

“Just Be There For Them”: Perceptions of Fathering among Single, Low-income Men

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Using an interpretive life course perspective, we explore how men define their role as fathers based on experiences with their own fathers in the past. Based on qualitative interview data collected from thirty-six low-income fathers, we consider men's relationships with their own fathers in terms of residence and affective evaluations. Our investigation reveals how men negotiate the demands of fatherhood in light of economic constraints and the absence of marriage, focusing on fathering role models and men's perceptions of fathering roles. Overall, men not close to their fathers defined fathering primarily in terms of the breadwinner role as opposed to the nurturing role, which was more apparent in the narratives of men close to their fathers.

Keywords: fathering, role modeling, low income, single parents

Given the recent explosion of nonmarital families in the U.S., scholars now pay greater attention to the challenges faced by cohabiting households. While a great deal of this scholarship has focused on cohabitation as a retreat from marriage (e.g., Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005; Waller & McLanahan, 2005), researchers have given only limited attention to challenges that cohabiting couples experience in raising children together (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004). Until quite recently, the scholarship on paternal involvement has largely focused on intact families or divorced

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couples (Goldscheider & Waite, 1991; Marsiglio, 1995). Moreover, a great deal of work on fatherhood has been marked by a preoccupation with middle-class men.

The current study is designed to contribute to the small but growing literature on fathering in low-income, nonmarital households. The significance of this study, and the literature to which it aims to contribute, is underscored by the fact that children in nonmarital, low-income families generally receive less attention from their fathers and are at greater risk of family violence relative to their counterparts in married families (Hofferth & Anderson, 2003; McLanahan, 2004). Moreover, research in this nascent body of scholarship also reveals that never married men face particular challenges in defining and enacting their roles as fathers given the lack of cultural scripts available for parents in nonmarital families (Hamer & Marchioro, 2002; Roy, 2006).

With the goal of further elucidating the experiences of low-income fathers in nonmarital families, this study uses qualitative interview data to examine how men negotiate fatherhood in a context marked by both scarce economic resources and the absence of marriage. We begin by outlining the theoretical perspective used to conduct our study. Thereafter, we discuss the methodological considerations that governed the collection and analysis of our interview data. We then review the findings that surface from the interview narratives of low-income fathers in nonmarital households, and conclude by identifying the implications of our research.

Theoretical Considerations

Historical surveys of fatherhood in the U.S. have examined how fathers' roles as teacher and moral guide during the colonial period gave way to the father-breadwinner model following the industrial revolution (Gerson, 1993; Waller, 2002). The model of father-breadwinner, mother-homemaker was particularly dominant in the 1950s when families in which a sole-wage-earning father comprised almost two-thirds of all American households (Gerson). However, starting in the 1970s, men's wages began to decline and women entered the labor force in greater numbers. Divorce rates increased, as did nonmarital childbearing. Additionally, family relationships and gender roles were questioned and redefined through the feminist movement. These transformations, coupled with other economic and social changes, resulted in the decline of the breadwinner role (Gerson; McLanahan, 2004; Waller).

With the decline of the father-breadwinner model, new cultural constructs of fatherhood have emerged. One of these emerging models has been the involved father—that is, a father who is emotionally connected with his children and that shares childcare responsibilities with his partner (Waller, 2002). Given the cultural imperative in favor of paternal involvement (sometimes called the New Father ideal), such fathers are often seen as “good dads” (Furstenburg, 1988). In sharp contrast, a second emerging model has been the uninvolved father—namely, men that lose contact with their children and are estranged from family life (Gerson, 1993). Based on the New Father ideal, these men are commonly viewed as “bad dads” (Furstenburg). Cultural judgments about “good dads” and “bad dads” notwithstanding, no single dominant model of fatherhood

exists today. Expectations about fatherhood and the actual practices of fathers have become more varied, and fatherhood itself is less clearly defined (Gerson; Waller). The decline in consensus regarding fatherhood has left men to search for their own meanings and definitions as fathers, without clear cultural norms to guide them.

This diversification in the cultural meanings of fatherhood and the quotidian practices of fathers underscores the importance of examining how men perceive, construct, and define themselves as fathers, and how they negotiate social expectations regarding fatherhood (Roy, 2006). In our view, the negotiation of fatherhood is best conceptualized through an *interpretive life course perspective* that emphasizes the sequencing and timing of life events with attention not only to turning points in a person's life but, even more centrally, to the meanings attributed to significant life events.¹ The interpretive life course perspective we propose is designed to examine how life events and the meanings attributed to those events are shaped by prior life transitions and the narratives to which those turning points gave rise. The interpretations that emerge from life experiences are further influenced by relationships of interdependence in the home (e.g., marital/cohabiting partnerships, father-child bonds) and significant others in a variety of other social venues (e.g., workplace, peer networks). From this vantage point, trajectories of experience and meaning are shaped by a confluence of structural position (e.g., social class), cultural schemas (e.g., paternal role modeling), and agency (i.e., creativity on the part of social actors). This perspective is congruent with constructionist approaches to fatherhood, in which men are viewed as “bricoleurs” who actively piece together “their ideas, justifications, and practices regarding fatherhood from various sources, including their families and communities, other institutions, and the general culture” (Waller, 2002, p. 45; see also Lupton & Barclay, 1997).

As men experience the transition to fatherhood, they are actively involved in negotiating their identities as fathers, such that they recreate “shared social meanings that [they] attribute to themselves in [their] role” as fathers (Burke & Reitzes, 1991: 242). And, given the diverse cultural definitions of fatherhood, the role of father now carries with it a host of expectations that range widely from nurturer to breadwinner. These diverse, and often contradictory, role expectations are social products formed and maintained through interactions with others and interpretations of cultural schemas (Burke & Reitzes; Marsiglio, 1995).

Moreover, variations in the social and economic context of men's lives create different opportunities and constraints for men in crafting a meaningful definition of fatherhood. Low-income men face distinctive challenges in cultivating a viable identity as a father. Although the breadwinner ideal is no longer dominant, its historical residue may lead low-income men to view themselves as inadequate providers (Lupton & Barclay, 1997). In addition, popular culture (e.g., film) often portrays low-income fathers as deadbeat dads who are sexually irresponsible and not financially reliable (Waller,

¹ In developing this perspective, we couple insights from the life course perspective developed by Elder (1985) and the approach to interpretive biography developed by Denzin (1989).

2002). The meaning that low-income fathers give to involvement with children is shaped by the larger socioeconomic context which may include restricted job prospects, poverty, nonmarital childbearing, welfare and child support systems (McLanahan, 2004; Waller).

Here again, the timing of life events is an important influence on the practice of fathering. While masculinity is defined in part by the ability to transmit values to the next generation (Marsiglio & Cohan, 1997), the intergenerational transmission of values is considerably more difficult for men who transition to fatherhood at a young age (e.g., late teens). Young men, particularly teens, do not have the maturity and resources to respond to fathering in the same way as older, adult men (Marsiglio & Cohan). In addition, the types of relationships men form with their partners influence men's definitions of parental involvement. Linked to partner relationships, residence with children is an important influence on a father's identity. Empirical research reveals that nonresidential fathers exhibit a weaker attachment to their children than do fathers who reside with their children (Furstenberg, 1988). Among nonresidential fathers, a more cooperative and coparental relationship is linked to greater father-child involvement (Sobolewski & King, 2005). In addition, the employment status and educational attainment of fathers shapes the amount of contact and economic support nonresidential fathers give their children (Rangarajan & Gleason, 1998). Thus, low-income men actively interpret and define their roles as fathers, but do so within the context of their socioeconomic and personal circumstances (Waller, 2002).

In addition to one's current social circumstances, past family relationships exert an important influence on men's definitions of fatherhood (Roy, 2006). Fathers' prioritization of their involvement with children is connected with important family relationships that they experienced as children, particularly their relationships with their own fathers. Thus, men are influenced by role models of fathering they have experienced in their own lives (Pleck, 1997). Empirical research reveals that men who had positive relationships with their fathers are more inclined to have positive parenting skills, and conversely those that had negative relationships will display negative skills (Floyd & Morman, 2000; Snarey, 1993). Research on the intergenerational transmission of both abusive and constructive parenting provides support for this conclusion (Chen & Kaplan, 2001; Pleck, 1997; Simons, Beaman, et al., 1993), and generally supports social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) with its focus on the modeling of attitudes, values, emotions, or behaviors (Masciadrelli, Pleck, & Stueve, 2006).

And yet, a good deal of recent research underscores men's agency in reconfiguring their role as father if they were exposed to a negative role model of fatherhood when they were young. The majority of men who report negative childhood experiences with their fathers do not replicate this pattern with their own children (Floyd & Morman, 2000; Pleck, 1997). The phenomenon of "crossing over," whereby men exhibit positive fathering behaviors despite having had negative experiences with their own fathers, underscores men's agency, or ability to craft innovative positive schemas of fathering to supplant what they perceived as a lack of caring and involvement from their own fathers (Floyd & Morman, p. 349; Masciadrelli, Pleck, & Stueve, 2006; Pleck).

Pleck (1997) suggests that a son's affective evaluation of his father's involvement strongly influences his willingness to model his father's parenting. If a man evaluates his experience with his own father as positive, he is more likely to model his father's parenting attitudes and behaviors. In contrast, if his evaluation of his father is negative, he is likely to compensate by adopting positive practices. Snarey (1993) concludes that fathers in general replicate the positive fathering they received and then try to rework the negative models of fathering with which they were raised. Such “compensatory fathering,” however, only accounts for crossover behavior where men go from “bad” to “good.” It does not account for the reverse—men who had positive experiences with their fathers but exhibit negative parenting behaviors.

The development of paternal identities is further compounded by a lack of appropriate paternal role models over time (Daly, 1993). Men who hold their fathers in high regard and consider them as role models are largely the exception; yet, most men still feel a need to provide a good role model of fathering for their own children (Daly). Thus, many men face the responsibility of parenting without the benefit of having strong father figures in their lives and instead draw from outside influences like men in their extended family, friends, or even their mothers to find characteristics they consider important to successful parenting. Daly found that many men draw upon a composite of models in paternal identity development, as opposed to one specific fathering model.

From a life course perspective, retrospective life histories allow us to explore how men socially construct their role as fathers relative to their own fathers, which may or may not include factual accounts (Roy, 2006). Fatherhood is a dramatic event in men's lives, and in the case of low-income fathers, has the potential to “snap” young men from their previous “player” lifestyle to accept paternal responsibilities (Roy, 1999). Fathering a child can be a turning point in the narrative identities of men that influences their future behavior (Roy, 2006). Whether or not fatherhood leads to lasting change depends in part on how men construct their identity as fathers (Palkovitz, 2002). We, therefore, focus on how men perceive their role as fathers and how their role identification depends in part on the expectations they associate with their circumstances. Men's stories of their experiences with their own father's provide insight into the process of developing their identity as fathers. And, of course, men rework the stories of their fathers' experiences from the past as part of this process (Roy, 2006).

To understand the changing meaning of fatherhood and make sense of men's perceptions (Gerson, 1993), we explore the way in which men define their parenting role relative to the relationship they describe with their own father. In particular, we focus on low-income, single fathers and consider how they construct their role as fathers given various social and economic constraints. Drawing on in-depth interviews, we use men's narratives to describe the relationship between men's affective evaluations of their own fathers, and residence with their fathers. We explore men's perceptions of modeling (incorporation of positive attributes from their fathers) and compensating (avoiding negative characteristics exhibited by their fathers) as they define their role as fathers based on the experiences with their own fathers in the past.

Sample and Method

Interview subjects were identified by a nonprofit organization that services low-income children in a major western city. The director of the organization advertised the study to patrons by posting notices in the building soliciting participation from single fathers. Fathers with children serviced by the organization also told friends about the survey. Thus, other single fathers were located through a snowball technique. Subjects indicating interest provided their names and phone numbers to the organization director for contact by the study investigators. Potential subjects were contacted by phone and pre-screened to be sure they had fathered children outside of marriage and were under age forty. Interviews were scheduled in the organization's office, generally after hours.

Approximately 310 children are serviced daily by the nonprofit organization and the majority of families participating are low-income (71% of children qualify for free or reduced lunch), single-parent households (about 60% of children). Given that several of the fathers interviewed had children supported by the nonprofit organization, our sample primarily includes involved fathers. Because some of the subjects were located by word-of-mouth (snowball technique), not all of those interviewed are actively involved with their children. Additionally, some of the fathers were involved with some children, but not all that they had fathered. Generally, the sample is reflective of low-income families served by the organization.

Thirty-six participants were interviewed. Two were married to their partner at the time of interview, although they had fathered children outside of marriage. Twenty of the fathers were single (that is, living without a partner) and the remaining respondents were cohabiting. Most of those cohabiting were living with the mother of at least some of their children, although a few fathers were living with a partner other than the mother of their children. Only seven of the fathers interviewed were residing with all of their children. Ten of them shared childcare with the mother of their children while living in separate households. Six fathers visited their children regularly, but were not involved in primary childcare. Nine of the fathers lived with their most recent children, but had other children from previous relationships with whom they had varying levels of contact. Four of the fathers had no or very minimal contact with their children. Although many of the fathers interviewed were involved in parenting children, the majority were not actively involved in regular childcare.

At the beginning of each interview, written consent from the subject to participate in the study was obtained; also the purpose of the study and steps to maintain confidentiality were explained. Interviews were conducted by male interviewers of similar age to the subjects between May of 2002 and April of 2003. Interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed by the interviewer for analysis. Subjects were given an honorarium for their participation. A third of the men interviewed were 20 to 25 years of age, another third were 26 to 30 years of age, and the final third were aged 31 to 39 years. Most of the men interviewed had a high school degree, with seven never completing high school. Fifteen had at most a high school diploma or GED. Nine had attended some college, and five had completed a college degree. The majority of the men

were employed full-time when interviewed, eight were employed part-time, and four were unemployed. Most of the fathers were white, seven were African American, four Hispanic, three Native American, and an additional three were of mixed race and ethnic background. Because some of the subjects were located via a snowball technique, we have a higher minority representation in our sample (47% minority) relative to the population of children served at the agency (23% minority). In particular, our sample includes a higher percentage of African American and Native American men.

The interview guide was semi-structured, and therefore used a flexible format with questions that were asked of all respondents. Questions regarding the mother of their first child, as well as current partners and later children were asked. Other questions focused on how respondents interpreted and defined their expectations, obligations, and experiences as fathers. The contributions men made to their children, both in terms of child care and financial support were also considered. In addition, questions related to the respondent's relationship with his own father were explored. We used a combination of sensitizing concepts generated from previous scholarship on fatherhood (e.g., father-child bonding, paternal modeling) with a grounded theory approach to analyze the interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Our approach was not to directly test and confirm theory, but to derive categories inductively of fathering and consider patterns in the data collected in the interviews.

After transcription, the interviews were sorted based on the respondent's affective relationship with his father. Initial analyses revealed a linkage between residence with one's father and the respondent's perceptions of closeness. With this initial pattern having surfaced, we grouped interviews into a four-square matrix based on two dimensions: residence versus non-residence with father, and close or not close to father. Drawing upon the respondent's narratives regarding their residence with their father during childhood and adolescents (coded narratives from interviews are featured below), we sorted the interviews based on responses to the question: “when you were about age 14, who were you living with?” Depending upon responses to this question and following probes, we determined residence during adolescence with biological father. If respondents were not living with their biological father, questions were asked about child support and contact with their father. Closeness to father was based on responses to the question: “how do you feel about your father?” Probing questions were asked to determine if and how the respondent's perceptions of his relationship with his father had changed over time.

Respondent's indicating that they loved their father, felt close to him, or saw him as their best friend were sorted as close to their biological father. Respondent's that indicated they had no contact or very minimal contact with their father, or hated their father were coded as not close. In addition, several respondents acknowledged their biological father and described him as a “good guy,” but indicated they had no relationship with him. Thus, strong, positive perceptions of relationships with their biological fathers were coded as close, whereas neutral to strong negative perceptions were coded as not close. For example, one respondent, when asked how he felt about his father replied, “Alright ... we're good friends now more than before because he wants to get to know us more because he didn't get to know me and my brother when we were kids. He's my father.” This response was coded as not close. In contrast, the response

“I love him. He was very protective. He was concerned and caring” was coded as close to father.

Based on the narratives, ten of the respondents were identified as residing with their father and close to him. All of these men grew up in two-parent married households except for one respondent that lived with his father following divorce. Only three of the respondents were coded as residing with their father and not close to him. Of these men, one lived with married parents and the other two lived with fathers following divorce. Five of the respondents indicated that they did not live with their father as teens, but still reported a close relationship. All of the parents of these men were divorced and four of them lived with their mother, but reported regular visits with their father. The fifth moved back and forth between parent households, although he reported spending more time with his father. The largest category included respondents (18 total) that did not live with their biological father and did not report a close relationship. Ten of these men lived with their mother, and at times with a step-father. Five lived with just their mother, two were in foster care or state custody as teens, and one lived with uncles.

To explore how low-income men define their role as fathers, we focus on narratives that described experiences with their own fathers. In particular, we asked about role models and father figures in their lives, as well as how they defined fathering roles. These questions included, “Who are your role models?” and more specifically, “Who is the best example of a father you know?” In regard to fathering roles, we asked, “What do you consider to be a man’s primary role in life?” and “What do you think a father’s responsibilities to his children are?” Additionally, we asked what was the hardest part about being a father and about how the respondent learned to be a father. To further explore perceptions of fathering relative to experiences with their own fathers, respondents were asked about what they do that is the same as their own father and what they do differently. Based on these narratives, themes that emerged from the data were coded and summarized according to the four category coding based on residency and closeness to father (Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Pseudonyms and ages are used to identify quotes from respondents.

Using our integrated analytical approach (sensitizing concepts coupled with grounded theory), codes for two aspects of fathering related to low-income men’s experiences with their own fathers resulted in the following:

Role Models: primary father figures; characteristics admired: commitment to family, breadwinner role, emotional support

Perceptions of Fathering Roles: commitment to family, provider, nurturer, teacher, protector; challenges to fathering

Findings

Role Models

Men close to their fathers. Our respondents’ relationships with their own fathers had a strong influence on their understanding of their own obligations as a father. Men

that resided with their fathers as youth and felt close to them perceived their own fathers as role models—especially in terms of taking responsibility to provide for the family and staying with the family. Men that did not reside with their fathers still saw them as role models in terms of working to provide and being involved in their lives, but they also turned to other family members such as step-fathers and grandfathers to model staying together as a family. Although close to their fathers, many respondents also mentioned other men in their lives they turned to for a listening ear and compassion such as scout leaders, coaches, and the fathers of friends.

All of the respondents close to their fathers (residential and non-residential) except for one, named their own father as a role model in their lives. The one respondent that did not named himself as his role model in addition to media figures. In particular, men that resided with their fathers perceived them as role models because of their commitment to their mothers, and because they modeled a strong work ethic. Victor, age 35, said of his father, “I look up to him because he took care of me and my brother and he and my mom stayed together. They had their problems, but they worked them out.” The importance of hard work and providing for their families emerged as the primary characteristic admired in fathers. Miguel lived with his father and looked up to him because:

He’s always worked like that. He’s always stepped up, and that’s what I’ve tried to learn from him. When I would miss work or something, he’d be like, “Hey man, I don’t ever miss work, even if I am sick. I need to put food on the table and I want you to realize that one of these times your life is going to be like that.” (Miguel, age 23)

Besides commitment and work, another important quality these respondents admired in their fathers was trust. Consistency in their relationship with their children and in going to work everyday were perceived as important to building trust as a father and “being there” for their children. Luis, who lived with his father following his parents divorce, described why his dad was his best example of a father: “he never let me down, ever. He never let me down in my whole life. . . . I trust him more than anybody. He’s probably one of the only people in this world I trust with everything” (Luis, age 20).

In addition to their fathers, respondents also mentioned relatives, scout leaders, coaches, and fathers of friends as good examples of fathering in their lives. These father figures were generally described as caring, easy to talk to, and good listeners that spent time with them as youth—sometimes in contrast to their own fathers who they admired for working hard to provide for the family. David, raised in a two-parent home, when asked about his role models first mentioned his father and explained, “I resented all his working, but he’s the one that taught me if you want to get ahead in life you’re going to have to work your butt off.” But when asked about the best example of a father, he mentioned a friend’s father he could talk to because, “when I was having problems he was always there for me” (David, age 24). Thus, men close to their fathers

primarily perceived them as role models because of their committed presence in their children's lives and their commitment to provide financially.

Men not close to their fathers. Men who felt distant from their fathers did not mention them as role models in their lives. Mike, whose father disciplined him with a belt explained, "Everything my dad did, I don't want to do to my kid" (Mike, age 22). The majority of respondents not close to their fathers mentioned their mothers as their primary role model for parenting. They perceived their mother as the one who worked hard to provide for the family, who disciplined them, and essentially raised them. Roberto, age 23, named his mother as his role model "because she had to go to work every day and raise me and my brother." Paul, who lived with an alcoholic father, when asked about role models explained:

I'd say my mom probably, just because she was always there. My dad would go and drink and she'd be the one who had to discipline me and talk to me. My mom was the one who helped me out through everything. When I found out I had a kid, it was my mom I turned to. (Paul, 25)

In addition to being an example of providing for the family, several of these men spoke about learning childcare skills from their mothers which they saw as important in fathering. Jamal described how his mother taught him to care for his infant son:

My mother taught me how to change a diaper; taught me how to bathe him in a sink and all this stuff; taught me when my son was six months old, you just feed him a bottle ... the cat want to eat ... he's hungry. So she taught me how to mash up the vegetables for him and stuff like that; feed him his first table food. So I learned that from my mother". (Jamal, 30)

Besides mothers, several respondents mentioned step-fathers as examples or role models. Again the primary themes were related to providing for the family and "being there" for them. Matt, speaking of his step-father said, "He's held the same job for as long as I've known him, and he's always been there. For most of my life I called him dad. That's who I looked up to" (Matt, 34). In addition, other relatives such as uncles, brothers, and grandfathers were mentioned as examples of working hard and caring for their children. Sam, age 28, described his role model as "my grandpa, because he took care of me a lot. He was like a dad to me."

Some respondents also mentioned coaches, the fathers of friends, and sports and media figures as models of fathering. Bill Cosby was one of the most frequent media figures mentioned, but none of the respondents elaborated on qualities they admired when sports and media figures were named as role models. In contrast, several elaborated on relationships with coaches and the fathers of friends they looked to as examples of fathering. Jamal explained his relationship with his coach:

I admired how he was raising his son. He was married and he always brought his son around, like to the track meets, to football. I could talk to him about anything. Sometimes growing up, sometimes you feel like you can't talk to your step-father or something like that. You've got your coach right there because that's who you're with a lot. So yeah he was like a father figure. (Jamal, age 30)

Not having an involved father, many men looked to others for examples of commitment to family and fathering. A few respondents lamented not having a father to turn to for advice. Roberto, when asked how he learned to be a father replied, “I just basically learned from myself. I don't have my dad there to teach me—he needs help himself” (Roberto, age 23). Brian, who grew-up in foster care, remarked, “I wish I had someone like a grandpa to go to. I wish I had a father figure that I could get guidance from” (Brian, age 31).

Whether or not respondents resided with their father was less important in perceiving him as a role model as compared to having a close relationship with him. Those who talked about having a close connection to their father perceived their fathers as modeling commitment to the family and the breadwinner role. Some men with close relationships with their fathers, and especially those without close father connections, identified other family members (uncles, grandfathers, stepfathers, brothers), as well as friends and coaches as father figures in their lives. They saw these men as modeling, in addition to a work ethic, positive communication skills. “Being there” was a phrase that was used often in these narratives to demonstrate commitment to family, providing financially, and emotional support.

Responsibility of Fathers

Men close to their fathers. In the narratives, respondents described what they perceived to be a father's responsibility to his children. Four themes emerged in these interviews. Overall, men close to their fathers talked about a father's commitment to his family and the importance of being involved in the lives of children and partners. In addition, the breadwinner role was the dominant role mentioned. Respondents also talked about the importance of providing emotional support or nurturing children, and lastly the role of moral teacher and disciplinarian was described. Men talked about these responsibilities and roles in the context of their relationship with their own fathers.

Most of the respondents close to their fathers resided with their fathers as adolescents. The few that did not had regular contact and considered their fathers involved in their lives. This commitment to family was a part of fathering that several of the respondents said they learned from their own fathers. Luis, who lived with his father following his parents divorce, explained the responsibility he felt at the birth of his son:

I just, right away I knew I had a responsibility and it was mine so I wasn't going to deny it or try to forget about it or anything. My dad said, “You've got a responsibility, you'd better take care of him and

you'd better do it the best you can." Basically he just said, "Be a man." (Luis, age 20)

Several of the fathers noted the importance of getting along with their partner and minimizing conflict so that they could be involved in the lives of their children. Even respondents that did not live with their fathers indicated that they thought staying with their partner was important. When asked how he compared to his father, Juan explained:

The only thing I try to do [different from my father] is stay with [my partner], whereas they just kind of left and got their divorces. My stepfather was also from divorce. I just think it's really important for families to stay together for their kids. (Juan, age 24)

Juan then went on to explain how it was hard to go back and forth between parents following divorce because they had different parenting styles and expectations. He didn't want his son to have that kind of family life.

Almost all of the fathers interviewed, regardless of residency or closeness to their father mentioned the breadwinner role and the importance of providing financially for their children as part of a father's responsibility. The challenge men close to their fathers described, however, was being able to work and provide financially, yet still spend time with their children. Rick put it very succinctly when asked about a man's role. He said, "[your role is] to make as much money as you can while spending the most time with your kids" (Rick, age 23). Generally, these men looked to their fathers as breadwinner role models, but they also recognized the importance of spending time with their children—even at the expense of work. David explained, "My father worked probably closer to 14 to 15 hours a day so we weren't as close as I wanted to be." In contrast to his own father, David was willing to spend less time at his business in order to have time for his daughter. He said, "She needs to know who I am, she needs to be a part of my life; therefore I'm not able to dedicate 24 hours a day, seven days a week to my job. I try to spend as much time with her as I can. I try to make the time where I can actually take time off work" (David, age 24).

The pressure to provide financially, as well as spend time with children, was apparent as several men described the challenges of fathering. Some found it hard to have enough time. Dale, age 39, explained, "I guess the hardest thing about being a parent is finding the time to do the things that I know I should be doing." Others wished they had more money. Charlie, age 30, speaking of his daughter, wished he "had more money so she could have everything. Sometimes she says she wants [something] but I can't get it for her." Referring to his son, Juan said, "I'd like to make a little bit more money and give him a little bit more; right now it's just rough with all the bills I have and taking care of him. I'd like to get him a lot of things" (Juan, age 24). Thus, the conflict between having time for their children and making more money was a challenge perceived by men as they defined their various roles as fathers.

Modeling the example of their fathers, respondents felt responsible to provide financially for their children, but in contrast to their own fathers, several also felt a need

to be more nurturing than their fathers had been. Joshua, age 26, explained, “I think every child needs their mom and their dad ... [they need] unconditional love by both parents.” Scott, raising his two-year-old daughter alone said, “I want her to be able to come to me and tell me about [her problems]. I would like her to feel that she can talk to me no matter what.” Although they felt close to their own fathers, several of the respondents saw themselves as more nurturing. Juan, raising his three year-old son explained, “My dad was like ‘You’re a boy, you’ve got to get up. Keep doing this or doing that.’ But I try to nurture him a little bit more because his mom is not around like she should be” (Juan, age 24).

In addition to the role of provider and nurturer, another theme emerging from the narratives was the role of teacher. When asked about a father’s responsibilities to his children, Nick, age 22, replied, “Teach them everything you know. Try to teach them morals. I think that’s the biggest thing.” This often included teaching children not to make the mistakes they had made. Charlie explained that as a father you should “teach your child so they don’t make the same mistakes. Give them everything you’ve learned and let them learn it and guide them through everything” (Charlie, age 30). In the context of teaching children, several fathers also discussed their role as disciplinarian. In particular, they noted how they discipline differently from their own fathers. Steve, age 37, explained: “The world has changed. My parents are in their 60s. They disciplined differently then. Now you don’t lay a hand on your kids. My parents were different with us.” Nick, the father of a five-year-old daughter, described his need to be creative as a parent rather than use physical punishment: “I think I handle situations really good. Like if I try to make her do something she doesn’t want to do, I’m pretty creative. [Whereas with] my dad, you’d be ready to get your ass kicked” (Nick, age 22). In contrast to physical punishment used by their parents, many of the respondents discussed the need to be patient with their children and find positive ways to discipline.

An additional theme emerged largely among respondents that did not live with their fathers as teens; this was the challenge of knowing what to do as a father. Several of these fathers noted that they want to do what is right and give their children the best, but they were not always sure of what to do. Juan explained that “it’s hard being a parent. There’s nothing easy about it. They don’t have instructions with them!” (Juan, age 24). The father of an infant and three-year-old noted it is hard “always making the right decisions for them. Sometimes you think you’re making the right decisions, but it might be wrong” (Rick, age 23). This uncertainty in fathering was prevalent more in the narratives of the few respondents close to non-residential fathers, in comparison to those close to residential fathers.

Men not close to their fathers. Commitment to family was also a theme that emerged among respondents not close to their biological fathers. Brian, a father of three children, two of whom he lives with, explained it this way:

When you have a child, that child is depending on you. You have taken your personal interest and your entertainment goals and your selfish non-responsible goals and you’re responsible for another per-

son. You have to put the child first. If you've taken the responsibility of having a child, you have to be responsible for it. There is a bit of selflessness in being a parent. If you have a child and you still think that you're going to have your cake and eat it to, then you'll be a bad parent. (Brian, age 31)

However, in terms of commitment to children, as with Brian above, several of the fathers in this group were living with or involved with some of their children, but not all. Justin, age 34, has a child he has never seen but pays child support for, and he also lives with and raises another son. He explained, "I love being a father. I raise my son. They say that I have another daughter and I pay child support, but I've never seen her and I don't think she's mine, but the state says it is. So I raise my son. He lives with me" (Justin, age 34). Both Brian and Justin never knew their biological fathers, and although they perceived taking responsibility for children as important to fathering, they were not involved with all of the children they had fathered.

A large part of being involved in the lives of children was dependent upon the respondent's relationship with the children's mothers. Several men voiced the importance of staying with the mother of their children, often in contrast to their experience with a non-residential father. However, this often became complicated as many of these men had fathered children with multiple partners. Matt, who has three children with three different partners, explained his efforts to remain with his current partner and their son:

Mostly I spend time with my son and I really enjoy spending time with him. I think that's a big part of [fathering]. I didn't get a lot of that growing up so, that's probably the biggest reason I'm still living in the same house with him and his mother is because I didn't have any of that growing up. I went from parent to parent to parent, back and forth after the divorce. (Matt, age 34)

Matt explained that he had given up custody of his first daughter to her mother and spouse so that his daughter would be raised in a two-parent family. He said, "It's one of the things that made me happy about [his previous partner]. I mean, twelve years they've been together [she and her current spouse], so I can't complain about that at all" (Matt, age 34).

Growing up without a close relationship with their own father, most of these respondents expressed a desire to "be there" for their partners and children, but many described challenges and problems that made it difficult for them to take responsibility. Two primary obstacles to commitment to children emerged in the narratives: being too young and conflict with partners. In some cases, the men had fathered children as teenagers and felt they were too young to take on the responsibility of fatherhood. In several of these cases, the fathers gave up parental rights to grandparents, or others. Nathan, age 25, fathered a child at age 14, and with his girlfriend gave up the child for adoption. Speaking of his son and his decision as a father, he said:

I think it's great and I'm very proud of him. I show his picture off to everybody. I feel like I'm a better person because I did give him a life instead of trying to be a child and taking care of a child. I kind of pat myself on the back for that one. It is the most mature and responsible thing we could have done. (Nathan, age 25)

In addition to being young, some men did not know they had fathered children until contacted later by the State. They expressed frustration at not being able to participate in the decision to raise the child or give up custody at the child's birth. Brian was contacted by the courts five years after the birth of his daughter. Speaking of the mother of his child he said:

I feel like I was cheated with her. She never told me she was pregnant, so I never had the opportunity to be responsible. She took my responsibility away by not telling me. We should have discussed what was best for the child, maybe adoption. She went ahead and had the kid without me and as a result I'm paying for it for 18 years. I accept the responsibility of my actions, I have to be responsible because I have to do the right thing, [but] I feel cheated in the same sense. (Brian, age 31)

These fathers paid child support for children they fathered early in their lives, but resented not having a say in parenting decisions.

Several fathers described how conflict with their partner inhibited their ability to father. Eric, who lives with his current partner and their son, also has joint custody of two children with an ex-partner. He explained that his ex-partner, “avoids any state stipulations on what my rights are. If she feels that she doesn't want the kids to be with me that day, she'll take the decision in her own hands and make her own decision about what my kids are going to do and how they'll go about it” (Eric, age 33). Having grown-up with conflict between parents, some of the fathers tried to get along with their partner in order to minimize conflict around their children. Tom explained that his main family problem is “me and [Jennifer] always having words. If I could change anything, that's what it would be is for me and her to get along in front of the kids” (Tom, age 39). Wayne shares parenting his son with his ex-partner and explains his feelings about minimizing conflict:

We decided when we split up we're like, you know, I told her, you can hate me forever and I can hate you forever but don't ever tell him that. He doesn't need to hear that; because I grew up that way, hearing my mom trash my dad and my dad trash my mom and it just kind of messed with my head. I don't want to do that to him. (Wayne, age 25)

For these fathers, conflict with partners made it difficult to father, and the conflict was often compounded by the complexity of having children with multiple partners.

As with men close to their fathers, the primary theme emerging in the narratives of men not close to their fathers was the importance of providing financially for their children. The importance of working and providing financially was generally the first role emphasized by men as they described the responsibilities of fathers. Matt, age 34, described a man's role "to be financially responsible. To be respectable, to have your bills paid, have your kids in good clothes, food in the house and have time to do other things." Matt, unemployed and a stay-home dad, explained his frustration because he was not providing for his family:

I don't think I'm a very positive role model. For one I wasn't raised like this. It's been three years since I've had a permanent, full-time job. Stay at home dad thing, it's all fine and dandy being politically correct, but as far as my upbringing goes, the man is the breadwinner. I don't care if [my partner] makes more money than I do, I'd like to make money. I think that it's important that my son sees me working, especially at [his] young age. I don't want him to think that's what life is all about when he grows up, because it isn't. (Matt, age 34)

Tyson echoed this need to role model working for his children. He said, "I want my kids to see me leaving every morning. I don't want my kids see me sleeping in until noon. I want them to see me working every morning" (Tyson, age 25). Fulfilling the good provider role was also described as one of the hardest challenges to fathering by several low-income fathers. Paul, who gives money to support his first daughter and lives with his second partner and son, explained that "finances is the hardest part for me; trying to take care of them so I can take them to the doctor and the dentist, so they always have money for anything they need" (Paul, age 25).

When asked about a father's role, providing financially for children was sometimes expanded to include other forms of providing. Generally, however, these descriptions were of actions, rather than emotions—of physically doing things for children or having a physical presence. Justin, age 34, defined a man's primary role as "provide—provide whatever is necessary. That means emotional support, financial support, clean the tub, and help with the dishes. Your job is to provide and to set an example for your children." Fathering was generally described as "being there" for children. Kevin, who lived apart from his own children, described a father's role as "probably just raising the kid, putting bread on the table, be there when they need ... just be there for them" (Kevin, age 32). Some men further defined "being there" to include attending their children's activities. This was seen as being a more involved father relative to their own fathers. In comparison to the step-father that raised him, Will said, "In the providing part I don't rate as well, but as a father, I think I rate better than him because he didn't spend too much time with my brother and I. He never came to our football games

or wrestling matches. I spend time with my son. I go to all of his soccer games” (Will, age 35).

Beyond the breadwinner role and “being there,” the next theme to emerge in the narratives of these fathers was that of teacher and disciplinarian. Brent, a single father that shares parenting his two children with their mother, described a father’s role as, “just teaching your children what you know ... morals, right from wrong, stuff like that” (Brent, age 28). In their efforts to teach their children, several fathers expressed the need for patience and the frustration of trying to explain things to their children. Justin, who lives with his eleven-year-old son, said:

Do I wish I had more skills in rearing my son? Yes. Do I wish I had more patience and skills in being able to sit down and understand his homework and understand some of the things he’s going through now? Yes, I do. I get frustrated when I try to explain things to him and he doesn’t get it. I don’t know any other way to explain things or make him understand it. (Justin, age 34)

Several fathers raised concerns regarding discipline and the need to not perpetuate the abuse they received as a child. Brian, age 31, said, “I am scared of me; I am scared of the cycles. A son will treat his children the way he was treated.” Justin, who was abused by foster parents, speaking about the hardest part of fathering said:

Discipline. I don’t know a lot of other ways. I get to the point when I get all mad and I’ve learned that it’s just best to walk away because I was abused when I was a kid. All of the men I knew would beat me. That’s how I was raised. They whipped me and used a strong fist and all that kind of stuff. I wouldn’t do that to my son. (Justin, age 34)

Some of these fathers experienced verbal or physical abuse as youth and struggled with ways to discipline without losing control. They described their efforts in stark contrast to their own fathers. Matt, living with his five-year-old son, explained:

Back then, if you smarted off to your dad it wasn’t against the law for him to knock you across the room. Well, it is now. I’ve got to find a punching bag or something. I have to release that energy. Honestly, I just attempt not to hit him in any way, shape, form, or fashion. I try not to spank him. I’ll grab him and sit him down on the chair and say, “You move out of that chair boy.” My dad was extremely physical. Back then there weren’t laws about that, but there are laws about that now; even so [I try to use] as little physical punishment as possible. I want him to learn from his mistakes. I try to explain to him instead of just saying, “No, don’t do it.” I try to tell him why, and that’s something my dad never did. (Matt, age 34)

Trying to teach and discipline without physical punishment was a challenge raised by several of these fathers, particularly those that had experienced abuse as children.

The final theme raised by respondents not close to their fathers was the role of protector. This aspect of fathering did not appear in the narratives of men that were close to their fathers. Tom, the father of two daughters ages three and seven, describing a father's responsibilities said, "look after them; see that they don't get hurt. Make sure they're not out by themselves" (Tom, age 39). Other fathers explained the need to protect their children from alcohol or drugs. Roberto, living with his son and partner, described a father's responsibilities saying, "to raise them right and raise them around no drugs or alcohol" (Roberto, age 23). In reference to his own father, Paul explained that as a father he did not want to drink, "because I just seen my dad. He was the worst person when he was like that and I don't want to be so my kids don't want to come around me, they just want to stay in their rooms and avoid dad. I don't want that" (Paul, age 25). Although some of the fathers mentioned the importance of keeping their children away from drugs and alcohol, a couple of these fathers expressed guilt because they themselves struggled with smoking. Brian, age 31, remarked, "my only vice is that I still smoke. It's a lack of willpower and I know I'm doing a stupid thing."

Overall, the men not close to their fathers defined fathering primarily in terms of the breadwinner role as opposed to the nurturing role, which was more apparent in the narratives of men close to their fathers. Although commitment to family and taking responsibility for children and partners was a common theme among all fathers, those without close father relationships defined their roles in sharp contrast to their experiences with their biological fathers. Rather than modeling their fathers, they focused on having a presence in their children's lives, as well as protecting their children and not perpetuating the abuse they experienced. Men with close relationships with their fathers defined their roles more in terms of emotional support and developing a caring, nurturing relationship with their children. Their descriptions of "being there" included an emotional element. In contrast, men without close father relationships instead defined their roles in terms of "doing"—going to work, attending activities, as well as "not doing"—verbal or physical abuse.

Discussion

Given the paucity of attention paid to the contours of paternal involvement in non-marital contexts, this study was designed to shed light on fathering in low-income, non-marital households. Using an interpretive life course perspective and qualitative interview data collected from low-income fathers, our investigation revealed how men negotiate the demands of fatherhood in light of economic constraints and the absence of a key relational resource, namely, marriage.

Among the variety of intriguing findings revealed by this inquiry, we discovered that, in the absence of marriage, men who were close to their own fathers as children drew heavily on paternal role models to generate fatherhood scripts. In what might be best termed a "substitutive strategy" of fathering, these unmarried men did not—and,

in fact, could not—draw cultural cues about paternal involvement from a spouse. In marital contexts, men can draw valuable directives (and often correctives) from their wives about what constitutes “good fathering” to help them navigate the vagaries of paternal involvement (Bartkowski, 2001). Many of the unmarried men in this study instead harkened back to their fathers, or rather the positive recollections they had of their fathers, to craft highly personalized paradigms of fatherhood that involved economic provision and emotional attachment. Thus, these men substituted memories of their own dads’ fathering for wifely cues about what it means to be a “good dad.” This group of men sought to “pass the baton” of care-giving, values, and such that they had received from their fathers to their own children, albeit outside the conventional context of a marital relationship.

By contrast, men who were not close their fathers as children adopted a more pragmatic approach to conceiving of and acting upon their paternal responsibilities. These men did not have direct or positive role modeling from their fathers during childhood and, consequently, sought to avoid becoming the delinquent dads that they perceived their own fathers to be. So, whereas respondents close to their own fathers aspired to become the “good dads” by whom they had been raised (replication of positive role modeling), subjects who were distant from their fathers wished to avoid becoming the “bad dads” they remembered from their childhood (recovery from negative role modeling).

Two noteworthy implications emerge from this study. The first relates to men’s agency in negotiating the demands of fatherhood. The great deal of quantitative scholarship on the antecedents of paternal involvement (reviewed above) has illuminated the factors that foster and inhibit men’s interaction with their children. However, such research is unable to consider the creative strategies that men use to negotiate intergenerational relationships. Our study has shown that men enlist diverse strategies in negotiating their paternal responsibilities, and that such negotiations often hinge on the social networks within which these men were embedded (e.g., perceived closeness to their own father) and are currently situated (e.g., relationship quality with the child’s mother). As research on fatherhood moves forward, more qualitative research is needed to explore the many social sources through which fatherhood scripts are transmitted to men (e.g., from biological fathers, step-fathers, grandfathers, uncles, coaches, media icons, significant women). Such research should consider not only the many sources from which men draw cues about “good” and “bad” fathering, but should also explore the reformulation of those scripts by men who are faced with the exigencies of “lived fatherhood.”

Second, while qualitative interviews provide insight into fathers’ motivations and aspirations, there is much to be gained by conducting observational and ethnographic research on father-child relationships. Such research could enable researchers to analyze fathers’ parenting “in action,” thereby comparing interview accounts with lived experiences and quotidian practices. Moreover, social scientific research on parent-child relations too often explores only the perspectives and actions of adults while neglecting those of children. Yet, children are social agents capable of formulating strategies

in light of their own desires and experiences, and even resisting the demands placed upon them. Naturalistic and ethnographic investigations could illuminate the ways in which father-child relationships are a “tandem negotiation” between parent and child (cf. Bartkowski, 2001), one in which fathers’ ideas and practices are shaped by the dispositions and practices of their youngsters, the changing contours of youth culture, and the power exhibited by children’s peer groups. Until such research is conducted, this study has contributed to our understanding of the ways in which low-income men in nonmarital contexts actively define and negotiate their responsibilities as fathers, commonly in light of the shadow their own father casts upon them.

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