



Faculty Publications

2004

American Fatherhood Types: The Good, the Bad, and the Uninterested

Loren Marks

Brigham Young University - Provo, loren_marks@byu.edu

Rob Palkovitz

University of Delaware

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub>



Part of the [Other Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Original Publication Citation

Marks, L. D., & Palkovitz, R. (2004). American fatherhood types: The good, the bad, and the uninterested. *Fathering*, 2, 113-129.

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Marks, Loren and Palkovitz, Rob, "American Fatherhood Types: The Good, the Bad, and the Uninterested" (2004). *Faculty Publications*. 4889.

<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/4889>

This Peer-Reviewed Article is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

American Fatherhood Types: The Good, the Bad, and the Uninterested

LOREN MARKS
Louisiana State University

ROB PALKOVITZ
University of Delaware

This paper presents four contemporary types of American manhood: (a) the new, involved father, (b) the good provider, (c) the deadbeat dad, and (d) the paternity-free man. These four types are compared, contrasted, and contextualized with related data from the classic Middletown studies of the 1920s and 1930s. The significance and implications of the trend toward paternity-free manhood are discussed, and directions for future research are suggested.

Keywords: fathers, fathering, childlessness, fertility, paternity, roles

Over the past quarter-century, the topic of fatherhood has received expanding attention in both the social sciences and popular culture. Two key research domains have included (a) identifying how child developmental outcomes are associated with various patterns of father involvement and absence (e.g., Lamb, 1997) and (b) investigating how fathers balance economic provision, household work, and involvement in child-rearing (e.g., Coltrane, 1996; Palkovitz, 1997, 2002). This paper addresses the latter domain and presents four types of contemporary American manhood and brief historical contextualizations of each of these types drawn from Robert and Helen Lynd's classic *Middletown* (1929) and *Middletown in Transition* studies (1937).

The authors thank Gloria Nye, Jennifer Burczyk-Brown, the editor, and the anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on previous drafts of the manuscript.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Loren Marks, School of Human Ecology, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA 70803. Electronic mail: lorenm@lsu.edu.

Fathering, Vol. 2, No. 2, Spring 2004, 113-129.
© 2004 by the Men's Studies Press, LLC. All rights reserved.

FATHERHOOD ROLE-TYPING TODAY: PROS AND CONS

Although emerging research regarding fathers is much more focused than that of the past, discussions of patterns of contemporary fatherhood still mute individual variations in fathering styles and involvement levels. Even fathers within the same general classification (e.g., fathers of teen sons) will have unique histories, developmental trajectories, interaction styles, and involvement levels (Palkovitz, 2002). As such, generalized and typologized discussions of fathers (including those presented in this paper) discount both inter-individual and intra-individual variability. However, even though types mask complexity and individuality, there is a degree of legitimacy to carefully generalized discussions of fatherhood, be it contemporary or historical, because most fathers share some universal characteristics (Lamb, 2000; Pleck, 1987). Further, descriptions of different styles or types of fathers can serve as helpful Weberian “ideal types” that are of great utilitarian and heuristic value in assessing “the social reality [of] the ‘typical’ father” (Horna & Lupri, 1987, p. 55). Ideally, while many fathers may not fit into neatly established categorical types, these types (a) establish parameters within which to conduct research, (b) offer recommendations to researchers regarding what to look for and be sensitive to, and (c) organize our efforts to understand the complexities of contemporary individual and family life.

While fathering styles are often described as fixed, in reality they are varied, fluid, multiply determined, and dynamic at both cultural and individual levels (Horna & Lupri, 1987; Palkovitz, 1997). Also, movement or development through diverse styles of fathering may be more the rule than the exception. The fathering type (new, involved, good provider, deadbeat, paternity-free, etc.) and parental style (e.g., authoritarian, authoritative, permissive) manifested at any given point of data collection or analysis are influenced by the context, the individual father’s assessments of the balance of requirements and resources, and the relative importance individual fathers assign to the various roles they enact (e.g., breadwinning, sex-role modeling, moral guidance, nurturance) toward their children (Palkovitz, 1997).

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UNINTERESTED: CONTEMPORARY TYPES OF U.S. FATHERING

Interestingly, two starkly contrasting views of “good” and “bad” American fatherhood have been frequently presented in the research literature (Furstenburg, 1988). In this section we address variations of these types and present an emerging type of American manhood that warrants additional scholarly attention.

TYPE 1 (THE GOOD, PART 1): NEW, INVOLVED FATHERS

One prevalent portrayal of American fatherhood suggests that we are witnessing an increased level of father involvement, often called “new, involved” fatherhood. A more historical portrayal would be that some patterns of contemporary involved fathering are a small pendulum swing back in the direction of patterns of father involvement prevalent in colonial America when fathers were typically highly

involved in many aspects of their children's lives (Palkovitz, 1996). Historian John Demos (1982) has outlined a description of pre-Industrial father involvement by delineating a myriad of paternal roles including pedagogue, guidance counselor, benefactor, moral overseer, psychologist, model, progenitor, companion, caregiver, disciplinarian, and provider.

In short, several though not all facets of the new, involved fatherhood forwarded by media and researchers are more resurgent than novel. In contemporary writing and social discourse, the term "new fatherhood" has fallen from preeminence, but other terms, each encompassing various aspects of new fathering, have been introduced; for example, "hands-on fathering" (Daniels & Weingarten, 1988), "generative fathering" (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997), "nurturant fathering" (Pruett, 1987), "positively involved fathering" (Pleck, 1997), and "responsible fathering" (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erikson, 1998). Although a full description is not possible here, according to Rotundo (1985):

this emerging form of fatherhood can at least be outlined. As part of the evolving style, a good father is an active participant in the details of day-to-day child care. He involves himself in a more intimate and expressive way with his children, and he plays a larger part in the socialization process that his male forebears had long since abandoned to their wives. (p. 17)

A prevalent scholarly and popular argument posits that America is seeing a rising number of men who (compared with other generations of post-Industrial fathers) have given increased time and commitment to their hands-on fathering while at the same time finding some measure of success as providers (for a recent discussion, see Wilcox, 2002). Specifically, although "women still do at least twice as much routine housework as men" (Coltrane, 2000, p. 1208), these new fathers are much more likely to diaper, care for, and nurture their children and engage in household labor than previous generations (see also Coltrane, 1996; Pleck, 1997).

TYPE 2 (THE GOOD, PART 2): THE GOOD-PROVIDER FATHER

An important point is that new, involved fathers tend to be well-educated and middle- to upper-middle class. Many such fathers are married to well-educated women who also provide substantial financial contributions for the family. A frequently overlooked reality is that many less educated, low- to middle-class fathers (and mothers)¹ must work long hours and/or multiple jobs to provide for their families. With all fathers in mind but with sensitivity to working class fathers, Christiansen and Palkovitz (2001) make a case that provision should not be viewed as oppositional to father involvement; rather, it should be seen as one component of father involvement that is essential but needs appropriate balance. They further indicate that in extant fathering research providing is frequently taken for granted, holds negative connotations, or has been inadequately conceptualized. However, good provision holds developmental and role-enactment salience for fathers (Cazenave, 1979; Palkovitz, 2002) and their partners (Dollahite, 1991). Additionally, correlational

data demonstrate relationships between fathers' economic underperformance and negative components of family development and functioning (Christiansen & Palkovitz, 2001).

A father's ability to provide may also have intergenerational effects on children through observational learning, educational opportunities, and other aspects of developing human capital and needed skills. The investment of fathers in economic provision for their children has been correlated with enhanced father-child relationships (Seltzer, Schaeffer, & Charng, 1989), educational achievement and behavioral adjustment (King, 1994), and children's self esteem (Elder, 1974). However, a key is balancing economic provision with close-at-hand father involvement (Palkovitz, 2002), a balance that many fathers (and mothers) are failing to find (Hochschild, 1997).

An important question that might be asked is: "How 'good' does a good provider have to be?" Not only are contemporary American parents obligated to meet the basic physical needs of their children, but they are consistently pressured to provide their children with the latest entertainment, technology, and fashion in a society where consumerism and status are hegemonic (Dienhart & Daly, 1997; Palkovitz & Marks, 2002). These pressures toward provision of status (above and beyond provision of needs) can be juxtaposed with the ideal that parents should create a home that is emotionally and relationally stable. The result is a work-family scenario replete with double-binds.

TYPE 3 (THE BAD): DEADBEAT DADS

Ironically, the two previous types of good fathers come at a time when demographic data show that if American men become fathers there is a tendency to spend less of their lives in the household with their children than in the past 50 years (Peters, Peterson, Steinmetz, & Day, 2000; Popenoe, 1996). Further, divorce, mother-headed households, and defaults on court-ordered alimony and child support payments have reached or are near all-time highs (Palkovitz, 2002). Indeed, some research shows that men are more likely to make their car payment than to pay child support (Hewlett, 1991). These and other similar negative indicators have been interpreted to suggest that contemporary patterns of fatherhood are far from reflective of a "new breed" of fathers and indicate a fathering deficiency and decline (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 1996).

Pleck and Pleck (1997) note that the American notion of the good-provider father mentioned in the previous section has been the historical counterpart of the bad dad.

The bad dad has always been the man who failed to live up to his parental responsibilities. Those responsibilities have always been defined in part as acknowledgement of paternity and responsibility for child support. Even though the good dad has possessed a variety of qualities, failure as a breadwinner has always been a significant feature of the bad dad. (p. 48)

Indeed, contemporary discourse frequently includes an emphasis on fatherlessness (i.e., an abundance of absent/bad dads) as a national crisis (Blankenhorn, 1995).

Macro-level influences including racism, lack of educational opportunity, and current economic strain are significant obstacles for many men who want to provide for their own but cannot (Allen & Connor, 1997). Conversely, some co-residential fathers may provide economically but miserably fail to adopt the social and emotional roles of fathering. Horn (2001) describes such men as physically present but psychologically absent fathers. Thus we see that while adequate economic provision is typically considered an essential part of being a good American father, additional considerations and sensitivities are needed. As Daly (1992a) has indicated, there is a need for research where “the focus is not on identifying structural or demographic trends in families, but rather on the *processes* by which families, create, sustain, and discuss their own family realities” (p. 4, emphasis added).

TYPE 4 (THE UNINTERESTED): PATERNITY-FREE MANHOOD

Demographic data indicate that American men are more likely not to have any children than at any time since the Great Depression (Johnson, 1992) and “the declining importance of marriage and parenting has been greater in the lives of men than in the lives of women” (Forste, 2002, p. 594). Eggebeen (2002) contrasts elements of the good father type with that of paternity-free manhood by stating that “it is ironic that, at the very time that the changes in the practice of fatherhood are being praised, fatherhood is becoming a less common activity” (p. 504). Why is this? Forste (2002) argues that present answers are “vague at best” (p. 594). Certainly, some childless men desire to have children but do not become fathers due to infertility, lack of a partner, economic circumstances, or other personal reasons—and research has explored some of these issues (Daly, 1992b; Marsiglio, 1998). However, there is a growing group of men, both married and unmarried, who appear to prefer paternity-free manhood over the alternative.

In his influential chapter, *Good Dads—Bad Dads: Two Faces of Fatherhood*, Furstenbeurg (1988) explains that the father involvement and father absence countertrends discussed earlier have been influenced by many factors, including men’s rejection of the good-provider role, increased labor-force participation by women, and the increasingly optional nature of fatherhood. Specifically, Furstenbeurg indicates that:

... fatherhood is becoming a more voluntary role that requires a greater degree of personal and economic sacrifice [and that] fathers may be becoming a more differentiated population, with only more highly committed males entering their ranks. (p. 201)

Furstenbeurg historically contextualizes this economic theme by noting that with industrialization “men’s economic roles increasingly drew them outside the home and into the marketplace” (p. 195), consistent with Demos’s (1982) discussion of the increasing spatial separation of work and family during the same time in history. One way to view the present retreat from fatherhood is that the *dis*-integration

of work and family identified by Demos has continued until the once highly integrated spheres of work and family now share minimal overlap for a conspicuous number of American men.

A supplemental economic perspective is offered by Teachman, Tedrow, and Crowder (2000), who first query, "How can we make sense of the changes that have occurred to America's families?" and then respond in part by stating:

Economic stagnation and growing uncertainty about the economic future has plagued young men ... [and] these changes have made it extremely difficult ... to achieve the type of family modeled by their parents and grandparents. (p. 1243)

If the economic future was uncertain for young men in 2000 when Teachman and colleagues made this statement, it is decidedly more gloomy today, following the events and aftermath of September 11, 2001. It is probable that the "extremely difficult" challenge of providing for a family financially is more than many American men want to tackle, even though this challenge is increasingly shared with wives.

There are, however, psychological influences that play into the retreat from fatherhood in addition to the aforementioned economic factors. Indeed, paternity-free manhood is not a trend that neatly corresponds with recent economic decline. Social critic Barbara Ehrenreich (1984) has argued that men have increasingly abandoned family and marital commitments since the mid-1940s, and Griswold (1993) seems to concur as he reports that many men appear to want an adult life without the responsibilities of fatherhood:

Whether as "gray flannel dissidents," playboys, beatniks, counterculturalists, or seekers of psychological "growth," American men have increasingly looked beyond marriage and fatherhood for ... personal gratification ... [and some] now view alternative life choices with equanimity and even approval. (p. 228)

While the above statements seemingly reflect single, "unattached" men, Marsiglio (1998) has addressed the paternity-free man within established partnerships as well. Marsiglio emphasizes that within a relational context:

[Men] may be reluctant to assert their preference [to not have a child] if they are in love with a partner who forcefully asserts her desire to give birth to their child. In this type of situation, it is often the case that men's procreative consciousness is interwoven with their feelings toward their partner identity. (p. 94)

Unfortunately, many who become fathers against their wishes "do not [subsequently] fulfill their financial obligations" (Marsiglio, 1998, p. 90). Thus, for some men, paternity-free manhood may be a precursor to becoming a deadbeat dad. For others, paternity-free manhood may precede new, involved or good-provider father-

hood. For a growing number, however, paternity-free manhood is not only an antecedent to fatherhood; it is a deliberate destination.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UNINTERESTED WITHIN THE 1920S-1930S

In our present consideration of the good, the bad, and the uninterested, we can benefit from examining Robert and Helen Lynd's two classic Middletown (Muncie, Indiana) studies. The first of these was published at the end of the "roaring '20s" (*Middletown*, 1929), and the second was completed near the end of the Great Depression (*Middletown in Transition*, 1937). Although neither study is generalizable or reports much data focusing on fathers or fatherhood, the Lynds incorporate several methodologies and levels of analysis (e.g., interviews with individual housewives; census records documenting family formation and fertility; economic data; school and community surveys regarding personal, familial, and community attitudes and beliefs; etc.). Subsequently, the composite work of the Middletown projects still offers much that deserves consideration in connection with contemporary fathering types. In an effort to historically contextualize the fathering types presented previously, we separately discuss each in the following section.

THE NEW, INVOLVED FATHER IN MIDDLETOWN

Although various formulations of the new, involved father have received considerable attention over the past 15 years, the involved father may not be so new, at least in concept. In the Lynds' first *Middletown* study (1929), by far the most desirable quality in a father mentioned by high school boys and girls was that he would "spend time with his children" (p. 144). While an attitudinal measure of "desirable qualities in a father" does not constitute reality per se, such a finding does indicate a hope, if not an implicit expectation, that fathers be involved with their children (p. 524). Note also that both boys and girls desired father involvement. This is important in that a defining feature of the new, involved father is his involvement with both sons and daughters (Rotundo, 1985).

Similarities between 1920s-30s Middletown and present America should not be overextended, however, as the fathers of Middleton certainly did not meet the new father ideal of androgyny presented in some scholarship (e.g., Rotundo, 1985). Indeed, the separate spheres of men and women, both at work and at home, are clearly delineated in both volumes. *Middletown* (1929) reports, "In general, a high degree of companionship is not regarded as essential for marriage.... The men and women frequently ... gravitate apart" (pp. 118-119). *Middletown in Transition* (1937) indicates little change in terms of household work or childcare in detailed discussion about the "worlds of the two sexes," and the roles of men and women are contrasted again (pp. 176-177).

In connection with parent involvement specifically, a *Middletown* table reports "traits to be stressed in rearing children as rated by housewives for themselves in 1924 and for their mothers in the Nineties [1890s]" (p. 523)—fathers are not even peripherally mentioned. This, however, should not be misinterpreted as indicating

that all fathers were uninvolved in child-rearing. Indeed, fathers (involved or not) have typically been overlooked in such research until the past two decades (Lamb, 2000). Even so, Middletown child-rearing was, by implication, indisputably the mother's domain.

Although fathers are absent in the collected data mentioned above, two contrasting narratives from "housewives" regarding father involvement are presented by the Lynds in their writing. The first mother explains:

Every one asks us how we've been able to bring our children up so well ... everything today tends to weaken the parents' influence. But we do it by spending time with our children.... [My] husband spends a lot of time with the boy. (p. 147)

The second mother states, "My man is so tired when he comes home from work that he just lies down and rests and never plays with the children" (pp. 147-148). Had the Lynds written 60-70 years later, they may have presented these two narratives as illustrations of the new, involved and distant-breadwinner father types, respectively. Such data add credence to LaRossa's (1997) request that we acknowledge the expression of a variety of fathering styles, both historically and in the present, instead of a portraying and accepting a single shallow stereotype or caricature for any era of fathers.

THE GOOD-PROVIDER FATHER IN MIDDLETOWN

In connection with the good-provider father, it is noteworthy that even during the Great Depression, Middletown's expectations for a man, as listed in *Middletown in Transition* (1937), include having a traditional family consisting of husband, wife, and children (note the plural) and that "a man owes it to himself, to his family, and to society to succeed" (p. 406). The good-provider father seems rooted in a Protestant work ethic, an ethic that apparently undergirded much of Middletown's economic mentality, as explicitly captured in the prevalent reported attitudes that "if a man does not 'get on' it is his own fault" (p. 407) and—in an apparent transition from Protestant work ethic to social Darwinism—"the strongest and the *best* should survive, for that is the law of nature after all" (p. 407, emphasis added). By extension, this latter attitude seems to symbolically endow wealth with not only strength but also moral superiority.

Continuing with our examination of paternal provision, we note that the Lynds emphasize that for many families consumption was often more related more to establishing and maintaining status than it was to providing for the needs of one's family. Nearly 50 years later, Jessie Bernard (1981) would argue that families had been reduced to "display cases for the good provider" (p. 5). In retrospect, it is somewhat surprising that the Lynds (1937) were able to identify harbingers of future consumption trends during the Depression era, when one might assume such spending would be minimal.

The Lynds provide further contextual detail on the good-provider father by devoting nearly six pages in *Middletown in Transition* (1937) to a description of the

qualities of the idyllic “successful Middletown business man” (pp. 419-424). Conversely, nothing is written of the ideal husband or father anywhere in the extensive volume. In fact, there is not even a listing for “fathers” in the volume’s index, and only two such listings are found in the index of *Middletown* (1929). Although fathers are addressed occasionally throughout the two *Middletown* volumes, “fathering” as a specific topic was apparently not on the Lynds’ research agenda, though it was a topic of interest for parent educators and in the popular press at the time (see Griswold, 1993; LaRossa, 1997; Pleck & Pleck, 1997).

THE DEADBEAT DAD IN MIDDLETOWN

Failure of a father to financially support his own children is heavily frowned upon today. Even so, the additional gravity of economic provision by 1920s-30s Middletown fathers (residential or otherwise) is underscored in *Middletown* (1929) by the illustrations of two men who were literally “sentenced” due to their failure to provide for their families, although these sentences were both eventually reduced to a “probation” of sorts (p. 432). We must bear in mind, however, that the social context of these penalties included a reported ratio of nearly four men “gainfully employed” for every employed woman. Further, the divorce and abandonment rates were low enough to make deadbeat dads conspicuous on the individual level (p. 511). Paternal economic provision was not only a socially prescribed role; it was apparently a legally enforced responsibility.

While deadbeat dads were rare in Middletown, in some ways the door to “bad dadhood” may have been opening wider during this time. The Lynds (1929, 1937) document several transitions and changes that are well under way in connection with individualism, morality, sexuality, the role of the family, and other central ideological concerns of the 1920s and 1930s that are frequently framed as more recent shifts.

THE PATERNITY-FREE MAN IN MIDDLETOWN

Both Middletown studies help to contextualize the present trend toward paternity-free manhood as well. In the 1937 volume the Lynds report:

A marriage without children is regarded, according to the traditions of this culture, as incomplete, and healthy couples who choose to remain childless are alternatively sympathized with, gently coerced, or condemned as “selfish.” But children in this culture are increasingly mouths and decreasingly “hands”; urban living, a higher standard of living, prolonged education, and other similar factors make “having another baby” an increasingly heavy mortgage against a family’s income and plans. The era of prosperity [the roaring ’20s] emphasized higher standards of living, and the era of depression financial hazards; and each operated as an economic deterrent to childbearing. (p. 164)

The cited economic strains of “urban living, a higher standard of living, [and] prolonged education” have all increased markedly since the 1930s. While the ability of most children to contribute to the family economy has decreased. Given these factors one would predict what the data clearly indicate, a decline in marital fertility.

Census research reported in *Middletown* (1929) shows that the average household size declined from 4.6 in 1890 to 3.8 in 1920.² *Middletown in Transition* (1937) indicates that average household size had dropped a little more to 3.7 by 1930, partially due to declining marital fertility. Although American marital fertility was up for roughly a decade during the baby boom era, it resumed its pre-World War II decline following the baby boom. Popenoe (1993) reports that for the years 1960-1990, marital fertility declined from 3.7 to 1.9 children per family, almost a 50% decline in three decades.

FROM MIDDLETOWN TO MODERNITY

In short, barring the somewhat anomalous mid-20th century baby boom, marital fertility in America has been on the steady decline for more than a century. Some historians and sociologists are both unsurprised and unconcerned by the *paternity-free manhood* trend because it has literally been coming for years, at least in some respects. Nearly two decades ago, demographers were projecting a 20-25% rate of childlessness, which we are likely to reach in the next generation (Bloom & Trussell, 1984; Westoff, 1986).

Just as individuals develop gradually, with their certain characteristics changing across time, fathering types have developed gradually across cohorts and history. For example, while some characteristics of the contemporary new, involved father are apparent in the 1920s-30s Middletown families described by the Lynds, there are different nuances in gender-role enactment that warrant the distinction of a new type. Similarly, the contemporary good-provider father shares many components with Middletown’s good dads although such fathers are now sometimes implicitly maligned as distant breadwinners. In the case of deadbeat dads, such fathers have always been around, but in Middletown such fathers were conspicuous in their rarity instead of in their prevalence. Finally, there have always been American men who were unable to have children due to economic constraints, but it is likely that there have never been more with the financial means who *choose* paternity-free manhood.

INDIVIDUAL, FAMILIAL, AND SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF PATERNITY-FREE MANHOOD

The rise of paternity-free manhood and some of its related implications are a source of serious concern to some scholars. We briefly address two such concerns: first, potential changes in men’s adult development, and second, a decline in child-centered involvement.

PATERNITY-FREE MANHOOD AND INDIVIDUAL ADULT DEVELOPMENT

In a recent book-length qualitative study, Palkovitz (2002) examines the effects of father involvement on men’s adult development and reports several ways in which

fathers perceive their lives and personal development to be transformed, often profoundly, by involved fathering. While Palkovitz acknowledges that men who do not engage in involved fathering can experience significant adult developmental stimulation and achievement through paternity-free channels, he also implies that men who forego ongoing involvement with and commitment to children are absenting themselves from contexts and relationships that may be both powerful and longitudinal in their developmental influence.

Griswold (1993) makes another developmental point regarding men's movement away from fatherhood and marriage (including but certainly not limited to paternity-free manhood) when he posits:

If men are truly in flight from the family, such a development marks a significant turn in American history. Until [recent history], supporting a family was perhaps the definitive act of mature manhood, and if that is eroding, then men will be forced to find a new source of identity and self-respect (p. 242).

A critical but largely unaddressed question that begs answers is: If American manhood and adult male development are no longer to be defined by marriage and fatherhood, what will the future American male do, aspire to, and ultimately become?

PATERNITY-FREE MANHOOD AND CONTRIBUTION TO CHILDREN

In disproportionate measure, parents fill (often voluntarily) civic and community positions of responsibility for churches, city councils, school boards, planning commissions, parent-teacher organizations, youth sports leadership, boys' and girls' scouting, and a host of other activities and endeavors (Doherty, 2001). This is particularly true in child-centered civic organizations because children are both directly and indirectly influential in their parents' involvement in sacred (Dollahite, Marks, & Goodman, 2004) and secular activities (Kuczynski, 2003; Palkovitz, Marks, Appleby, & Holmes, 2003). While there are paternity-free men who are highly engaged in the activities of the next generation, it is critical to note that social expectations for men's temporal, social, and financial contributions to child-centered activities differ substantially for fathers and non-fathers. Men with children participating in programs face greater social pressure from the outside as well as a push (whether implicit or explicit) from their children to provide leadership and oversight for children in those programs. Conversely, these social and paternal pressures toward child-centered contributions are much weaker for paternity-free men.

The importance of expectations regarding men's generativity is further contextualized by research that indicates that the father-child relationship is both more fragile and more sensitive to the social environment than the mother-child relationship (Doherty et al., 1998; Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997). The expectations (or lack of expectations) society places on men of all types influence what they do and become. Perhaps most significantly, those expectations affect how much money, time, and energy men devote to children and child-centered civic involvement. Eggebeen (2002) explains that:

as fewer and fewer men become fathers and those that do spend a smaller proportion of their adult life course living with children than was the case among men in earlier cohorts, we might expect an overall declining commitment on the part of men to child-centric social, political, and economic issues. (p. 503)

Waning male civic involvement is only part of the story, however. Married mothers do the lion's share of child-centered civic service, but as marriage and fertility rates decline (Teachman et al., 2000), so does the brigade of married mothers who will be available to serve. Voluntary paternity-free manhood directly yields both voluntary and involuntary maternity-free womanhood and vice-versa. In addition, as maternal employment rates and paid hours-per-week have climbed in recent cohorts, mothers have less discretionary time to invest in volunteer work (Hochschild, 1997).

As the proportion of civically involved, married mothers and fathers declines, we need to address the question of who will replace "too-busy-to-serve" parents as close-at-hand advocates, mentors, and role models. As parental involvement declines, children are likely to turn increasingly to peers for direction, guidance, and models in a predicament reminiscent of the blind leading the blind. Harris's (1998) controversial monograph entitled *The Nurture Assumption* bears a subtitle that reads "parents matter less than you think and peers matter more." If parental involvement in child-centered activities continues to decline, this statement may increasingly reflect social reality.

POTENTIALLY POSITIVE ASPECTS OF PATERNITY-FREE MANHOOD

With the above concerns outlined, there may be a brighter side to the trend toward paternity-free manhood. As previously mentioned, Furstenbuerg (1988) has observed that on one level "fathers may be becoming a more differentiated population, with only more highly committed males entering their ranks" (p. 201). On a related note, Fagan's (2000, p. 343) finding "that paternal motivation may be related to father involvement with children" seems to indicate that men who want to be fathers are more likely to be involved fathers. Conversely, men who do not desire to be fathers but biologically father a child anyway are less likely to be involved financially, temporally, or relationally, especially across time (Marsiglio, 1998). With decreasing social pressure to father a child, perhaps American fathers will increase in quality while decreasing in quantity.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Currently, more data are needed that adequately examine all of the fatherhood types discussed in this paper, especially paternity-free manhood. Specific questions might include (a) What are the contexts, decisions, and perspectives that seem to correlate with men in the different types? (b) What are the perceived and verifiable costs and benefits that accompany each type? (c) Why and how do men opt for or against marriage? (d) Why and how do men opt for or against having and parenting children?

(Marsiglio, 1998) (e) Why do some men become deadbeat or “cut and run” fathers? and (f) Why are some men motivated toward high levels of father involvement even during challenging times? (e.g., Dollahite, Marks, & Olson, 1998, 2002; Marks & Dollahite, 2001; Wilcox, 1999, 2002). A remarkable strength of the Middletown studies was the diversity of factors addressed (personal, marital, familial, community-level, educational, religious, economic, etc.). Research responding to the above questions will do well to take a note from the Lynds’ comprehensive approach.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, when comparing our present types of the good, the bad, and the uninterested with 1920s-30s Middletown, we learn more about both continuity and change. Perhaps the most evident continuity between Middletown and the present is that three-quarters of a century after the high school girls and boys polled in the Lynds’ first *Middletown* study (1929), contemporary American culture and contemporary American children similarly idealize a father who will “spend time with his children” (p. 144). Conversely, a pronounced change between early Middletown and contemporary fathers lies in the shifting gender roles and decreasing separation of spheres between father’s and mother’s work. The starkest contrast between Middletown and the America of today, however, lies in the rise of paternity-free manhood in a relatively brief window of historical time. We need to know more about the origins, present status, and probable positive and negative consequences of this phenomenon.

Our analysis highlights that in any era there are different types of fathers, and though the typologies may be in flux, they are intricately connected to changing sociocultural forces and contexts. It is only through contextually positioning men in both historical and contemporary patterns of fatherhood that we can begin to understand what has changed and why it has changed. Tracing the cultural trajectory of fatherhood back into history also allows us a better glimpse of what the future may hold for fathers and families. This exercise inevitably invokes questions. A question surrounding fatherhood in the 1990s was “what is a ‘good enough’ father?” (Blankenhorn, 1995), but a central question this analysis invokes for the 21st century is “Will there be *enough* fathers?”

NOTES

1. Working mothers nevertheless spend considerably more time on childcare and housework than do working fathers (Coltrane, 1996).

2. These figures are drawn from census data that counted single persons as households. Average household size among working-class families in Middletown was much higher (5.4 in 1924).

REFERENCES

- Allen, W.D., & Connor, M. (1997). An African American perspective on generative fathering. In A.J. Hawkins & D.C. Dollahite (Eds.), *Generative fathering: Beyond deficit perspectives* (pp. 52-70). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bernard, J. (1981). The good-provider role: Its rise and fall. *American Psychologist*, *36*, 1-12.
- Blankenhorn, D. (1995). *Fatherless America*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bloom, D.E., & Trussell, J. (1984). What are the determinants of delayed childbearing and childlessness in the United States? *Demography*, *21*, 591-611.
- Cazenave, N.A. (1979). Middle-income Black fathers: An analysis of the provider role. *The Family Coordinator*, *28*(4), 583-593.
- Christiansen, S.L., & Palkovitz, R. (2001). Why the "good provider" role still matters: Providing as a form of paternal involvement. *Journal of Family Issues*, *28*, 84-106.
- Coltrane, S. (2000). Research on household labor: Modeling and measuring the social imbeddedness of routine family work. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *62*, 1208-1233.
- Coltrane, S. (1996). *Family man: Fatherhood, housework, and gender equity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Daly, K. (1992a). The fit between qualitative research and characteristics of families. In J.F. Gilgun, K. Daly, & G. Handel (Eds.), *Qualitative methods in family research* (pp. 3-11). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Daly, K. (1992b). Parenthood as problematic: Insider interviews with couples seeking to adopt. In J.F. Gilgun, K. Daly, & G. Handel (Eds.), *Qualitative methods in family research* (pp. 103-125). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Daniels, P., & Wiengarten, K. (1988). The fatherhood click: The timing of parenthood in men's lives. In P. Bronstein & C.P. Cowan (Eds.), *Fatherhood today: Men's changing role in the family* (pp. 36-53). New York: Wiley.
- Demos, J. (1982). The changing faces of fatherhood. In S. Cath, A. Gurwitt, & J.M. Ross (Eds.), *Father and child: Developmental and clinical perspectives* (pp. 425-445). Boston: Little Brown.
- Dienhart, A., & Daly, K. (1997). Men and women cocreating father involvement in a nongenerative culture. In A.J. Hawkins & D.C. Dollahite (Eds.), *Generative fathering: Beyond deficit perspectives* (pp. 147-164). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Doherty, W.J. (2001). *The intentional family: Simple rituals to strengthen families*. New York: Quill.
- Doherty, W.J., Kouneski, E.F. & Erickson, M.F. (1998). Responsible fathering: An overview and conceptual framework. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *60*, 277-292.
- Dollahite, D.C. (1991). Family resource management and family stress theories: Toward a conceptual integration. *Lifestyles: Family and Economic Issues*, *12*(4), 361-377.

- Dollahite, D.C., Marks, L.D., & Goodman, M. (2004). Religiosity and families: Relational and spiritual linkages in a diverse and dynamic cultural context. In M. J. Coleman & L.H. Ganong (Eds.), *The handbook of contemporary families: Considering the past, contemplating the future* (pp.411-431). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dollahite, D.C., Marks, L.D., & Olson, M.M. (2002). Fathering, faith, and family therapy: Generative narrative therapy with religious fathers. *Journal of Family Psychotherapy, 13*, 263-294.
- Dollahite, D.C., Marks, L.D., & Olson, M.M. (1998). Faithful fathering in trying times: Religious beliefs and practices of Latter-day Saint fathers of children with special needs. *The Journal of Men's Studies, 7*, 71-94.
- Eggebeen, D.J. (2002). The changing course of fatherhood: Men's experiences with children in demographic perspective. *Journal of Family Issues, 23*, 486-506.
- Ehrenreich, B. (1984). *The hearts of men: American dreams and the flight from commitment*. New York: Anchor.
- Elder, G.H. (1974). *Children of the great depression: Social change in life experience*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fagan, J. (2000). Head Start fathers' daily hassles and involvement with their children. *Journal of Family Issues, 21*, 329-346.
- Forste, R. (2002). Where are all the men? A conceptual analysis of the role of men in family formation. *Journal of Family Issues, 23*, 579-600.
- Furstenberg, F. F. (1988). Good dads—bad dads: Two faces of fatherhood. In Andrew Cherlin (Ed.), *The changing American family and public policy* (pp. 193-218). Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Griswold, R.L. (1993). *Fatherhood in America*. New York: Basic Books.
- Harris, J.R. (1998). *The nurture assumption: Why children turn out the way they do—Parents matter less than you think and peers matter more*. New York: Free Press.
- Hawkins, A.J., & Dollahite, D.C. (1997). *Generative fathering: Beyond deficit perspectives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hewlett, S.A. (1991). *When the bough breaks: The cost of neglecting our children*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hochschild, A.R. (1997). *The time bind: When work becomes home and home becomes work*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Horn, W. (2001). Marriage essential to fatherhood topic. National Fatherhood Initiative Website. Retrieved from <http://www.fatherhood.org/articles/wh010201.htm> on 02/21/2003.
- Horna, J., & Lupri, E. (1987). Fathers' participation in work, family life and leisure: A Canadian experience. In C.L. Lewis & M. O'Brien (Eds.), *Reassessing fatherhood: New observations on fathers and the modern family*. London: Sage Publications.
- Johnson, W.B. (1992). Father uninvolved: Impact, etiology and potential solutions. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity, 12*, 301-311.
- King, V. (1994). Variation in the consequences of nonresident father involvement for children's well-being. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 56*, 963-972.

- Kuczynski, L. (Ed.) (2003). *The handbook of dynamics in parent-child relations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lamb, M.E. (2000). The history of research on father involvement: An Overview. In H.E. Peters, G.W. Peterson, S.K. Steinmetz, & R.D. Day (Eds.), *Fatherhood: Research, interventions and policies* (pp. 23-42). New York: Haworth.
- Lamb, M.E. (Ed.) (1997). *The role of the father in child development* (3rd ed.). New York: Wiley & Sons.
- LaRossa, R. (1997). *The modernization of fatherhood: A social and political history*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lynd, R.S., & Lynd, H.M. (1929). *Middletown*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.
- Lynd, R.S., & Lynd, H.M. (1937). *Middletown in transition*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.
- Marks, L.D., & Dollahite, D.C. (2001). Religion, relationships, and responsible fathering in Latter-day Saint families of children with special needs. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 18, 625-650.
- Marsiglio, W. (1998). *Procreative man*. New York: New York University Press.
- Palkovitz, R. (2002). *Involved fathering and men's adult development: Provisional balances*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Palkovitz, R. (1997). Reconstructing "involvement": Expanding conceptualizations of men's caring in contemporary families. In A.J. Hawkins & D.C. Dollahite (Eds.), *Generative fathering: Beyond deficit perspectives* (pp. 200-216). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Palkovitz, R. (1996). The recovery of fatherhood. In A. Carr & M.S. Van Leeuwen (Eds.), *Religion, feminism and the family* (pp. 310-329). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Palkovitz, R., & Marks, L. (2002). Refining fatherhood and motherhood: An analysis of cultural trends in American parenting. In W.E. Fthenakis & M.R. Trexter (Eds.), *Mutterschaft, vaterschaft* (pp. 156-169). Germany: Weinheim and Basel.
- Palkovitz, R., Marks, L.D., Appleby, D.W., & Holmes, E.K. (2003). Parenting and adult development: Contexts, processes and products of intergenerational relationships. In L. Kuczynski (Ed.), *The handbook of dynamics in parent-child relations* (pp. 307-323). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Peters, H.E., Peterson, G.W., Steinmetz, S.W., & Day, R.D. (Eds.). (2000). *Fatherhood: Research, interventions and policies* (pp. 23-42). New York: Haworth.
- Pleck, E.H., & Pleck, J.H. (1997). Fatherhood ideals in the United States: Historical dimensions. In M.E. Lamb (Ed.), *The role of the father in child development* (3rd ed., pp. 33-48). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Pleck, J. (1987). American fathering in historical perspective. In M. Kimmel (Ed.), *Changing men: New directions in research on men and masculinity* (pp. 83-97). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Pleck, J.H. (1997). Paternal involvement: Levels, sources, and consequences. In M.E. Lamb (Ed.), *The role of the father in child development* (3rd ed., pp. 66-103). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Popenoe, D. (1996). *Life without father*. New York: Free Press.

- Popenoe, D. (1993). American family decline, 1960-1990: A review and appraisal. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 55, 527-555.
- Pruett, K.D. (1987). *The nurturing father: Journey toward the complete man*. New York : Warner.
- Rotundo, E A. (1985). American fatherhood. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 29, 7-24.
- Seltzer, J.A., Schaeffer, N.C., & Charng, H. (1989). Family ties after divorce: The relationship between visiting and paying child support. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 51, 1013-1032.
- Teachman, J.D., Tedrow, L.M, & Crowder, K.D. (2000). The changing demography of America's families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 62, 1234-1246.
- Westoff, C. (1986). Perspective on nuptiality and fertility. *Population and Development Review Supplement*, 12, 155-170.
- Wilcox, W.B. (2002). Religion, convention, and father involvement. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 64, 780-792.
- Wilcox, W.B. (1999). Emerging attitudes about gender roles and fatherhood. In D. E. Eberly (Ed.), *The faith factor in fatherhood* (pp. 219-239). New York: Lexington.