



National Center on Fathers and Families

**BRIEF**

*NCOFF Briefs provide summaries of literature reviews, research reports, and working papers published by NCOFF and of emerging practice- and policy-focused issues in the field. This Brief, Reinventing Fatherhood: Toward an Historical Understanding of Continuity and Change in Men's Family Lives, written by Scott Coltrane and Ross D. Parke of the University of California, Riverside, is one in a series of NCOFF's working papers designed to expand work in understudied areas.*

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## **Reinventing Fatherhood: Toward an Historical Understanding of Continuity and Change in Men's Family Lives**

### **Key Findings**

- Researchers, practitioners, and policymakers have paid insufficient attention to the history of fatherhood, leading to theoretical models, community programs, and social policies based on false assumptions about continuity and change in men's family lives.
- The so-called "traditional" married couple family with a wage-earning husband and stay-at-home wife is a relatively recent historical invention. Claims about the universal character of this family form ignore complicated and shifting social and economic contexts for marriage, childrearing, and community life in past times.
- Early histories of fatherhood proposed simplified models based on relationships among production, consumption, and the private family, whereas recent histories of fatherhood focus on continuing diversity and complexity, incorporating insights from social history, family sociology, and developmental psychology.
- Early studies of fatherhood tended to overgeneralize for the entire society based on the experience of those who were white and middle-class. As we learn more about fatherhood in the past we need to guard against the tendency to artificially homogenize men's experiences across class and ethnic lines. The diversity of the forms that fatherhood assumes needs to be recognized.
- The history and pre-history of fatherhood are incomplete and still in the process of being written. Historical change is complex and contradictory. A better understanding of the historical roots of fatherhood will help us avoid oversimplified views of recent changes, aid us in interpreting the present, and help us predict future trends.
- A historical perspective increases our understanding of issues concerning contemporary fatherhood including the complexity of popular cultural imagery, the developmental and intergenerational basis of fatherhood, how fatherhood is gendered and entails power relations, how fathers continue to change, and how political contexts shape fatherhood research.

### **Recommendations for Research**

- Changes in fatherhood cannot be understood without reference to the past. For example, it is generally assumed that the "New Father," the involved daddy who plays with and nurtures his children, did not become popular until the late 1970s. Historians, in contrast, suggest that this fatherhood ideal existed in the United States at least since the 1920s. Whenever possible, researchers should place their findings about fatherhood in historical context.
- Fathers cannot be studied in isolation. Fatherhood, motherhood, and childhood are interdependent and result from the interplay of complex cultural, political, economic, and institutional forces. Researchers should study fatherhood by placing it within various family and social contexts.

- In every historical period, ideas of what fathers should do and the actions of real fathers differ. In addition, every time period contains multiple ideals and realities of fatherhood depending on class, culture, race, geographic location, etc. Researchers should recognize the gap between real and ideal fathering and seek to document how the symbolic and actual are related across various social categories and time periods.
- Viewing fathers from a developmental perspective is central to understanding the past, present, and future of men's roles in families. Research should attempt to understand and isolate how fathers influence their children's development, how fathering behavior shifts as children develop, how parenting changes men, how fathering changes over the life course, and how fathering influences mothers, families, and society.
- An intergenerational perspective on fathering is also needed. Researchers should investigate how parenting practices are passed on or change across generations, and how grandparents and other kin support, advise, or discourage fathers from participating in their children's lives.
- Researchers need to be aware that their studies of fatherhood will be exploited for political advantage. It is the responsibility of each researcher to anticipate the political uses of reported findings and to present study results in ways that will maximize public understanding of the issues involved.

### ***Recommendations for Practice and Policy***

- Changes in fatherhood are complex and contradictory. Historical research suggests that father involvement in childrearing is increasing at the same time that father absence is on the rise. Both trends result from economic and social forces making marriage more individualistic and contingent. Policies and programs should therefore address multiple trends in patterns of marriage and practices of fatherhood.
- Dramatic rhetoric about the decline of marriage and the negative effects of women's expanding opportunities on children has resurfaced periodically for over a century. Such claims deserve careful evaluation using the best available contemporary and historical evidence. Policies and programs should not be enacted in response to a nostalgic vision of separate gender spheres or idealized families from a mythical past.
- What fathers do with and for children is more important than simple residence in a family household, marital status, or legal paternity. Historical research suggests that father involvement should be encouraged to the extent that it positively influences children. Policies and programs should promote responsible parenting but should not value symbolic paternal rights over the well-being of children.
- Policies and programs should be sensitive to the social class and ethnic backgrounds of fathers.

## **Reinventing Fatherhood: Toward an Historical Understanding of Continuity and Change in Men's Family Lives**

Two decades ago, American politics and popular culture combined to create an enticing, if somewhat superficial, image of the "new" father. In the watershed year of 1979 alone, Dustin Hoffman's character in the Academy award-winning film *Kramer vs. Kramer*, was transformed from a self-centered careerist to a passionately committed father; The National Organization of Women applauded the "new fatherhood" in a conference on The Future of the Family; and The White House Conference on Families called for workplace policies to increase opportunities for fathers to care for their children (Griswold, 1993). Since then, the popular media have promoted, exploited, and lampooned this new cultural icon. During the past two decades, politicians and social critics have also decried the declining state of "The American Family," claiming that increased divorce and nonmarital birth are driving fathers

away and endangering children. We suggest that claims about the uniqueness of recent developments in fatherhood are overstated and that both positive and negative family rhetoric lacks historical perspective. To correctly identify contemporary family patterns and predict future trends, we need a better understanding of the history of fatherhood. We offer suggestions on how researchers might begin to comprehend the complexities and variations in the ideals and practices that constituted fatherhood of the past.

How did the images of "new" fathers that gained popularity in the late 1970s and early 1980s differ from the wholesome but distant providers featured on 1950s television programs like *Ozzie & Harriet* and *Father Knows Best*? According to sociologist Frank Furstenberg (1988, p. 193), "television, magazines, and movies herald[ed] the

coming of the modern father — the nurturant, caring, and emotionally attuned parent ... Today's father is at least as adept at changing diapers as changing tires." No longer limited to being protectors and breadwinners, fathers were pictured on television and in magazines as intimately involved in family life.

Starting in the 1980s, researchers also reported that most men still resisted assuming responsibility for daily housework or childcare and that their contributions to child development were slight compared to those of women. Some researchers in the 1980s highlighted how popular images of involved fathers exceeded most men's actual behaviors and others suggested that men, on the whole, were much less committed to families than they had been in the past.

In the 1990s, popular books and articles rediscovered a focus that had been popular in the 1960s — father absence. For example, in *Life Without Father* (1996), David Popenoe suggests that a variety of social problems (e.g., delinquency, teenage pregnancy, etc.) are all the result of fatherlessness and that American society is in decline because it has abandoned "traditional" marriage and childrearing patterns of the Victorian era. According to the historian Stephanie Coontz (1996), such claims are an elaborate form of nostalgia, insofar as they invoke unreal images of mothers and fathers from an idealized past.

Media imagery and nostalgic rhetoric about ideal motherhood and fatherhood not only shape the expectations of people in families, but they also subtly influence social scientists' research designs and scholarly commentary. We suggest that by appreciating some of the historical contexts that continually shape and reshape parenting and child development, social scientists might improve current research, gain a more realistic assessment of the state of American families, and perhaps minimize the misinterpretation of research findings by political pundits. For our part, an appreciation for historical diversity has led us to challenge the assumption that fatherhood is unchanging, but also to reject the assumption that contemporary forms of fatherhood are a dramatic and categorical departure from the past. Our review of both historical and contemporary research suggests that fatherhood, as always, is undergoing incremental and contradictory changes.

### Bringing The Fathers Back In

When the new fatherhood ideal emerged in the late 1970s, researchers were also beginning to include men in their studies of family life and child development (Parke, 1981). This new attention directed toward the actual behaviors of fathers contrasted with the 1950s and 1960s, when child and family researchers focused almost exclusively on mothers and popular culture offered images of kind but distant, middle-class, breadwinner fathers or bumbling, working-class ones (Coltrane, 1996; Parke, 1996). After the mid 1980s, fatherhood again seemed to fade into the background of public consciousness, only to burst back onto the scene in the 1990s. The new political debates and popular imagery about fathers and families are framed by an older dichotomy: conservatives focus on

values and stress the importance of conventional breadwinner fathers, respect for authority, and moral leadership (Popenoe, 1996), whereas liberals focus on the importance of the economy and highlight the benefits that accrue to women when patriarchal family traditions are replaced by more individualistic and democratic family forms in which fathers play an active role in family life (Coontz, 1996).

### Guidelines for Historical Appreciation of Fatherhood

Our attempts to place our own sociological and psychological findings about fathers in historical context motivated us to propose thirteen tentative and overlapping assertions about studying fatherhood of the past. We discuss each in turn below.

1. The history of fatherhood is incomplete. In 1982, soon after the new fatherhood ideal emerged in American popular culture, historian John Demos noted that the history of fatherhood was yet to be written (Demos, 1982). Though more historical research on fathers has been conducted since then, Demos' statement still rings true today. Thanks to the work of many historians, sociologists, and other family researchers, we are beginning to gain a more differentiated and complex portrait of social change as it relates to families. In large part because of a new appreciation for social history, recent studies have captured more about the behavior and emotions of everyday family life in the past. The primary benefit has been increased understanding about motherhood and childhood, but an important by-product has also been more historical knowledge about men's family lives. Though studies are still few in number, and conclusions remain tentative, we are moving in the right direction.

2. Historical change is complex and contradictory. Early attempts to understand the history of fatherhood painted a simple before and after picture: Before the industrial revolution, families were rural and extended, and patriarchal fathers were stern moralists; After the industrial revolution, families were urban and nuclear, and wage-earning fathers became companionate husbands, distant breadwinners, and occasional playmates to their children. This "before and after" picture captures something important about general shifts in family life, but its simple assumption of unidirectional linear change can be misleading (Coontz, 1992). Detailed historical studies show us that both continuity and change in fathering are common, and that many forms of fathering can coexist. Careful research also shows that modern patterns of fathering are neither a direct and inevitable outgrowth of earlier practices, nor do they represent a categorical break from past ideals and practices. Modern fatherhood both continues and transforms what came before, and in all eras social forces and individual choices combine to produce a diversity of fathering practices. Fatherhood can only be understood with reference to the dynamic nature of motherhood and women's changing roles. The point is that both continuity

and change in family roles can occur simultaneously, and our conceptual models of men's family involvement ought to reflect such possibilities.

3. **Fatherhood has a pre-history.** In the emergent history of fatherhood, perhaps we haven't gone back far enough. Studies of fatherhood in the 1960s and 1970s used the 1950s as a comparison, falsely assuming that patterns observed during that era constituted a reasonable baseline against which more modern versions of fatherhood should be evaluated. As it turns out, the 1950s were an anomaly for major demographic trends in the century (e.g., marriage, divorce, family size, fertility, and the timing of parenthood). To understand these trends, it makes sense to go back at least to the turn of the century. Researchers have also focused attention on European and American families of the 18th and 19th centuries. As we learn more about the shape of fathering in these times and places, we need to search wider for even more diverse patterns with which to make comparisons. If we hope to understand what is "natural" and what is socially malleable about fatherhood, we must turn to more far-reaching and inclusive cross-cultural and historical comparisons.

4. **Fatherhood ideals and practices are not the same.** In every historical period, the idea of what a father should do and the actions of real fathers differ. Elder and Caspi (1990) suggest that the ideal-actual distinction in historical family research has been promoted in two major ways. First, literary sources from the upper-classes have been used as evidence of the overarching ideals, values, and norms of society, and second, documentary sources representing ideals have been mistakenly assumed to represent actual practices. Both real and ideal family practices are shaped by larger social forces, but the gap between them is smaller in some eras and larger in others. We suggest that such "gaps" are worthy of serious research. We would like to see more attempts to chart the extent of the ideal-actual gap in different historical periods for different subcultures and geographic regions. Principles that explain the variation in ideal-real gaps for different historical periods could potentially emerge from such an exercise.

5. **Popular cultural images can be misleading.** In the context of competing ideals of fatherhood, we need to be careful about how we interpret historical and cross-cultural data. We assume that popular cultural images of fatherhood, whether celebratory or mocking, help to define what is normal and what is deviant. But as scholars of myth, ritual, and art have shown us, the interpretation of popular imagery in any culture is far from straightforward. We cannot assume that cultural images reflect actual practices, nor can we assume that they set a standard to which most people aspire. In fact, many elements of popular culture employ humor and allegory in ways that serve to undermine the very images they present.

Early 20th century cartoons in U.S. magazines tell us something about American fatherhood ideals, but we cannot assume that they are presenting a unified vision of fatherhood that is either sought after or ridiculed. More recent portrayals of fathers in television situation comedies

are subject to the same ambiguities that render interpretations of cartoons contradictory and ambiguous. In order to make sense of popular portrayals of fatherhood in any era, we need to understand more about their production, distribution, intended audience, and especially about how they were received and "read" by different people. If we can learn more about the historical context for these popular images of fatherhood, we will be in a better position to comprehend the role they play in defining normalcy and deviance for men in families.

6. **Multiple forms of fatherhood co-exist.** There are multiple ideals of fatherhood and multiple realities of fatherhood in every time period, so that we might want to start using the term "fatherhoods" to describe variations that presumably occur on a common set of dimensions. For example, there are images of "Good Dads" and images of "Bad Dads" in every historical period, and each is accompanied by a variety of "Good Dad" and "Bad Dad" practices. Issues of gender, race, social class, and geographical location are especially noteworthy, here, because they have generally been slighted in the past. As a result, many of our models of family life are based on relatively narrow, white, privileged standards. We need to focus on specific comparisons across different groups to isolate the important differences and similarities among them. The changes for different groups may parallel one another, but may also run at odds with each other. Furthermore, it is likely that the pace of change has varied for both ideals and practices, depending on various economic, social, cultural, and individual factors.

7. **Fathers are part of families embedded in society.** Fathering does not occur in isolation, and is best understood as part of a family system, which obligates us to consider all of the relationships among family members. Nor are families isolated from other social institutions. Instead, they influence and are influenced by a wide network of social systems, including legal, economic, political, and cultural entities. Fatherhood researchers would benefit from trying to emulate the emergent social history of families, with its detailed efforts to understand how families have operated in changing social circumstances. Historical studies of fathers must also include reference to other social changes and view changes in fatherhood as part of the pattern of changes in the family as a social institution — the patterned structure of rights, duties, and expectations that define the activities of individuals.

8. **A non-developmental history of fatherhood is incomplete.** Viewing fathers from a developmental perspective is central to understanding the past, present, and future of men's role in families. A developmental perspective has multiple meanings. First, we know little about the impact of fathers on their children's intellectual, social, or emotional development in earlier historical periods. Second, a developmental perspective calls attention to how fathering behavior shifts as children develop, an important but infrequently studied aspect of parenting in families of the past. Third, fathers' own developmental trajectory is

another aspect of development that needs to be considered (Parke, 1996). The location of the father in terms of his age, lifestyle, occupation, and education are important determinants of his involvement, which are linked, in turn to changes in the historical relationship between families and other social institutions. Fourth, the developmental historical agenda needs to include a further face of fatherhood; namely the impact of fatherhood on men themselves. Becoming a father may change men in a variety of ways. Some are challenged and develop further, others are overcome by the demands of their new role. Little is known about the nature of fathers' management of this transition in earlier eras. Knowing more about how men have negotiated and responded to this transition will help us understand how changing ideals and practices have affected fatherhood.

9. An intergenerational perspective on fatherhood is needed. Although the relative impact on child development of fathers (versus mothers) in contemporary families is far from clear. We are beginning to understand some of the important processes involved. We know, for instance, that earlier relationships with one's parents influence the ways in which men enact their fathering roles. Applying this insight to historical studies might help us understand processes of change in fathering ideals and practices. An intergenerational perspective also suggests that we pay attention to the impact of grandparents on their grandchildren.

10. Fatherhood is gendered. Historical researchers have shown us that the meaning of gender is reflected in and reproduced through family ideals and practices. Fatherhood, along with other cultural and economic institutions, influence the meaning of manhood in any particular era. This suggests that we ought to place studies of fatherhood in the context of emergent understandings of masculinity. Fatherhood researchers, mirroring public concerns, have paid attention to fatherhood as a mechanism for ensuring the masculinity of our sons, but we have paid less attention to the ways that the practices of fatherhood also contribute to the masculinity of adult males. Historical explorations could focus on fathers' activities with children and the impact such activities have on fathers' sense of masculinity, as well as sons'. Historians and social scientists have typically studied men in public settings and women in family settings. As a corrective to earlier patterns, we can turn our attention to men in families and women in jobs, investigating how gender influences both and contributes to patterns of "breadwinning" and "gatekeeping" that serve to perpetuate gender inequality in the larger society (Coltrane, 1998).

11. Fatherhood entails power. Although many recent fatherhood studies ignore issues of power and conflict, to be a father has almost always implied power over others, especially women and children. The institution of patriarchy — or rule by the father — is our historical legacy. Families have been, and to some extent continue to be, social mechanisms for the control and intergenerational transmission of wealth, property, power, and prestige.

Though less transparent than in the past, this includes how we train children to occupy their proper "places" in society. That most people resist thinking of fatherhood and families as mechanisms for the perpetuation of social inequality or hierarchy should not cause researchers to abandon the study of them in these terms.

12. Fathers continue to change. Neither fathers nor families are static entities and a variety of social changes, including divorce, custody arrangements, and remarriage need to be carefully monitored. This kind of near-term historical analysis is needed to complement studies of our more distant past. At the same time, to understand these recent trends, we need to locate them in relation to similar issues in earlier eras. By examining these same issues in different historical periods with very different norms and rates of occurrence, we can gain a better understanding of these issues in our own time. Finally, in conducting studies about the changing role of fathers, we should resist the temptation to treat contemporary fathers as unique. Both modern and historical forms of fathering are shaped by individual choices made in the context of constraining social forces. Although we like to think of ourselves as more enlightened and in control of our lives than our predecessors, contemporary parenting practices, like those of our forebears, are largely shaped by historical as well as current circumstances.

13. Political contexts shape fatherhood research. Scholars studying fathers are not operating in a political vacuum and the results of our efforts will be appropriated and used by the media in ways we do not intend. We must therefore be cautious in our selection of topics and reporting of results, anticipating potential interpretations that might distort and misrepresent our findings. Current efforts to emphasize family values in political arenas can be seen as efforts to save families, but taking history seriously, we would also be wise to interpret such rhetoric as self-serving political maneuvering. As researchers of fatherhood, we must therefore be aware of the possible uses to which our results can be put. We should neither envelope ourselves in a cloak of value-free, scientific objectivity, nor design our studies for partisan, political purposes, for both paths will be intellectually unfulfilling. Instead we ought to embark on studies of fatherhood with an historical appreciation for the fact that contemporary political issues will inevitably frame popular understandings of our work.

### **Coda**

This paper can best be viewed as a reminder that an understanding of our historical roots can help us avoid oversimplified views of the present and can aid us in interpreting current trends by reference to their place as part of larger historical trajectories. Finally, we view this essay as an invitation to scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to embrace our past. By doing so, not only will our appreciation of the changing dynamics of fatherhood increase, but our programs and policies on behalf of fathers and families will be better informed. In the end, providing better guidance for fathers, families, and children should be our ultimate goal.

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### For more information, contact:

National Center on Fathers and Families  
 Graduate School of Education  
 University of Pennsylvania  
 3700 Walnut Street, Box 58  
 Philadelphia, PA 19104-6216  
 Phone: (215) 573-5500  
 Fax: (215) 573-5508  
 mailbox@ncoff.gse.upenn.edu  
<http://www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu>

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 Graduate School of Education  
 University of Pennsylvania  
 3700 Walnut Street, Box 58  
 Philadelphia, PA 19104-6216

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