

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

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by

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The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of University of California, Riverside.



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## **PREFACE**

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Not since the 1960s and 1970s—when research in the field was at a peak—have family issues captured as much attention or sparked as much wide-scale debate as they have in recent years. Casting its net to address a variety of problems that fall outside the typical domains of psychology and sociology (where much of the early work was located), research on families is part of a growing interdisciplinary focus which is no longer simply implicated in questions about family development. Rather, the present interdisciplinary focus of the field attempts to respond to massive changes in the needs, structures, poverty levels, and formation patterns of families and the policies that are designed to remedy the increasingly complex problems they face.

A significant and compelling part of research on families over the past 20 years explores the impact of father involvement and father absence on children’s development and complements much of the existing research on issues in other areas—e.g., female-headed households, poverty, social welfare, and public policy. In particular, the potential impact of family support legislation, national welfare reform agendas, and persistent systemic problems at local and state levels lends a sense of urgency to the research discussion about father participation in families. What is noticeably lacking in these discussions, however, is a focus on programs that serve fathers and families and the voices of practitioners.

The issues defining and surrounding research and practice on fathers and families are complex. Nested in each issue are multiple layers of questions about the problems facing young fathers, mothers, and families; the needs of programs and the practitioners who work in them; changes in national, state, and local policies; and the nature of the tasks facing society. Although there is substantial discussion about the impact of father absence, research studies provide only modest evidence for the negative consequences of father absence on children and typically attribute these negative effects to reduced family income resulting from separation or divorce. There are only sparse data on families that deviate from “traditional, intact” family forms such as families headed by adolescent or young, adult never-married, and/or poor mothers. Research on families of color, outside of poverty studies, is still conspicuously meager in the knowledge base.

The work of the National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF) uses the strengths and voids in these research discussions as a launching pad to develop a framework for research, practice, and policy—to promote the building of a field in which the needs of children and families are the core of the discourse and research and practice cohere to craft the language and activities associated with that discourse. NCOFF aims to bring together these issues within a research and collaborative effort on behalf of children and their families.

Established in July 1994 with core funding from The Annie E. Casey Foundation, NCOFF’s mission is to improve the life chances of children and the efficacy of families by

facilitating the effective involvement of fathers. Developed in the spirit of the Philadelphia Children's Network's (PCN) motto, "Help the children. Fix the system.", NCOFF seeks to increase and enrich the possibilities for children, ensuring that they are helped and that the system allows for and encourages the participation of fathers in their children's lives. NCOFF shares with PCN and other field activities the premises that children need loving, nurturing families; that mothers and families in general need to be supported in providing nurturance; and that family support efforts should increase the ability of both parents and adults within and outside the biological family to contribute to children's development and well-being.

NCOFF's mission is developed around seven *Core Learnings*. The Core Learnings provide the context for NCOFF's research agenda. This research agenda is intended to support the field in the development, conduct, and advancement of research, practice, and responsive policies. Research activities are designed to synthesize work from multiple disciplines, provide current analyses, and examine emerging conceptualizations in the field. In this and all of its work, NCOFF recognizes that the scope of need in the field requires a variety of approaches and the commitment and collective effort of different communities.

This Monograph is intended to highlight critical and emerging topics in the field that have received minimal attention and that complement issues identified in the NCOFF FatherLit Database, Briefs, critical literature reviews, and research reports. The Database combines citation lists, annotated bibliographies, and abstracts of research articles, reports, and volumes that focus on issues implied in the Core Learnings. All NCOFF documents are written and reviewed by scholars representing multiple disciplines and research interests in fathers and families. Information about the NCOFF Database, the literature reviews and analyses, working papers, and other NCOFF documents and activities is currently available on HandsNet and through our website.

Embedded in NCOFF's mission is a vision in which fathers, families, and communities are positioned to ensure the well-being of children and are able to translate their hope and the possibilities that accompany that hope into human and social prosperity. A well-coordinated national effort on fathers and families will give support and a collective voice to programs, encourage research, and contribute to responsive policy formulation. Such a vehicle would provide the appropriate context for experience-sharing among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers; identification of basic research, program, and policy-related issues; surfacing of new research issues; and increased opportunities for communication, cooperation, and collaboration.

*Vivian L. Gadsden*  
*Director*

## **SEVEN CORE LEARNINGS**

- Fathers care — even if that caring is not shown in conventional ways.
- Father presence matters — in terms of economic well-being, social support, and child development.
- Joblessness is a major impediment to family formation and father involvement.
- Existing approaches to public benefits, child support enforcement, and paternity establishment operate to create systemic obstacles and disincentives to father involvement. The disincentives are sufficiently compelling as to have prompted the emergence of a phenomenon dubbed "underground fathers"—men who acknowledge paternity and are involved in the lives of their children but who refuse to participate as fathers in the formal systems.
- A growing number of young fathers and mothers need additional support to develop the vital skills to share the responsibility for parenting.
- The transition from biological father to committed parent has significant developmental implications for young fathers.
- The behaviors of young parents, both fathers and mothers, are influenced significantly by intergenerational beliefs and practices within families of origin.

The seven Core Learnings are at the heart of NCOFF's agenda for research, practice, and policy and are a framework for the field. They represent the knowledge and experience of practitioners who confront complex problems facing fathers and families and are consistent with research across multiple disciplines. They offer an important lens through which policymakers might learn more about the implications and impact of legislation and policy decisions on the lives of large numbers of fathers, mothers, children, and families. Within them are captured salient issues experienced and felt deeply by a range of fathers and families—from those who are financially secure to those who are the most vulnerable to poverty and hardship.

The Core Learnings were identified immediately prior to NCOFF's inception by frontline practitioners in a series of survey and focus group activities conducted by the Philadelphia Children's Network and NCOFF. Formulated first as seven hypotheses drawn from practitioners' experiences in programs serving fathers and families, each hypothesis was tested against existing published research and policy studies. As each hypothesis was borne out in the literature, it became a Core Learning. A library of information was developed for each. The resultant seven libraries now constitute the NCOFF FatherLit Database and include over 7,000 citations, annotations, and abstracts of research, available in written, diskette, and electronic form.



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**Abstract**

This paper argues that American researchers have paid insufficient attention to the history of fatherhood, leading to theoretical models and social policies predicated on false assumptions about continuity and change in men's family lives. Because fatherhood varies across time, a historical perspective is needed to isolate what is common or unique about contemporary patterns of fathering. Early histories of fatherhood proposed overly simple stage models or posited unidirectional causal pathways. More recent social histories of fatherhood focus on diversity and complexity, incorporating insights from both family sociology and developmental psychology. This paper summarizes strengths and weaknesses of historical research and explores how social science and social policy might benefit from an understanding of continuities and changes in American fatherhood.

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The National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF) is a policy research center that is practice-focused and practice-derived. Based in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania, NCOFF's mission is to improve the life chances of children and the efficacy of families by facilitating the effective involvement of fathers in caring for, supporting, and advocating on behalf of their children. NCOFF's research plan is developed around seven "Core Learnings," distilled from the experiences of programs and agencies serving fathers, mothers, and children around the country.

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## ***ABOUT THE AUTHORS***

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*Today, fatherhood has become politicized: its terms are contested, its significance fragmented, its meaning unstable. How we came to such a pass, how we came to expect more than ever from fathers without knowing quite what to expect, is the story of fatherhood in the twentieth century.*

Robert Griswold (1993, p. 9)

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 for 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. In this paper, 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 identify contemporary family patterns correctly and predict future trends, we need a better understanding of the history of fatherhood. In this paper, we offer suggestions on how researchers might begin to comprehend the complexities and variations in the ideals and practices that constituted fatherhood in 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:

A new image, summed up in the term “the new father,” is clearly on the rise in print and broadcast media. This new father differs from older images of involved fatherhood in several key respects: He is present at the birth; he is involved with his children as infants, not just when they are older; he participates in the actual day-to-day work of child care, and not just play; he is involved with his daughters as much as his sons. (Pleck, 1987, p. 93).

Some psychologists and sociologists who study families and social change focused on the positive potentials of the new fatherhood ideals and practices (Biller & Meredith, 1974; Chodorow, 1978; Fein, 1978; Friedan, 1981), whereas others focused on how different fathering styles contributed to various aspects of child development (Lamb, 1981; Parke, 1981; Pleck, 1987). Starting in the 1980s, researchers also reported that most men still resisted assuming responsibility for daily housework or child care and that their contributions to child development were slight compared to those of women (Miller & Garrison, 1982; Thompson & Walker, 1989). Some researchers in the 1980s highlighted how popular images of involved fathers exceeded most men’s actual behaviors (LaRossa, 1988; Lewis & O’Brien, 1987), and others suggested that men, on the whole, were

much less committed to families than they had been in the past (Ehrenreich, 1983).

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 suggested that drug and alcohol abuse, juvenile delinquency, teenage pregnancy, violent crime, sexual abuse, violence against women, and child poverty were all the result of fatherlessness and that American society was in decline because it had abandoned “traditional” marriage and childrearing patterns of the Victorian era (Popenoe, 1996). According to the historian Stephanie Coontz (1992), such claims are an elaborate form of nostalgia, insofar as they invoke unreal images of mothers and fathers from a 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. Understanding the complex and multiple ways in which historical forces influence families might help correct for the rhetorical excesses and intellectual errors of those promoting a simple vision of the “correct” family form or the single “right” way to parent. 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 (Fein, 1978; 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 (Blankenhorn, 1995; 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, 1992; Stacey, 1996).

Because these debates seem at once old and new, we are led to an important question for contemporary fatherhood researchers and policymakers: Is the waxing and waning of cultural imagery about fathers unique to the past several decades? In *Fatherhood in America* (1993), Robert Griswold suggests that the so-called “new” father who nurtures his children, takes pride in their accomplishments, and tries to be a “pal,” actually dates back at least to the 1920s. Similarly, Atkinson and Blackwelder (1993) and LaRossa (1997) note that fatherhood imagery has never been uniform, and that the cultural ideal of fatherhood has been in flux for at least a century. These findings, and others from recent historical studies, remind us that contemporary changes in fatherhood have precedents from earlier eras. Whereas earlier research tended to posit simple linear stage models of family change, more recent studies suggest that changes in parenting and domestic life have been neither uniform nor routinely predictable. Studies of families from past times allow us to see how cultural, economic, political, technological, and geographical contexts combine to shape choices that people make in the conduct of their daily lives. Recent historical studies of family life also help us to understand how ideas and practices of motherhood, fatherhood, and childhood are mutually produced, interdependent, and constantly in flux (Coontz, 1992; Mintz, 1996). Finally, as discussed below, we must remember that cultural imagery and family behaviors are often distinct,

so that changes in one arena are not necessarily reflected in changes in the other.

Because our understanding of community institutions, social psychological processes, and developmental trajectories are time- and culture-bound, there is much to like about recent attention paid to the history of fatherhood in the United States. Documenting historical trends in fatherhood should help us see the significance of recent changes in family practices and enable us to assess more accurately where we might be heading in the future. Although trained in sociology (Coltrane) and psychology (Parke), we have both ventured into the realms of history and cultural studies in our attempts to understand modern fathers and have come away with a profound appreciation for the importance of social contexts (e.g., Collins & Coltrane, 1995; Coltrane, 1996, 1998; Coltrane & Allan 1994; Parke, 1995, 1996; Parke & Stearns, 1993; Parke & Tinsley, 1984). In this paper, we highlight some of the gains that might be realized from further explorations into the history of men in families. At the same time, we worry about drawing simplified contrasts between current practices and past patterns of fatherhood. As we haltingly begin to explore how and why fatherhood has changed over the years, it is important to understand some of the limitations, as well as the strengths, of research that has emerged in this area (Griswold, 1993; LaRossa, 1993, 1997; Mintz, 1996). Though we are not trained as historians, our attempts to place our own sociological and psychological findings about fathers in historical context motivated us to propose 13 tentative and overlapping

assertions about studying fatherhood of the past. We discuss each in turn below.

1. The history of fatherhood is incomplete.
2. Historical change is complex and contradictory.
3. Fatherhood has a pre-history.
4. Fatherhood ideals and practices are not the same.
5. Popular cultural images can be misleading.
6. Multiple forms of fatherhood co-exist.
7. Fathers are part of families embedded in society.
8. A non-developmental history of fatherhood is incomplete.
9. An intergenerational perspective on fatherhood is needed.
10. Fatherhood is gendered.
11. Fatherhood entails power.
12. Fathers continue to change.
13. Political contexts shape fatherhood research.

**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. The claim that fatherhood has been ignored seems paradoxical; since historians have produced tomes about men's lives and their achievements since the

beginning of written records. Nevertheless, it is men's public lives—their work, political exploits, literary accomplishments, scientific discoveries, and heroic battles—that have been chronicled, leaving their private lives as fathers and husbands largely unexplored (Mintz, 1996).

Lack of historical analysis has not been unique to the study of fatherhood. Two decades ago, Glenn Elder wrote:

Despite a rich legacy of sociological uses of history from the pre-1940 era, exemplified by Weber's *The Protestant Ethic* and Thomas and Znaniecki's *The Polish Peasant*, social research in the postwar years largely ignored the historical facts that are so vital in understanding family patterns—those of events, setting, circumstance, and especially time. (Elder, 1978)

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 byproduct has also been more historical knowledge about men's family lives. Though studies are still few in number, results remain contradictory, and conclusions continue to seem tentative, we are moving in the right direction

(Griswold, 1993; Kimmel, 1996; LaRossa, 1997; Parke & Stearns, 1994; Rotundo, 1985).

Like other early attempts to study family practices, historical studies of fathers have corrected previous errors of omission, but they have also tended to overgeneralize from limited sources and to posit overly simple explanations for complex multi-dimensional phenomena. According to Steven Mintz (1996), the lack of detailed historical data has not prevented researchers from proposing a variety of stage theories and functionalist models of long-term fatherhood trends. Unfortunately, most early stage models have been limited by their tendency to either romanticize or demonize men's familial roles of the past, thus using historical research to argue contemporary issues. Depending on the point being made in contemporary debates, preindustrial fathers have been seen as either intensely and actively involved in family life and childrearing, or as domestic patriarchs who dominated their children and tyrannized their wives (Mintz, 1996, p. 2). Both extremes have historical precedents and thus could be considered to contain an element of "truth," but using either to construct simple models about the evolution of fatherhood is more misleading than helpful.

Among the major shortcomings of early historical studies of fatherhood is an assumption that most fathers acted the same and that changes from one era to the next were linear and progressive. For example, early accounts emphasized that peasant families were extended and therefore contained powerful patriarchs who dominated women and children whereas market

societies produced companionate marriages and nuclear families with more loving and cooperative husbands and fathers. In fact, historical patterns of fathering, like historical patterns of mothering, have responded to a complex array of social and economic forces, varying considerably across regions and time periods. Although it is useful to focus on how men's (and women's) relationship to work and production have shaped their public and private status, these relations have been quite varied, and fatherhood ideals have followed different trajectories in different parts of the country (Griswold, 1993; Mintz, 1996). For example, as most of the United States was undergoing industrialization, large pockets remained relatively untouched by it. Griswold (1993, p. 17) shows how the experience of white planters in the antebellum South was both similar to and unlike that of men in the commercial and industrial North. Although both became increasingly child-centered during the late 18th century, the experience of those in the North was strongly influenced by industrialization and a changing domestic ideology, whereas the white Southern gentry were more likely to hold to "a vision of patriarchy predicated upon veneration of forefathers and to child-rearing practices that used shame and humiliation to inculcate a sense of hierarchy and honor" (Griswold, 1993, p.19).

A second major drawback of early studies of fatherhood is the tendency to overgeneralize for the entire society based on the experience of those who were white and middle-class. This problem is not unique to history or to the study of fathers, as the same tendency exists in many

scholarly fields (Graham, 1992). Nevertheless, as we learn more about fatherhood in the past, we ought to guard against the tendency to homogenize men's experience artificially across class, ethnic, or geographical lines. As Griswold (1993), McDaniel (1994), and others remind us, not only were there major differences between the fathering of white men in the South and the North, but slave fathers and freedmen in the South had experiences very different from either group of white men. Only by including men of color, paying attention to work status, and studying different regional economies, will we be able to generalize to larger groups of men and understand how social, political, and economic forces shape fatherhood.

**2. Historical change is complex and contradictory.** As noted above, 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; Hareven, 1991; Skolnick, 1991). A binary mode of thinking contrasting "patriarchal" conceptions of men's roles in the past with "egalitarian" definitions in the present may create more conceptual problems than it

solves (Mintz, 1996). The major point is that fatherhood is multidimensional and that these dimensions can change singly or jointly depending on circumstances.

Detailed historical studies show us that both continuity and change in fathering are common and that many forms of fathering can co-exist (e.g., Griswold, 1993; Mintz, 1996; Parke & Stearns, 1994; Pleck, 1987; Rotundo, 1985; Stearns, 1991). In *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (1996), Michael Kimmel documents how, at the end of the nineteenth century, more husbands and wives spent their days in separate worlds than ever before: The father away all day at work and the mother tending the children and keeping house. Both domains increasingly were mechanized and industrialized—“his, by the assembly line, mass production, and growth of white-collar clerical positions, and hers, by innovations in household technology that made the home look like a little factory. . . . At the moment of perhaps their greatest separation, husbands and wives were told they should establish what critics called companionate marriage. Husband and wife should be more devoted, more emotionally *connected*, than ever before” (Kimmel, 1996, p. 158-9).

At the same time, according to Kimmel and other historical researchers, a movement for involved fatherhood became discernible. Catharine Beecher and her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote in *The American Woman's Home* (1869), “[I]t is far more needful for children that a father should attend to the formation of their character and habits, and end in developing their

social, intellectual, and moral nature, than it is that he should earn money to furnish them with handsome clothes and a variety of tempting food” (cited in Kimmel, 1996, p. 159). Similarly, in 1905, the editors of *American Homes and Gardens* announced “the responsibility of the home is not the wife’s alone, but equally the husband’s, there is no reason at all why men should not sweep and dust, make beds, clean windows, fix the fire, clean the grate, arrange the furniture, and cook” (cited in Kimmel, 1996, p. 159). The economic conditions supposedly responsible for promoting separate spheres simultaneously thus can be seen also as encouraging the merging of parental and spousal duties. Such an analysis calls into question reductionist causal models of historical change and, as discussed below, reveals that behaviors and ideals often conflict. When multiple documentary sources are used to investigate past family practices, we often find that past patterns of fathering were many and varied. 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.

Among sociologists and psychologists studying the recent history of fatherhood (since the 1960s), change and discontinuity are over-emphasized in portrayals of the “new” father who is an equal partner to his wife and participates in the routine care and nurturing of the children.

There are plenty of such men, but most studies profiling them are based on nonrepresentative samples selected to focus on egalitarian marriages. Conversely, continuity in men's minimal domestic contributions and a lack of change in fathering are over-emphasized by economists and sociologists studying the household division of labor using time diaries and sample surveys. Both types of findings about 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 involvements ought to reflect such possibilities.

**3. Fatherhood has a pre-history.** In the emergent history of fatherhood, perhaps we have not 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 also have 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 (though these comparisons are plagued by substantial methodological and theoretical difficulties; see Coltrane, 1996). For example, although virtually all societies in the world have included some form of social control of women by men, not all have been shaped by patterns of control by the father. The core idea of patriarchal kinship is that paternity is the most important social relationship. As Katz Rothman (1994) points out, one of the clearest statements of patriarchal kinship is found in the Book of Genesis, in the "begats." From Adam onward, each man is described as having "begat a son in his likeness, after his image." Although daughters are mentioned, most emphasis is placed on firstborn sons. In a patriarchal kinship system, children are born to men, out of women. But in matrilineal societies, even though men usually still occupy most of the powerful positions, they do not rule as fathers. Instead, they have power over women and children who are related to them through their mother's line, and this has important implications for how mothers and wives are treated. Residence rules also shape family relations, with patrilocal residence or matrilineal residence significantly influencing the shape of marital and parenting relationships (see Collins & Coltrane, 1995; Coontz, 1988; Johnson, 1988). Men's participation in daily childrearing also varies widely among nonindustrial societies; so moving beyond historical comparisons among relatively

recent western societies can provide important insights about the practice of fatherhood (Coltrane, 1988, 1996).

**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 (this distinction is variously termed culture and content, ideology and practice, attitudes and behavior, etc.; see Atkinson & Blackwelder, 1993; Coltrane & Allan, 1994; Laquer, 1992; LaRossa, 1988, 1997; LaRossa and Reitzes, 1993; LaRossa, Gordon, Wilson, Bairan, & Jaret, 1991; Parke & Stearns, 1993). Elder (1978) suggests that blurring of 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. The emergence of an idealized fatherhood movement in the early part of the twentieth century was, in part, a response to the increasingly distinct work spheres of men and women at the time. The fatherhood movement promoting men’s domestic activities, however, co-existed with other ideological movements that promoted the more complete separation of the sexes. 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. Is the gap larger in times of social flux and smaller in times of stability? What is the relationship between the fatherhood gap and similar gaps for motherhood, child development, marriage, religion, etc.? Principles that explain the variation in ideal—real gaps for different historical periods could emerge potentially from such an exercise.

Although we advocate the historical study of fatherhood ideals and practices, such an enterprise is plagued inevitably by almost insurmountable methodological problems. Beyond typical questions concerning the validity of surviving historical records, we question whether it is ever really possible to separate ideals from practices. For one thing, those who embrace a particular ideal of parenting tend to interpret their own actions as reflecting the ideal. Since we usually rely on historical documents that are self reports, it is difficult to make factual assertions about fathers’ “actual” behaviors. On the ideal side, as well, there are conceptual and methodological problems that are not easily resolved. We agree with recent researchers that the advice of so-called experts is a potentially rich resource for studying fathering ideals in different eras (Atkinson & Blackwelder, 1993; Griswold, 1993; LaRossa, 1997; Stearns, 1991). We must also understand, however, that parenting authorities, their expertise, and its legitimacy, have changed rapidly in the past century. This makes analyses of the claims of experts difficult to conduct and interpret. If the goal is to track changes in “ideals,” research on expert advice may be appropriate, but this work leaves

questions about practice unanswered. In fact, there is evidence that parents may endorse the recommendations of experts, but not follow these guidelines in practice (Robbins, 1963). We suggest that attempts to understand parenting through expert advice be supplemented with discussions of family practices inferred from other historical records. Integrating personal documents with demographic and employment data shows particular promise for studies of changes in families over time (Elder & Caspi, 1990; Hareven, 1991).

**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.

For example, we can learn something about gender antagonism in premodern societies by studying the origin myths of different cultures, but it can be misleading to assume that the imagery in these stories is a direct expression of the fears, aspirations, or daily lives of the people who retell them (Coltrane, 1988; Sanday, 1981).

Even when we are looking at western societies from which we have inherited important cultural symbols, we need to be skeptical about what such imagery means. We can learn something about Greek marriage from studying the infidelity of Zeus and the vindictiveness of his wife Hera, but these stories are far from direct reflections of everyday life in ancient Athens (Slater, 1968). Similarly, early 20th century cartoons in U.S. magazines tell us something about American fatherhood ideals, but we cannot assume that they are presenting a vision of fatherhood that was uniformly either sought after or ridiculed (see LaRossa et al., 1991; Day & Mackey, 1986). More recent portrayals of fathers in television situation comedies are subject to the same ambiguities that render interpretations of cartoons contradictory and ambiguous (Cantor, 1990). 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 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 indicate variations that presumably occur on a common set of dimensions (for a similar argument about the use

of the term “masculinities,” see Kimmel & Messner, 1994). In our attempts to characterize what fathering was like in any particular era, we are sure to ignore what fathering was like for those who left no records of their everyday lives and their own ideals. Differences based on race, social class, and geographical location are especially noteworthy here, because they have generally been slighted in the past (Mintz & Kellogg, 1988). As a result, many of our models of past family life are based on evidence from a relatively narrow (white and privileged) segment of society. We need to focus on specific comparisons across groups to isolate the important differences and similarities among them. The changes in fatherhood and family life in different groups may parallel one another or may run at odds with each other. Furthermore, it is likely that the pace of change has varied for both ideals and practices, depending upon various economic, social, cultural, and individual factors. Since ideal images of fathers usually come from the middle class, we need to understand in what relation they stand to working-class, ethnic minority, or immigrant fatherhood ideals and what political and ideological purposes their dissemination has in any particular historical period. For example, Hondagneu-Sotelo & Messner (1994) suggest that the images and practices of the “new father” serve as class and race markers, setting upwardly mobile white professional fathers with flexible schedules, baby carriers, and gymnastics lessons apart from Mexican immigrant men who take multiple menial jobs in the hopes that their wives can avoid doing domestic work for wealthier women

and focus on their own children.

**7. Fathers are part of families embedded in society.** In our efforts to turn a scholarly spotlight on a subject long neglected, we must be careful to avoid extracting fatherhood from its various social contexts. Fathering does not occur in isolation and is understood best as part of a family system. This fact 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. Family historians have documented the ways that changes in family form and function have been influenced by changes in the organization of production, the availability of land, and the development of commercial markets; changes in the type of work performed; maternal labor force participation; the growth of schooling and compulsory education; changes in family size; changes in marital and birth timing; the growth of “affective individualism;” reliance on kinship ties; the presence of others in the household (boarders, servants); the growth of the bureaucratic state; the frequency and practice of warfare; changes in the legal system; the growth of professional experts; improvements in nutrition and longevity; changes in medical practices; fluctuations in immigration; the

existence of slavery; urbanization; growth of the suburbs; an ideology of separate spheres; ideas about childhood; etc. (Aries, 1962; Boydston, 1990; Cott, 1977; Degler, 1980; Demos, 1986; Hareven, 1991; Mintz & Kellog, 1988; Pollock 1983; Shorter, 1976; Stone, 1977). When scholars of contemporary families search for reasons why fatherhood has changed, they tend to focus on changes in production and wage labor. The emphasis on men's role in the overall economy is well-founded, but it should not be pursued single-mindedly.

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. We cannot understand fatherhood without also understanding the expectations for men as husbands in marriage and the rights and duties of women as wives and mothers. For example, the historical concept of family in the west includes the notion of husband/father as head and master of the household, and the word “family” is derived from the Latin “famulus” meaning servant and “familia” meaning the man's domestic property. Unless we know about the patterned set of privileges and obligations that accrue to men in families, usually by way of custom or legal statute, we will not be able to comprehend the actions of fathers. Family law is thus a rich source of historical material about fathers that thus far has received little attention from fatherhood researchers. In this area, we might follow the lead of legal scholars, historians,

and sociologists who have used case law and statutes to explore changes in the family as a social institution. Excellent examples of such research include studies by Zelizer (1985) on the changing value assigned by the courts to children who die and Fineman (1988) on legal change in child custody decisionmaking. These studies show that analysis of the legal rights and obligations of fathers, in combination with other historical materials, can tell us much about both the ideals and the practices of fatherhood in past times. Such studies can also inform us about the degree to which fathers' actions are discretionary versus mandated.

**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—a surprising observation in view of the assumed centrality of this aspect of the fathering role in most definitions of fatherhood (Parke & Stearns, 1993). At the same time, we know even less about the mechanisms or processes through which this presumed impact takes place and has taken place in the past. Were fathers always direct interactive partners with their children and with direct influence on their children's development, or was fathers' influence largely indirect and mediated through mothers' attitudes and behaviors? Alternatively, was fathers' influence largely through the social,

educational, and occupational opportunities that they provided to their children?

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. The rich history of the changing meaning of children and stages of childhood (e.g., Aries, 1962; Pollock, 1983) needs to be linked with historical studies of fathering if we are going to make progress in unraveling this puzzle.

A third meaning of development flows from a life-span or life-course perspective on fathering. 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, life style, 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. The timing of entry into fatherhood and its impact on men and families is an important topic that needs historical scrutiny.

Fourth, the developmental and historical agenda needs to include a focus on the impact of fatherhood on men themselves. As Cowan (1988), Snarey (1993), and others have recently shown, 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. Researchers are challenged to recognize fatherhood more fully as an important developmental transition in the lives of men. 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 better the changing ideals and practices of fatherhood.

Finally, adopting a developmental perspective on fathering broadens the historical agenda by serving as a corrective to the view long held by some psychologists in particular: That fatherhood was primarily of interest because of the possible impact of fathers on children's development. The historical agenda should include analysis of the developmental trajectory of all family members—fathers as well as mothers and children—if the richness of fatherhood is to be appreciated fully.

**9. An intergenerational perspective on fatherhood is needed.** Although the relative impact on child development of mothers versus fathers in contemporary families is far from clear, we are beginning to understand some of the important processes involved. We know, for instance, that relationships with his own parents influence the way in which a man enacts his own fathering role. 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. In addition to the childhood effects, grandparents play important roles as providers of support and advice to fathers in their struggle to define their new roles. Tracing changes in mobility and patterns of intergenerational contact with extended kin is an important historical task (e.g., Parke, 1995).

**10. Fatherhood is gendered.** Historical researchers have shown us that the meaning of gender is reflected in and reproduced through family ideals and practices (e.g., Bose, 1987; Coontz, 1992; Welter, 1966; Stearns, 1991). Fatherhood, along with other cultural and economic institutions, is influenced by the meaning of manhood in any particular era (Carnes & Griffen, 1992; Connell, 1993). 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 in which the practices of fatherhood also contribute to the masculinity of adult males (cf., Coltrane, 1989). For example, research focusing on fathers' activities with children, such as rough and tumble play, should attend to the impact such activities have on fathers' sense of masculinity as well as sons'. Historians and social scientists typically have studied men in public settings and women in family settings without realizing that they were reproducing the cultural ideal of separate spheres they were trying to understand (Bose, 1987). As a corrective to earlier patterns, we can turn our attention to men in families and women in jobs, investigating how gender differences contribute 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. Some argue that those who study modern versions of fatherhood can ignore vestiges of patriarchy, because the organization of society is no longer based on feudal households and complex family alliances. But the history of modern society is a history of the transformation of earlier forms of social control, not their elimination. That marriage is now a more overtly individual choice than it was in the past does not mean that people can marry anyone they please. Just as overt matchmaking by family elders has been replaced by more subtle family influences on the selection of marriage partners, so too has the power of fathers over wives and children been diluted but not abandoned. Fathers are not all-powerful today, but neither were they in past eras, as evidenced in detailed historical accounts of family violence by Elizabeth Pleck (1987) and Linda Gordon (1988). History can be read as a constant struggle between rulers, including patriarchs, monarchs, and bureaucracies over subjects, including women, children, and less powerful men (e.g., Donzelot, 1979). Fathers have always played an important part in these struggles, and they usually have controlled the wealth and labor of wives and children. Families have been, and to some extent continue to be, social mechanisms for the control and intergenerational transmission of wealth, property, power, and prestige. This includes how we train children to occupy their proper "places" in society (e.g., Barrett & McIntosh, 1982;

Bourdieu, 1984; Kohn, 1977). 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 monitored carefully. 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 changes 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. For example, does the impact of divorce differ when it is a non-normative event, as it was in some historical periods, in contrast to the current era in which it is viewed as a more normative occurrence. How do fathers with custody in earlier times compare with single custodial fathers today, in light of the earlier legal view of children as paternal property? In addition, a focus on the current diversity of fathering arrangements leads to new historical questions. For example, what were the norms and practices of remarriage and stepfathering in earlier times?

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. Some family researchers implicitly assume that modern fathers, especially those who rely on social science findings and egalitarian ideals, possess a privileged vantage point from which to evaluate and make decisions about appropriate fathering behaviors. In fact, our own practices, as well as those of our ancestors, are a product of individual choices that are largely determined by forces outside of us, including the culture, economy, polity, technology, etc. 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 shaped largely by historical as well as current circumstances.

**13. Political contexts shape fatherhood research.** The current political context for fatherhood research cannot be ignored. Scholars studying fathers are not operating in a political vacuum and the results of our efforts will be appropriated and used by the media and policymakers 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 also would be wise to interpret such rhetoric as self-serving political maneuvering. For centuries, politicians, religious leaders, professionals, and others with vested

interests have used family rhetoric to further their own agendas (Howard, 1981). We fear that recent attempts by academics to reinstate “traditional” family values and restore respect for the conventional father (e.g., Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 1993) carry reactionary potential. Reinstating fathers as family patriarchs by making divorce more difficult, automatically giving child custody to men, or increasing men’s rights over wives’ and daughters’ reproductive decisions is a reactionary move that will have dire social consequences. As researchers of fatherhood, we must therefore be aware of the possible uses to which our results can be put. We should neither envelop 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 inevitably will frame popular understandings of our work.

### **Coda**

This paper can be viewed best 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. If we do 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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