assume *responsibility*; and, fathers spend very little time *interacting* with their children, especially if they are girls.

We are inclined to agree with Furstenberg that two discrete male populations may emerge as we drift to a more voluntaristic notion of parenthood: those who embrace fatherhood and those who flee from it. It is also very likely that men will migrate from one category to the other throughout their lifetime. In doing so many men who may have abandoned their biological children may end up assuming paternal responsibilities for a new set of children, if not their own then someone else's. Yet, this is not to say that they will assume equal responsibility in parenting.

A corollary concept that has emerged is that of "social fathering," which is being commonly used in the literature to help explain why contact between noncustodial parents (usually fathers) and children typically decreases over time. This perspective suggests that biological ties to children become less important when the biological children live elsewhere; and further any children who do reside with the father (e.g., those from a remarriage) receive more attention. Seltzer and Brandreth (1994) show that the attitudes of nonresident fathers toward paternity varies by resident child characteristics rather than biological linkages. Furstenberg and colleagues suggest that biological parenthood may be giving way to social parenthood.

Theoretical Approaches

Much of the research on fatherhood is characterized by a conspicuous absence of a unifying theoretical framework. Researchers have borrowed liberally from psychology, sociology, social-psychology, child and adult developmental perspectives, and from economic theories to guide their work. Some of these approaches overlap to a great degree; yet, no one theory or conceptual framework stands out. Below we review a few of these approaches that are used more commonly and seem to be relatively fruitful.

Structural Functionalism

The "dual spheres" ideology is imbedded in one sociological perspective, structural functionalism, that assigns particular importance to the nuclear family form and its gender-based division of labor. Accordingly, in the homemaker-breadwinner ideology, the core element of the ideal family is the distinction of labor and authority between husbands and wives, and between parents and children. Further, the nuclear family is best suited to functions of childbearing and rearing, in which men are responsible to provide financial support for the family (the good provider role), and women are responsible for socialization and emotional stability of the children (Malinowski, 1913; Murdock, 1949; Parsons, 1955; Bernard, 1983). That is one important reason why early studies of the family tended to focus almost exclusively on the experiences of women, and continue to do so albeit to a lesser extent. Using this reasoning, the functionalist view would not predict that men would reject the expectations of the good provider role. Yet we have seen the weakening if not the complete collapse of the good-provider role (Ehrenreich, 1983; Bernard, 1983).

Conflict Theory

A common thread that runs through many versions of the conflict theory is the acknowledgment of the struggle for power, including that between genders. Accordingly, men, in general, having an advantage over women in attaining socially- and economically-valued resources, manipulate the power gained with this access to perpetuate their dominance which is reflected in the gender-based division of domestic labor, including child care. In other words, men maintain their power over women by refusing to engage in the "woman's job of parenting," because in our society (and elsewhere) "childrearing" places one in a powerless position, while avoiding child-rearing results in power and prestige (Franklin, 1988). Conflict theory also specifies a class-effect and thus recognizes a gender-class interaction in the defining of the parenting roles and the meaning of fatherhood for men.

Gender Display and Hegemonic Masculinity

According to West and Zimmerman (1987), gender is a performed activity which is characteristic of situations and interactions. Based on cues and stereotypes, actors display certain genders within interactions, and perceivers interact on the basis of these expressions of gender. Actors are held accountable for displaying and reconfirming the "appropriate" gender in their interactions. Gender display typically involves highlighting the differences between masculinity and femininity. For example, doing housework has been a symbolic affirmation of women as good wives and mothers, while doing market work has been a symbolic affirmation of men as good husbands and fathers. Physical and symbolic segregation both emphasizes and perpetuates these social constructions of masculinity and femininity as different and unequal. Paid work for men outside the home, and housework and child care for women are symbolic markers for gender (Fenstermaker et al., 1991; Brines, 1994). Therefore, child care facilitates a display of femininity for women, while not performing child care activities facilitate a display of masculinity for men (West and Zimmerman, 1987, Pleck, 1977) Any deviation from the institutionalized norms of male provider role and female caretaker role invites the risk of negative social judgments; men and women are held socially accountable for displaying their gender appropriately (Brines, 1994). Further, the concept of hegemonic masculinity predicts a harsher judgment for men than women when they display a gender which does not correspond with the culturally-resonant stereotypes. Because masculinity occupies a more privileged position in relation to femininity, men are held more accountable for displaying the appropriate gender, and a man who violates the cultural expectations of masculinity during a display of gender may be sanctioned more harshly than a woman who violates the expectations of femininity (Connel, 1987). Hence, the resistance of men to child-rearing activities.

Identity Theory

Identity theory posits that a person's behavior is a function of his conception of identity which derives from the positions he occupies in society (Kuhn, 1960). As applied in fatherhood research, the theory proposes that the key element in father involvement is the extent to which a father identifies with the status and roles associated with being a parent. In much of the research we have reviewed father's parenting role identity is defined as the meanings attached to the status and associated roles of parenthood (usually self-described, but meanings ascribed by mothers or children have also been used). Further, the theory posits that these self-perceptions are organized in a hierarchical fashion such that, at any given point in time, some father roles are more important than others (Ihinger-Tallman, et al. 1993). The two key concepts of the theory, namely "identity saliency" and "commitment," specify how individuals' identity perceptions are formed and shaped. The greater the saliency the more likely are the fathers to engage in specific fathering behaviors and emphasize their fatherhood roles when other demands compete for their attention (e.g., time, energy, resources). "Commitment," as used in the fatherhood research is harder to nail down, because its use is confounded by multiple meanings which are not always clear (Stryker, 1980; Stryker and Serpe, 1982; Burke and Reitzes, 1991). The most promising of these appear to be one that links "commitment" to the number of persons, and the extent to which these persons expect or require him to hold the status of father and enact father roles; and the importance of these relationships to him. Other definitions include: the willingness to give one's energy and resources to a particular course of action (Gecas, 1982); the obligation and promise to stay in and maintain a relationship over time (Tallman, Gray and Leik, 1991); and, a consistent line of behavior resulting from one's evaluation of the balance of benefits over costs (Becker, 1981).

Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory emphasizes the way individuals develop gender-appropriate behaviors through the observation and imitation of models. Although there is very little research on how men learn to be fathers, there is a long research tradition that looks at the implications of differential reinforcement of boys' and girls' behavior. However, it appears from the research findings that children do not appear to imitate people of their own gender any more than the opposite gender, nor do they typically end up resembling the same-sex parent more than the other. It seems, therefore, that men are unlikely to construct their fatherhood identity on the basis of male role models, only.

A more recent addition to the arena is the adult developmental perspective, a process which Erikson (1982a, 1982b) labeled as "generativity" -- caring for and contributing to the life of the next generation. There are three distinct types of generativity: biological generativity (procreation), parental generativity (parenthood), and societal generativity (productivity and creativity). The applicable equivalents in fatherhood research then would be biological or birth fathers, child-rearing fathers, and cultural fathers or social fathering. Parental generativity is the link between biological and societal generativity and involves carrying out the child-rearing activities that promote children's ability to develop to their full potential (Snarey, 1997). This is also a reciprocal relationship in that generative parents receive opportunities to satisfy their own developmental need to be generative, in return for the support they provide for their children's development.

Another late entry is the "scripting theory" developed and used by Gagnon and Simon (1973; and Simon and Gagnon, 1987) in their research on human sexual behavior.

Recently, Marsiglio (1995b) discussed the relationship between different aspects of fatherhood. He proposes, after Simon and Gagnon, that there are three distinct but interrelated levels of fatherhood activity: cultural and subcultural scripting, interpersonal scripting, and intrapsychic scripting. At the first level, fathering scenarios are provided at the societal level and include the basic normative guidelines for the fatherhood roles (LaRossa, 1988). At the second level, individuals interpret the expectations provided in the cultural scenarios and use these as guidelines to construct and manage specific situations when they interact with others (e.g., partners, children). At the third level, it is posited, fathers privately construct images about how they want to present themselves as fathers.

It is neither feasible nor desirable to confine the conceptualization of fatherhood to a single theory or framework. However, it is appealing to think that a unifying approach can lead to better research designs and help close the gaps in our understanding of many of the issues involved in human parenting in general, and fatherhood in particular. As of this date, there is little evidence of this actually occurring.

The Knowledge We Need: An Overview

It was relatively easy to summarize what we know about the meaning of fatherhood and the change in the father's role over the last several decades or more. The account of what we do not know is primarily a chronicle of the visible gaps in the research literature we reviewed. In this section we present an overview of some general considerations. In the next section we discuss some of the more specific research questions that require attention.

The recent research on fatherhood issues is clustered around three areas of focus: the symbolic representations, ideologies and cultural images of fatherhood; men's perceptions about their fatherhood identity and roles; and the ways in which resident and nonresident fathers interact with their children, and the extent of their involvement (Marsiglio, 1995a).

There are excellent discussions of symbolic representations, ideologies, and cultural images of fatherhood, but there seems to be no systematic work that separates the *ideal* from the *stereotypical* image of fatherhood, and either from the *actual* representation of fatherhood among the general public, and among relevant subgroups of the population. We also have very little information on how these images are shaped, and how they vary among subgroups of the population. For example, why does the public perception of black fathers tend to be more negative than those of white fathers? What are the public's perceptions and expectations of stepfathers, and why are they different than those for biological fathers? How do these standards of behavior get established, disseminated and processed? To what extent is class, independent of race, related to the fatherhood images and perceptions, and evaluation of fathers' actual behaviors?

Most of our information on men's beliefs about parental roles come from after-the-fact inquiries about their roles and responsibilities as fathers. We know much less about men's perceptions of their parental responsibilities, and the possible effects of fulfilling or not fulfilling these obligations on the spouse, children, and themselves, before they have become a father (either when planning or expecting to become a father). Moreover, significantly fewer studies have compared the attitudes toward and perceptions of parental roles among stepfathers, unwed fathers, and noncustodial fathers. We also know little to nothing about the reciprocal effects of fertility intentions (e.g., unintended vs. planned) on these perceptions, and on the actual participation of fathers in parenting.

Also scarce is information on the effects of a father's own socialization, and the model portrayed by his own parents, as influencing factors on his conception and practice of fatherhood. This problem is confounded by massive intergenerational changes suggesting that societal values, independent of the micro family transitions, may be driving the changes in the meaning of fatherhood. The best that can be said from the scant evidence is that the effects are ambiguous. For example, those who adopt a nontraditional model of fatherhood are equally likely to have had fathers who were relatively unavailable, unloving, and powerless or have modeled themselves after fathers who were also highly participant in their own upbringing (Radin, 1981; Sagi, 1982).

The practical aspects of fatherhood are reflected by individuals' daily experiences. Although numerous studies in the last two decades have focused on various aspects of paternal behavior, relatively little seems to have been done to advance the conceptualization of the diverse social and psychological aspects of fathers' lives (Marsiglio, 1991, 1995a). Subjective aspects of fatherhood appear to be more poorly understood than the more objective behavioral aspects. Also neglected is research on the kind of paternal involvement which Pleck, Lamb and Levine (1986) refer to as the "responsibility" types of activities, including organizing and managing their children's lives (e.g., scheduling medical appointments, buying clothes, etc.).

Research on fatherhood has primarily considered the interaction of resident fathers with their children, and nonresident fathers' level of involvement, on the basis of frequency of contact, closeness, and financial support, and the effects of the level and type of involvement on the well-being of the children. We know more about these behaviors and their effects on children than we do about the factors that determine or account for the variation in the levels and types of fatherhood behavior beyond some associations with limited characteristics of the father, mother, and the child(ren). Also, while these types of analyses reveal aggregate patterns among children categorized in one way or another (e.g., biological father present, involved nonresident father, resident nonbiological father, etc.), they do little to clarify the social psychological mechanisms by which children differentially respond to diverse circumstances. In other words, we have little understanding of the process which translates father attitudes or behaviors into child outcomes, which fatherhood behaviors have the most positive "payoff," or what these most positive payoffs actually are.

As researchers and policy makers continue to concentrate on the effects family changes have on children, relatively less is known, and insufficient consideration has been given to possible consequences for mothers, and even less to consequences for fathers. Yet it seems, these changes in the family, and therefore changes in the role of fatherhood, are likely to have both direct effects on mothers and fathers, and also indirect effects on the children as a consequence of the effects on the parents. Also, if the emergent model of fatherhood is indeed androgynous, blending the traditionally masculine parenting activities with those which were traditionally feminine, then research needs to focus more on the effects of increased paternal participation on the father, and on the costs and benefits of increased participation for fathers (e.g., relationship with their children and wives, own personal development, commitment to their jobs and careers, etc). Further, we seem to have a relatively better understanding of the effect of paternal nonparticipation on children, but not what the costs and benefits may be for fathers who do not participate. In part, fathers are absent, or not participating, because, obviously, in some situations, there may be certain returns--economic and social psychological--to not participating in parenting. It might neither be politically correct, nor socially productive to document the benefits that may accrue from such nonparticipation to absent fathers and even to resident fathers who are not involved to any significant degree. But, it is productive to clarify why fathers may find noninvolvement to be positive. We need to reduce the ambiguity about the relevant effects for dads, moms, and kids, and accept the fact that not all effects have to be positive, and that there are tradeoffs.

Fatherhood research should take into account the diverging perspectives men and women hold on relationship, marriage, family life and so on, and how these divergent perspectives may define the symbolic meaning and presentation of paternal activities. That is, to the extent men and women develop separate gender-specific perspectives on parenthood, they would discount and distort each other's values, ideologies, and models regarding parenthood, not to mention the actual parenting behaviors each may have adopted (Marsiglio, 1995a).

Finally, it is important to consider paternal involvement and fathers' commitment to various identities as being both socially patterned and individualistic at the same time

(Furstenberg, as cited in Marsiglio, 1995a). The opportunities and constraints fathers face in their fatherhood roles are often shaped by large-scale social processes. Therefore, patterns of paternal parenting behavior should be examined within the larger social context that is in part responsible for the specific role they end up playing. Particularly important are the gender and class dimensions in this sorting process (Marsiglio, 1995a). Some of the gaps in our understanding of the meaning of parenthood for men are described below more specifically, in the form of research questions.

Implications for Research

On the basis of a limited review of the existing research literature we have identified a number of research questions that need to be answered to better understand the meaning of fatherhood, its effects on the father's behavior, and the short- and long-term consequences for men, women, and children in a variety of family forms. Such family forms include not only the traditional intact families, but reconstructed families and nonmarital unions. Within the various family forms, research should further consider the roles and effects of non-biological parents, custodial and non-custodial, as well as resident and nonresident parents. The list of research questions we offer below is by no means exhaustive; it is only restricted by our limited synthesis of the many pieces of the puzzle. Further, the order in which they are presented does not necessarily imply an order of salience, priority, or urgency.

Life Cycle Stage Considerations

What is the effect of life cycle stage at marriage or at the birth of the first child on how men (and women) view and practice parenthood? It appears that men and women view parenthood differently at different life cycle stages. Consequently we would expect parenting behaviors to vary accordingly. In the little research available, the results are often contradictory. In younger marriages, the women's ideology appears to be more relevant, while in older marriages the man's ideology may take precedence. Yet other research shows that older male partners tend to have more liberal views regarding women's roles. All of this contradicts the notion that older men are more likely to be immersed in careers and therefore might be less involved in fathering. Clearly, life cycle stage issues need to be disentangled from employment and social class considerations.

What is the effect of the child's life cycle stage on the extent of father involvement? It has been noted by many that there is very little useful information about the extent to which a father *can* and *should* be involved in the child nurturance process during the early years of life. Research suggests that, historically, the infant - early childhood phase was essentially viewed as totally the mother's domain. More recently, with the emergence of "nurturant father" models, and with fathers being increasingly involved in their children's life at all stages, there is greater ambiguity on this issue. This has further implications for having legitimized paternal involvement with absent children when marriages (or the relationships) dissolve (as often they do) while the children are still quite young.

How does entry into parenting alter individual ideas about parenting? A research sub-theme, which is neglected in the literature, relates to the question of the extent to which the "meaning" of parenthood is sensitive to the parent status of individuals. In the limited literature on this issue, much of the research has essentially compared cross-sections of parents and non-parents. What is needed is more research which follows individuals from non-parenthood into parenthood and later. The question of the extent to which notions about the meaning of parenthood are altered abruptly with entry into that status is inherently important because it can tell us a lot about attitude incongruence within the society -- between non-parents, parents with children, and those of us who have to some extent "forgotten" some of its joys(?). This understanding becomes of even greater importance during periods of rapid social change, where the recollections which one generation may have do not mesh closely with the actual experiences of their children's generation.

Gender, Racial/Ethnic, and Age-Linked Issues

To what extent are gender differences in parenting attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors socially appropriate? While fathers, on average, appear to be more involved with their children at all ages, this does not imply equal sharing in all child-related activities. To the extent that we operationally define the "meaning of fatherhood" in terms of actual father involvement, fathers (both present and absent) and mothers are not equal parents. The question, then is, how large is the discrepancy between what fathers and mothers in American society feel they should both do, and actually do? Furthermore, there appears to be a view that these possibly immutable gender differences should not be extinguished. Therefore, is it advisable for government programs or policies to encourage a completely egalitarian or identical notion of parenthood?

Can we usefully explain racial, ethnic, and class differences in the meaning of fatherhood? There appears to be a great amount of heterogeneity in the meaning of fatherhood that is not fully understood. Such differences appear to exist between as well as within racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups. Black-white-Hispanic distinctions reflect differing cultures, histories, and socioeconomic statuses. There is also considerable variation, for example, between generations of immigrants, between different Hispanics of different origins (e.g., Mexican vs. Puerto Rican vs. Cuban vs. other Central and South American), and between upwardly mobile blacks compared to second or third generation middle-class blacks.

Generally, public perceptions of black fathers tend to be more negative than those of whites fathers. It seems that black fathers are mostly perceived as inner-city, hyper-masculine, irresponsible men who do not get involved in their children's lives. Such perceptions are even more negative for black men who have fathered children out-of-wedlock. And there are many of them.

There is some evidence that the traditional notions about discrete family transitions do not reflect the experiences of black fathers and their children and that traditional definitions of residential status may underestimate the role of black fathers (biological or otherwise) in the lives of their children (Mott, 1990). Put differently, the prevailing definitions and conceptualizations of fatherhood may not adequately capture the cultural nuances in the presentation of fatherhood roles.

A number of explanations have been offered to account for the distinctive features of family formation and parenthood among black men, ranging from the experience of slavery and exploitation, traditional practices root in Africa, to racial discrimination, segregation, and persistent poverty. Undoubtedly, black men feel the rising expectations for fathers in our society and carry the burden of their personal histories and the weight of their culture as they become fathers. But we do not know how exactly these expectations impact the process of establishing and maintaining the many roles of fatherhood.

Are adolescent parenting issues unique? Adolescent fathers deserve special attention largely because, at a crucial time of identity formation, they are much less prepared or qualified for a paternal role. While this is true for adolescent mothers as well, fathers may have an especially difficult time. Consequently, many adolescent males seem rather ambivalent about fatherhood. Teti and Lamb (1986) suggest that this ambivalence is in part due to the sex-role learning that predispose adolescent males to avoid situations that require stereotypically feminine behaviors, like child care. Such tendencies to avoid feminine behavior and to embrace the masculine role may become exaggerated during adolescence as a result of identity struggles and peer pressure (Teti and Lamb, 1986). The ambivalence toward fatherhood among adolescent males may also be influenced by the drive to establish autonomy, which is typical of the teen years. At a time when partially breaking away from parents and achieving a sense of independence are developmental milestones, the restrictive demands of the paternal roles constitute a serious threat to this autonomy. Also, the ability to provide for the

family is still one of the most important indices of our society. Therefore, the limited ability of adolescents to provide adequately for their partner and the baby may be another cause of the response to fatherhood among adolescent males.

Although, teenage pregnancy and childbearing has been popular area of research for nearly three decades, our knowledge of adolescent parenting, particularly adolescent fatherhood, is surprisingly limited. The research that has been conducted on teen fatherhood is, not all too infrequently, confounded by methodological inadequacies, theoretical research designs, measurement instruments of unknown validity and/or reliability, and findings that can neither be replicated nor generalized. Few generalizations are possible regarding appropriate interventions which may be most suitable for the shorter and longer-term well-being of both parents and children.

The Effect Of Changes In Marriage Age and Parenthood Probabilities

How does the changing age at childbearing affect the meaning of parenthood? For a wide range of reasons, many of which have been detailed in demographic literature, women and men are beginning childbearing at later ages than those in the immediately preceding generations. To what extent, do these changes in childbearing directly reflect changes in how men (and women) view parenthood? Conversely, to what extent may changes in how individuals view parenthood reflect changes in the childbearing patterns? Further, to what extent does the narrowing age gap between fatherhood and motherhood reflect an increasing similarity in the reasons for and the meaning of parenting for men and women?

How have any possible increases in childlessness among contemporary adult cohorts altered the meaning of parenthood? There is evidence of a recent decline in the proportion of adults (men and women) who will ever become parents. Has this presumed selection process altered in any important way the characteristics of those who do become parents? Put differently, are the parenting attitudes of otherwise comparable parents and non-parents perhaps more different from each other than was true a few years ago? What are the implications of this for the well-being of children? Are we now "selecting out" a better or worse quality person into the parenting subset?

The Effect Of Parents On Children

How does congruence between parental role expectations and role behavior affect child well-being? From the onset, we have speculated that the "meaning of fatherhood" is probably closely linked with the roles that fathers are willing to play in the parenting sphere, both inside and outside of relationships. Harmony between living-together and living-apart parents is at least partly contingent on the congruence that each feel exists between their role expectations and their role behavior. And this harmony has major implications for the well-being of their children. This is one way of saying that the satisfactory cognitive and emotional development of children both in traditional and disrupted families is probably closely linked with the extent to which the two parents have similar views about the role expectation for each present or absent parent. This does not mean that they should both expect to be doing the same thing; just that they should have agreement about what each parent should be doing. This suggests some testable propositions using available data sets. For example, in triads (mother-father-child) where there is relative congruence between what a mother would prefer the father do and what the father does are likely to have less acrimony and the children are probably less likely to have behavior problems (whether or not the parents are living together).

At the level of individual and family behavior, there are now available several large national data sets which permit one to try to tease out for population subgroups which specific paternal roles/behaviors may be more likely to translate into preferable child cognitive and emotional outcomes. These paternal-child interaction patterns, which can be used as proxies for more general notions of the "meaning" of fatherhood, can be incorporated into multivariate statistical models and perhaps suggest preferable and less preferable paternal behaviors for a variety of family forms. This leads into the next two points.

What does the formal structure of parental relationships imply for the parents' commitment and child well-being? The distinction between the meanings of marriage and cohabitation is not only central to the discussion of relationship dissolution, but is central to interpreting child development issues. Within the context of this discussion, the key question is: Does the "meaning" of parenthood differ in important ways between married and unmarried couples? That is, is there a difference in the level of commitment to the partner and child while the relationship is ongoing and in the level of commitment to the child when the relationship falters. Because of the high probability of marriage dissolution and, in particular, dissolution of cohabiting unions, we need to have a better understanding of the differences between these relationship forms in terms of what the participants view as their parental commitments and obligations.

What do parental relationship transitions imply for the socioemotional and intellectual development of children? There is a large and growing body of literature which examines the consequences of relationship transitions for the development of children. Depending on a host of circumstances, results have tended to be ambiguous. In part, this ambiguity reflects to a considerable extent the extraordinary variety of situations these children find themselves in. Much of this variability is intimately linked with the "meaning of parenthood" notions. The expectations of and the meaning of fatherhood to the biological parents both before and after the transition are in all likelihood important explanatory inputs. Typically, available research finds little statistical interpretive value in visitation patterns as predictors of better or poorer child outcomes. It is worth speculating that if research could differentiate paternal role expectations (as anticipated by both parents) interactively with visitation patterns, the results might be more successful in finding the posited associations. Similarly, the presence/arrival of step-parents are non-neutral events. These are often found to have negative consequences, contingent on a number of characteristics, such as the child's gender or the parent's race. More research is needed on the role expectations of step-parents, and the meaning of step-fatherhood or more generally step-parenthood. In the broadest context, this draws somewhat on Cherlin's (1978) notion of there not being a useful normative structure which allows individuals coming into non-traditional family forms to have a firm grasp of what their role should most appropriately be.

What are the implications of linkages between custody status, child support payments and the meaning of fatherhood for the development of children? While the probability of making payments is heavily linked with economic viability, possibly it is also contingent on what the man views as the fatherhood role. First, his willingness to contribute may be related to whether or not he feels he had been allowed to play the father role which he had felt to be appropriate (e.g., how much contact or "instrumental contact" has he had or been allowed to have with his children). Additionally, and more directly, child support is likely to be linked with what he feels is the universal role of fatherhood, regardless of whether he is in residence with the child. Yet another question is, whether in joint custody situations, it is logistically and psychologically possible for both parents to maintain relationships with the child which are consistent with what they view as their parental roles. It appears that this may not even be feasible for the noncustodial parent, when only one parent has custody. In this case, the question is how this affects the likelihood of maintaining child support payments?

Historical Perspectives

How has the meaning of fatherhood changed over time? We provided a brief descriptive account of fatherhood in the 19th and early 20th Centuries. However, there is a dearth of information on the social-structural and ideological circumstances surrounding the fatherhood models of the past. We know little about how those circumstances sustained the prevailing fatherhood roles of the time. We also know very little about the "components" of the historical fatherhood model, including the subjective meaning, objective indicators, and how they are different from those currently observed. Documenting the elements of fathering in the past, and the social-structural context within

subjective indicators, and how they are different from those currently observed. Documenting the elements of fathering in the past, and the social-structural context within which the predominant fatherhood model flourished may help better understand the ensuing changes in the social-structural context that eventually may have led to changing patterns of family formation and parenting. In other words, to be able to project the future of fatherhood, we need to understand the past and present patterns of family life, and the linkages between different styles of fatherhood and the various social, economic, and demographic conditions. This is particularly important within the context of race, ethnicity, and class differences in parenting, the antecedents of such differences, and the diverse consequences on all parties involved.

Data and Measurement Issues

Much of the research on fatherhood is based on data from nonrepresentative small cross-sectional samples, often of women. Major exceptions to this are the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), the National Longitudinal Survey Youth (NLSY), and the rather outdated National Survey of Children (NSC). There is an urgent need for new data collection efforts that focus specifically and systematically on fatherhood issues with extensive reports from fathers, mothers, and children. Preferably, such data collection efforts should be based on probability samples and a longitudinal design. It is also important that future surveys should attempt to properly cover, and when possible over-sample, certain ethnic groups as well as nonwhite and non-middle class low income families. It is essential that such surveys include the collection of attitudinal information on a continuous basis, given the sensitivity of attitudes to life cycle events.

Small nonprobability samples or convenience samples are also important. Even though such samples do not allow generalization to the population at large, they are extremely useful for hypothesis testing, measurement development, and exploratory work. Hence, such efforts should also be continued and encouraged. Particularly important are qualitative ethnographic studies that would enhance our understanding of the diverse meanings of fatherhood among ethnic and cultural subgroups, and allow us to formulate sound conceptualization and more accurate measurement of the many dimensions of fatherhood.

A basic methodological issue is the widespread reliance of fatherhood research on data collected from the mothers, on mothers' reporting of fathers' attitudes and behavior, and mother's reports of the quality of the relationship fathers have with their children. One would correctly assume that the validity of the reporting would be highly dependent on whether or not the father is resident, on the quality of the relationship between the mother and the father, and whether the fathering behavior of the men is congruent with the mother's ideology and expectations. The validity of such reports is also highly reliant on whether the mothers are reporting subjective or objective phenomena. And even the so called "objective" data may be colored by rationalization after the fact or indeed by transparent dishonesty. In this regard, when data are directly obtained from the fathers, as was done in the NSFH, the quality of the data can also be affected by the tendency to provide socially desirable responses, especially by nonresident and noninvolved fathers. Furthermore, a different type of measurement issue arises (Smith and Morgan, 1994) when discrepant reports of subjective phenomena (e.g., father-child relationship quality) are provided by different respondents (i.e., by father, mother, child, or another household member).

In general, fathers are less likely to participate in surveys than mothers, and nonresident fathers are less likely to participate than resident fathers. Therefore, self-selection bias can also affect the representativeness of specific subsamples of fathers, such as nonresident fathers in particular. The data and measurement issues we have mentioned here are not by any means limited to fatherhood research, but are indeed pervasive in social sciences.

Conclusion

A lot has been written about various dimensions of fatherhood, and there is still a lot more to be learned. As social, economic, and political conditions shift, the dynamics of family formation and parenthood also change, and the complex issues involved in these processes re-emerge to the forefront of many agendas. Consequently, the topic needs to be and is revisited, periodically. If the current focus, as evidenced by the extensive public debate and social inquiry it has generated, is any indication, then fatherhood is once again a "burning" issue in the United States.

Above, we tried to summarize, succinctly, what is known and what needs to be learned, on the basis of an extensive research literature. We also attempted to delineate some broad research areas, as well as some very specific research questions. As the debate on the past, present and the future of fatherhood continues, social scientists will continue to play a vital role in the this debate, for the foreseeable future. While their contributions to this debate may be varied, the sum of their work will continue to provide the foundation for a scholarly discourse and for a learned social policy.

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