

## 9 Dealing with dads: The changing roles of fathers

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One of the first lessons taught in sociology in the 1960s was that marriage was a universal or nearly universal institution. A cultural mechanism for regulating the potentially conflicting claims and obligations of parenthood, marriage simultaneously grants paternity rights to fathers and their families while ensuring social recognition and economic support for childbearers and their offspring. Marriage provides an added benefit for children by connecting them to a wider network of adults who have a stake in their long-term development (Malinowski, 1930; Davis, 1939).

This theory, purporting to explain the universality of marriage, became the subject of an intense debate in anthropology and sociology during the 1960s (Bell & Vogel, 1968; Coser, 1964). Evidence from cross-cultural investigations showed enormous variation in marriage forms, differing levels of commitment to the norm of legitimacy, and often minimal participation by biological or social fathers in the process of child rearing. More recently historical evidence indicates that the institution of marriage was not firmly in place until the end of the Middle Ages (Laslett, 1972; Goody, 1983; Gillis, 1985). The accumulation of contradictory data forced Goode (1960, 1971) to revise Malinowski's theory to take account of the high rates of cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing in many New World nations and among African-Americans. Goode argued that among lower-status groups, where community standing and property rights are not at issue, the principle of legitimacy will be relaxed. The importance of regulating childbearing through marriage declines when women see limited benefit from marriage and when families have little honor to uphold. Speaking of the attenuation of the norm, Goode (1971, p. 478) concluded:

No simple moral or technical solution exists for these problems. The mechanical process of marriage does not automatically create a family relationship, though it may confer the status of legitimacy on the child. Illegitimacy in the United States most often occurs precisely among those who are not deeply involved with one another emotionally and who have shared mainly a sexual experience. . . . Marriage would "give a name," but not a father, to the child. Fundamental changes in the social structure would be required to give full social rights to the illegitimate child, and these are not likely to take place in the next few generations.

Written nearly two decades ago, Goode's comments now seem prescient, though neither he nor any other sociologists anticipated the sweeping changes in the family that have taken place over the past quarter century. So extensive have these changes been that Malinowski's universal principle of legitimacy now seems to be seriously in doubt. In a number of societies, our own among them, marriage is an ineffective mechanism for regulating parenthood (Cherlin, 1989). The nuclear unit (biological parents and their offspring) – once regarded as the fundamental building block of our kinship system – is no longer the prevailing family form. And men – the weak link in the biological process of parenthood – have, in rising numbers, become unattached to their children.

Tracing the sources of the transformation in marriage patterns is not the main mission of this chapter, but some of the factors contributing to the changing role of men in the family are presented. In the initial section, the consequences of the declining significance of marriage for children's relations with the fathers and general well-being are discussed. Concern about the deteriorating situation of children has spawned a number of policy initiatives to strengthen the economic link between fathers and children. The second half of the chapter focuses on the implications of the Family Support Act of 1988 for fatherhood, looking at both the objectives of this far-reaching policy for fathers' role in the family and its prospects of success. How would we know if it were bringing about change in the behavior of males either in marriage or parenting patterns? While the examination of these questions inevitably touches on issues of child support, this topic is more directly addressed by McLanahan and Garfinkel in this volume. The emphasis here is rather on whether public policy can affect marital and family functioning. A few final, speculative comments about the future of fatherhood are presented in the concluding section.

### **Men in the family:**

#### **Where have all the fathers gone?**

Family change is not peculiar to the latter half of the twentieth century. The form of the family has always been sensitive to economic conditions and ideological currents. Social historians have convincingly demonstrated to all but the truest of true believers that there was no stable, traditional family model against which to contrast our unstable contemporary family forms (Gordon, 1983; Hareven, 1978). Even disabused of any romantic images of family stability in times past, many recent trends in marriage and parenthood are unprecedented in both magnitude and scope. Their effect is heightened because they follow on the heels of a period (the 1950s and 1960s) when the nuclear family was nearly omnipresent (Cherlin, 1992).

The following section presents some demographic and social evidence to back up the claim that marriage is no longer effectively regulating parenthood and paternal responsibilities. First, recent trends in nonmarital childbearing will be reviewed, suggesting that the link between marriage and childbearing is weakening; many

couples are not marrying before (or even after) they have children. Furthermore, fragmentary studies of the performance of never-married fathers show that most have a tenuous and often temporary relationship with their children. Second, trends in marital stability strongly suggest that divorce and remarriage are no longer anomalous events but intrinsic features of our kinship system. The growing pattern of conjugal succession blurs and confuses paternal responsibilities. This observation leads to a consideration of the consequences of the declining role of men in the family for children in the third part of this chapter. While not a thorough review of this complex issue, this section offers some comments on the uncertain state of our knowledge about this topic before addressing issues of public policy and fatherhood.

*Nonmarital childbearing: The declining importance of marriage*

Out-of-wedlock childbearing has been common in parts of the United States and Western Europe at various times (Laslett, 1972; Shorter, 1975; Vinovskis, 1981). Fluctuations in nonmarital childbearing can result from changes in the permissibility of sexual behavior, the availability of contraception and abortion, and the amount of control exercised by the community in forcing couples to marry in the event of pregnancy. Over the past several decades, the tolerance for nonmarital childbearing has increased in the United States as well as in many other Western nations (Davis, 1985; Popenoe, 1988). Responding to or merely reflecting these normative shifts, a growing number of couples are not marrying when a premarital pregnancy occurs (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992a). The risk of pregnancy for young single women rose from the late 1960s through the 1970s as premarital sex became acceptable and widespread. Even so, a decline in nonmarital childbearing might have been expected after abortion was legalized because single women who chose not to marry or give up their child for adoption had another acceptable alternative. It is therefore all the more surprising that the proportion of premarital pregnancies leading to marriage has diminished over the past quarter century. Some scholars have argued that this trend was precipitated by a wave of expert advice, counseling pregnant teenagers against precipitous unions (Vinovskis & Chase-Lansdale, 1987; Vinovskis, 1988). But the fact is that the decline of "shotgun" weddings began in the late 1950s, as marriage rates peaked, and occurred among all age groups, not just teenagers (Furstenberg, 1988a).

Since the 1940s, when vital statistics data first became available, the rate and ratio of nonmarital childbearing have risen steadily among teenagers. The pattern among older women is slightly more complex though it generally follows the upward trend (Furstenberg, 1991). An exception is nonmarital childbearing among mature women, which temporarily declined in the wake of the baby boom. This brief pause lasted for less than a decade, however. Beginning in the early 1970s rates started to rise again, first among women in their early 20s and then among older unmarried females (National Center for Health Statistics, 1993).

Contrary to popular impressions, nonmarital childbearing is not a teenage problem. Nor is it confined to women of color (Furstenberg, 1991). The most rapid increases in the past decade have occurred among mature women, while rate increases among younger teenagers have been relatively modest. Unmarried women in their 20s have similar rates of childbearing as 18- and 19-year-olds and are about twice as likely to bear a child out of wedlock as girls between the ages of 15 and 17. While black women are much more likely to bear children out-of-wedlock than are whites, the black-white differential has been steadily diminishing over the past half century. In 1950 blacks were more than 10 times as likely as whites to have a child out of wedlock; by 1970 the racial differential had declined to about 7:1; by 1980 it dropped to 5:1; in 1990 it had fallen to 3:1. In 1975 just 7% of white births were to single women compared to about half of the black births. By 1990 the fraction of out-of-wedlock white births had risen to 20% and for blacks, to 67%. Close to half of all births to white women and 90% of births to black women under the age of 20 occur to unmarried mothers (National Center for Health Statistics, 1993).

These striking changes suggest that marriage as a precondition for childbearing has all but disappeared among young blacks. And a majority of white women in their late teens and a substantial minority of those in their early 20s seem to be abandoning the longstanding pattern of marrying in the event of a pregnancy. Fewer white women, too, are marrying (presumably the fathers of their babies) in the immediate aftermath of childbirth (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1989).

It is easier to describe this pattern than to explain it. Many believe that the declining economic position of males is strongly implicated in the decline of marriage and hence marital childbearing (Adams & Pittman, 1988; Sum & Pierce, 1988; Wilson, 1987; Cherlin, 1992). Certainly, the timing of the increases in nonmarital childbearing rates and ratios within the black community seem to fit this explanation. The most dramatic rise occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s when rates of unemployment shot up among younger males. The long period of economic stagnation in the 1970s, which eroded the position of working-class, noncollege youth, probably affected the attractiveness of marriage for whites as well as blacks (Johnson, Sum, & Weill, 1988).

It is unlikely, however, that faltering economic conditions can entirely account for the declining significance of marriage. The change appears too rapid and too widespread to be the result of a single, albeit fairly lengthy period of economic stagnation. In any case, the economic downturn does not explain the changing patterns of marriage among older blacks and whites of all age groups in recent years (Bennett, Bloom, & Craig, 1989; Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, & Landry, 1992). More likely, these changes are linked to broader shifts in gender roles resulting from the economic independence of women (Cherlin, 1989; Huber & Spitze, 1988; Furstenberg, 1990). The rising rate of marital dissolution should also be credited as a source of the change in marriage attitudes (Thornton, 1989). High rates of conjugal instability reduce the perceived benefits of early marriage and probably increase the tolerance for nonmarital childbearing.

All of the above factors have figured in the changes in marriage patterns in the black community, accounting for a dramatic redefinition in the importance of marriage and its link to childbearing (Cherlin, 1992). In the mid-1960s, in a large sample of teenage childbearers in Baltimore, many young mothers felt compelled to marry in order to "give their child a name" (Furstenberg, 1976). A decade later, this standard had largely been abandoned. But even in the mid-1960s there was evidence of a deep ambivalence about the benefits of marriage for young mothers and their children. The teens' parents frequently urged them not to marry right away so that they could complete their schooling and gain a measure of economic self-sufficiency. Among the older generation, distrust of marriage was widespread, no doubt because of the high prevalence of marital instability within the black community (Moore, Simms, & Betsey, 1986).

Many parents expressed doubts that fathers could or would provide regular and steady support whether or not their daughters married. Evidence collected later in the Baltimore study seems to bear out these doubts. Half of the early marriages dissolved within 5 years; about three-fourths had ended by the 17-year follow-up. Formerly married fathers were not much more likely than never married fathers to provide economic support or to sustain close emotional ties to their children. And the women who entered unstable marriages fared less well economically because they frequently left school and were more likely to have additional children early in life (Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Morgan, 1987a).

Twenty years later, when the offspring were studied as they entered early adulthood, it was plain that a transformation in marriage attitudes had taken place. Marriage, while still an ideal, was considered a foolish act early in life (Furstenberg, Levine, & Brooks-Gunn, 1990). Virtually none of the daughters who became pregnant in their teens elected to marry. As some of their parents had a generation before, the young mothers instead looked to their families for support. Along with welfare benefits, they saw their kin as providing a much more stable and predictable source of economic and emotional support than was offered by marriage (Furstenberg et al., 1990).

A corresponding decline in the involvement of unmarried fathers appears to have occurred, judging from the reports of the second-generation mothers in the Baltimore study. A small number of them attended prenatal classes with the mother and were assuming a major role in child care and support, but the majority could not be counted on for regular assistance. Half had either legal or informal child support agreements; however, not all of these fathers were contributing on a regular basis. Just about a third of the unmarried mothers received full and regular support from the fathers though another sixth could count on partial support on a fairly steady basis. About a third of the fathers had frequent contact with the child (once a week or more), a third saw the child less often (usually once or twice a month), and a third had not seen their child in the past year. Keeping in mind that parenthood is quite recent for these women, these figures do not auger well for the long-term support of their children (Furstenberg & Harris, 1993).

Data collected by the Census Bureau show that only a tiny minority of never-married fathers become regular providers (Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, 1989). And information from the National Survey of Children reveals a sharp decline in paternal involvement generally occurs soon after childbirth (Furstenberg & Harris, 1992). This behavioral evidence seems to undermine the observation of many service providers that young fathers often possess strong paternal commitments. A good deal has been written about how children give meaning to the impoverished lives of young men; and there is other evidence showing that many fathers want to be involved, participate in caretaking, and support their offspring at childbirth (Elster & Lamb, 1986).

In the Baltimore study the performance of the small number of males in their late teens and early 20s who acknowledged fathering a child was examined. These men do provide a more favorable picture of their paternal involvement than the one supplied by the teen mothers in our sample. Still, few had participated in prenatal services, the majority admitted that they provided no support or irregular support, and about two-fifths indicated that they saw their child less frequently than once a week on average. Unstructured interviews with young fathers uncovered a profound despair about the possibilities of fulfilling the duties of fatherhood (Furstenberg, Sherwood, & Sullivan, 1992). Most men wanted to do better for their children than their fathers had done for them, but their commitments were eroded by troubled relations with the baby's mother and her family, their precarious foothold in the job market, the temptations and pull of the street, and their own uncertain sense of how to balance immediate needs and parental obligations. Consider the testimony of one young father whom I interviewed in 1991 as he surveys his current and future plans for his child and the child's mother:

R: Well he's 7 months old. But I love him a lot. I wish he was here with me but he's not. He will be with me one day, I'll see to that. I want him to know that I am his father. He needs me. I'll do all I can for him. I'm not saying my father wouldn't; he just didn't. I want my son to just be happy, more happy than I was.

I: What about his mom? He's living with his mom now?

R: Right, he's living with his mom and his grandmom.

I: Sometimes guys I know have trouble with the girlfriend's mom.

R: Okay, it's not all peaches and cream you know, she expects more from me than what I can do right now. But as time go on, of course, I'm gonna get better. Cause I am gonna try. If people see you trying, sometime they give you breaks.

I: She expects more? More means more in what way?

R: Financial. You know she says that. I do give what I can. But I have to live too. I have to keep my clothes clean. I have to, you know, take care of my utilities and all that other stuff, and my toiletries, and I have to have stuff like that. Nobody's gonna do it for me now that I am grown; she just have to understand that for now. Until one day maybe I can get a place of my own and take care of him best that I can. . . . I feel as though that I'm not really ready to live together with a female.

A growing body of evidence on relations between unmarried fathers and their children suggest that the results of the Baltimore study are not atypical. There is general agreement that the intentions of fathers far outstrip their ability to make

good on their goal of becoming involved caretakers. Whether by design, desire, or default many fathers retreat – some almost immediately but most after their initial efforts end in frustration or their motivation flags (Sullivan, 1989; Ooms, 1981).

Parenting outside the home is difficult even when fathers have established strong bonds with their children and have reasonably trusting relations with the other parent. When neither of these conditions occurs, it is nearly impossible. Lacking material resources and the skills to manage a complex and delicate relationship with the child's mother and facing a suspicious and sometimes hostile set of maternal relatives, fathers frequently become disheartened and disaffected. Their efforts at maintaining ties with their offspring may seem large to them, but are likely to be regarded as inadequate by dispirited and overburdened former girlfriends. Rather quickly, the process of cooperative parenting can break down, to be replaced by mutual recriminations (Furstenberg et al., 1992).

It must be acknowledged that there are exceptions to this depressing scenario. Longitudinal data from both the Baltimore study and the National Survey of Children show that a minority of unmarried fathers do remain actively involved with their children. But the number dwindles over time. There is some reason to suspect that commitment to fathering requires both resources and a commitment to the role. Relatively little is known about the sources of paternal commitment (Marsiglio, 1988).

### *Marital disruption and remarriage*

Prior to the past two decades, the incidence of nonmarital childbearing was low, especially for whites. Moreover, most unmarried parents quickly entered conjugal unions. Though the link between marriage and childbearing was nearly inviolable, by the middle of the twentieth century marriage had already become a less reliable mechanism for ensuring paternal involvement because of rising rates of divorce (Preston & McDonald, 1979; Weed, 1980). Today, close to half of all marriages end in divorce (Cherlin, 1992). Were marriages that are dissolved but are never legally terminated also included, the figure would rise even higher (Castro & Bumpass, 1989).

These trends represent a fundamental alteration in the institution of marriage. Americans, and to a growing extent Western Europeans, have moved from a permanent to a conditional matrimonial contract (Davis, 1985). Couples were once expected to remain together even if they did not retain strong affective ties; now they are much more likely to part if they are not emotionally gratified. Increasingly, marriage has become a discretionary arrangement (Furstenberg, 1982).

Seen from the perspective of children, this pattern of conjugal succession means that a shrinking number of children will spend their entire childhood living with both of their biological parents and a growing number will acquire stepparents before they reach adulthood. Because divorce and remarriage rates are continually changing, it is difficult to provide an exact estimate of the number of children who

will encounter family instability. It is safe to say that about half of all children will witness a marital dissolution and close to 20% will spend some time living with a stepparent before they reach the age of 18 (Furstenberg, Nord, Peterson, & Zill, 1983; Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992b).

In the great majority of cases, the father becomes the nonresidential parent. Despite the growth of joint custody, close to 90% of children from divorced families initially are in the custody of their mothers (Rawlings, 1989). Over time, some of these children eventually live with their father on a part-time or full-time basis. But both census and survey data suggest that only a minority of children – a fourth at most – live with their fathers for any substantial amount of time after divorce (Sweet & Bumpass, 1987).

Two surveys conducted in the early 1980s reveal that most formerly married fathers living outside the home see their children infrequently or not at all (Furstenberg et al., 1983; Seltzer & Bianchi, 1988). Contact drops off sharply in the first 2 years after divorce. After several years, most fathers cease to see their children or see them only very occasionally. The majority of children living apart from their fathers never spend time in their father's home, talk to him by telephone infrequently, and rarely communicate by mail (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Teachman, 1992). It is hardly surprising that only a minority of children receive economic support or any kind of assistance from their fathers 3 or more years after the marriage breaks up (Ellwood, 1988; Garfinkel, 1992).

It is difficult to say whether these general patterns of low involvement by formerly married males have changed as divorce rates increased or as custody practices have altered to encourage greater paternal participation. Reliable data on father's involvement among nonresidential fathers are simply not available prior to this decade. One possibly revealing indicator is the persistently low level of child support assistance provided by fathers. Despite recent efforts by the federal government to strengthen collection procedures, child support remained at the same low level in 1985 as it was in 1978 (Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, 1989). Some encouraging trends in child support were evident in the more recent survey of child support payments conducted by the Census Bureau in 1988 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990). Still, the increase in the level of child support in the more recent survey appears to be very modest. It is possible that aggregate data on child support may be concealing more encouraging trends in recent marriage cohorts. A better understanding of current trends requires more careful analysis of existing data sources on child support and fresh evidence on paternal contact (see Garfinkel & McLanahan, this volume).

Relatively little is known about men's motives for withdrawing from their children. Advocates of fathers' rights claim that men are locked out of the family. It is not clear from existing studies just how often mothers actually try to prevent visitation or thwart child-rearing efforts by former mates. Most existing data, based largely on surveys of women, suggest such attempts occur only infrequently. But



residential mothers may have subtle ways of discouraging involvement even when they purport to encourage it. Nonetheless, the retreat of many divorced fathers seems to be based partly on the unwillingness or inability to pay child support, especially in the event of a remarriage by either former partners.

The behavior of the fathers who withdraw is consistent with the emergent pattern of conjugal succession. Just as marital obligations have become more discretionary, so, too, parenthood is viewed as voluntary (Furstenberg, 1990). As they move from one marriage to another, many men exhibit a pattern of child swapping – they relinquish their responsibilities for biological children in favor of children in their current household. Many men are inclined to regard marriage as a package deal. Their responsibilities to their children are linked to their marital bonds. When the conjugal bond is dissolved, the tenuous tie between father and child is broken. (For an extended discussion of the process of marital disengagement, see Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991.) Malinowski's proposition that marriage is a mechanism for strengthening the weak biological link between fathers and children appears to apply only as long as a marriage survives.

While this pattern of child swapping describes a prevailing current in American society, a minority of nonresidential fathers retain strong and continuous ties with their biological children (Mott, 1993). The National Survey of Children, a longitudinal study of a nationally representative sample of children who were followed over a period of a dozen years from the mid-1970s onward, contains data on the changing relations of fathers who no longer lived with their children. The data set permits an examination of the reports of children about their relations with their nonresidential fathers in midadolescence and, then again, when the children were in their late teens and early 20s.

When the children were ages 11 to 16, slightly more than half of those whose parents had separated saw their father on at least an occasional basis. Just under two-fifths indicated that they were close to their father, and a third said that they would like to be like him when they grew up – about half the level reported by children in intact families. Five years later, when the youth were in late adolescence, these figures dropped even lower. Barely more than a third of the children were seeing the father regularly enough to report on the state of their relationship. Just one in four responded that they were close to him and would like to be like him when they grew up. Children in intact families were three times as likely to give positive evaluations of relations with their father (Furstenberg & Harris, 1992).

What are the sources of variation in relations between fathers and their children and the reasons for the high rate of emotional attrition? How much do preexisting relations between fathers and children set the pattern of postmarital relations as compared to events following the divorce? Existing data suggest that the maintenance of strong bonds between children and their fathers is not highly predicated on early relations; strong ties in early childhood are not always a necessary and certainly not a sufficient condition for close relations in late childhood and early

adulthood. If men's relationships with their children are indeed often mediated by the relations among formerly married couples, then we must understand how the divorce process and its aftermath weaken the paternal bond.

A recent study by Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) examines a sample of California divorces, monitoring the management of postmarital parenting over time. They report much higher levels of paternal participation than were recorded in the National Survey of Children or even in the more recent study in the National Survey of Families and Households analyzed by Seltzer. In all likelihood, the preference for joint legal custody in California promotes and permits greater paternal participation. Their results do resemble the national surveys in one important respect: Substantial fluctuations occur in living arrangements and visitation patterns over time. These changes often seem to be governed by external factors such as work moves or new relationships, but they may also be associated with interpersonal bargaining related to child support and visitation.

To sum up, divorce often results in a withering of the paternal bond, though recently there may be a trend toward greater persistence in paternal contact (Seltzer, 1991; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Still, it is too soon to tell whether recent changes in custody practices or child support regulations will alter the widespread practice of formerly married men relinquishing ties with their children. A small minority of nonresidential fathers do manage to maintain an active presence in the family, either because they are able to maintain collaborative relations with their former spouses or, more often, they negotiate a *modus vivendi* that usually involves each parent relating to their children with minimal consultation and minimal interference from the other (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985).

### **The consequences of paternal participation for children**

It has been widely assumed that the maintenance of ties with fathers is good for children. That there are economic benefits for children when fathers remain involved is indisputable. The psychological results of continued contact are not so evident from the small amount of empirical data that has been collected. We know very little about the consequences of paternal participation for children's emotional and cognitive development in intact families. The effects of paternal involvement when fathers live apart from their children are even less well understood (Parke, 1989; Lamb, 1987).

The major source of evidence supporting the premise that a father's presence contributes to the emotional and intellectual well-being of his children comes from studies comparing children living in intact and nonintact families. While it is clear that children's adjustment is moderately higher in the aggregate when they grow up in intact families than in single-parent or stepfamily households, it is not so clear why (Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1986; Chase-Lansdale & Hetherington, 1990; Emery, 1988; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991). No consensus yet exists on how much or why marital disruption leads to poorer outcomes (Amato, 1993). To be sure, some

part of the divorce effect can be traced directly to the economic disadvantage resulting from living in a single-parent family and the associated problems of downward mobility, residence in poorer neighborhoods, and limited educational opportunities. But most researchers have concluded that economic differences alone cannot account for the differences in children's school functioning and educational attainment, emotional health, behavioral problems, or differences in early adulthood, such as patterns of family formation and family stability (Dornbush, 1989; McLanahan, 1988; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

How does the father's presence and involvement in the home, apart from his economic contribution, protect the child? Some suggestive studies indicate that the capacity of the mother to monitor her children's behavior effectively is reduced by the departure of the father from the home (Dornbush et al., 1985). Also, adolescent females seem to be more prone to early sexual behavior when they are not residing with their father, which has been interpreted as a result of weaker family controls. However, it must be said that the direct evidence that fathers play an important disciplinary or social control function in regulating children's behavior during adolescence is less than satisfactory. Gross comparisons between the family functioning of intact and nonintact families are an insufficient method of demonstrating the benefits of paternal involvement for children's development (Furstenberg & Teitler, 1991). Studies of the consequences of impaired paternal relationships in intact families come closer to showing how fathers may contribute to their children's adjustment. The tradition of research established by Patterson and his colleagues points to family malfunctioning when fathers are inconsistent, explosive, or highly irritable (Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989). Hetherington's (1987) astute observations of divorced families also shows how vicious cycles of punishment and behavioral problems are initiated in single-parent families, especially between mothers and their sons. Hetherington's data, however, do not demonstrate whether the continued involvement of fathers reduces or exacerbates this family dynamic.

Only a few large-scale studies have examined the impact of continued paternal involvement between nonresidential fathers and their children (Amato, 1993). Data from the National Survey of Children revealed a surprising result. There was no evidence that participation by fathers outside the home reduced the level of problems exhibited by children living in single-parent households (Furstenberg, Morgan, & Allison, 1987b). This result has been replicated using data from the Baltimore study, including both formerly married and never-married fathers (see also King, 1994). Children who reported frequent contact and emotional closeness with fathers outside the home did not do better on any of a number of measures of adjustment with one exception – they did have lower levels of depression (Harris & Furstenberg, 1990).

More recent analysis of the third wave of the National Survey of Children provided another opportunity to examine the impact of paternal participation. Again, closeness to father and regular contact were associated with lower levels of depression in late adolescence but were unrelated to school achievement, behavior prob-

lems, or early childbearing. Surprisingly, no strong evidence indicated that closeness to fathers contributed to children's functioning in intact families though, of course, children from stable marriages generally experienced fewer problems than those whose parents had separated.

Where does this preliminary and admittedly insufficient evidence leave us? It leaves us thoroughly confused about the role of fathers in the family. Overall, fathers in the home improve children's chances of doing well in later life though the differences are much more modest than is commonly assumed (Amato & Keith, 1991; Furstenberg & Teitler, 1991). And to the extent that family structure matters at all, researchers have not done an adequate job of explaining why.

Participation of fathers outside the home may matter much less than is widely believed, though again, we do not know why. Data from observational studies or more complete survey information might demonstrate that children perform better in the long run when their fathers, living outside the home, maintain an active disciplinary and supportive role. Evidence supporting this proposition is difficult to obtain because so few fathers living outside the home are intimately and actively involved in child rearing. For purposes of public policy, one might be tempted to conclude that the effect of fathers outside the home is trivial apart from the economic support that they may contribute. The existing evidence, nonetheless, is too weak to draw so radical a conclusion. However, in the absence of strong supportive data, concluding that future policies designed to increase paternal involvement are likely to have a significant impact on the psychological well-being of children must, at least, be regarded as an undemonstrated assertion.

### **Fathers and public policy**

This brings us to a consideration of the likely consequences of the Family Support Act of 1988 for fathers, and indirectly for their children. Following the lines of argument that have been advanced in this chapter, we want first to know how current welfare reform is affecting future marriage trends, that is, the formation and maintenance of stable unions. Will this legislation counteract the declining commitment to the norm of legitimacy or the prevailing pattern of conjugal succession, trends that have weakened the bond between fathers and their children? Second, how will current welfare reform efforts, such as the Family Support Act of 1988, shape or influence the behavior of fathers living apart from their children, specifically the quantity and quality of fathering? Finally, if the levels or stability of unions or the patterns of parenting of nonresidential fathers are affected, how much more better off will children be as a result?

#### *The impact of the Family Support Act of 1988 on marriage and marital stability*

The principal intent of the Family Support Act of 1988 is to increase the economic contribution of nonresidential fathers. As such, it recognizes the declining signifi-

cance of marriage and attempts to compensate for what has become an increasingly impotent institution. The Family Support Act is designed to protect women and children from a collapsing system of marriage. It is primarily designed to replace rather than to restore marriage. As such, the legislation recognizes and thus unavoidably institutionalizes what has become largely a *fait accompli*.

It might be argued that the child support provisions of the Family Support Act that establish paternity, locate missing parents, and set guidelines for awards make nonmarital childbearing less appealing. If this is happening, marital childbearing could become relatively more attractive to men. While the latter proposition seems like a fairly remote possibility, it is entirely plausible that raising the economic costs of nonmarital childbearing to men may deter early and out-of-wedlock childbearing.

Recent trends on rates of nonmarital childbearing do not give much encouragement to those who believe that child support enforcement will deter early childbearing, but aggregate figures may conceal different effects among states such as Wisconsin and Michigan that have already adopted strict child support enforcement systems. The Family Support Act provides an opportunity to identify deterrent effects of child support enforcement by contrasting states that have more efficient implementation systems for paternity testing, location of missing parents, and collection of child support with those that have less efficient programs. A comparison of "strong" and "weak" state programs might demonstrate deterrent effects if differences among states were evident in the perceptions of men, not yet fathers, of the future costs of fatherhood and if unmarried fathers were more likely in the strong enforcement states to perceive more severe sanctions for unmet financial obligations to their children than in the weaker enforcement states. If rates of nonmarital childbearing drop more rapidly in the states with strong enforcement measures than the states with weak measures, a deterrent effect would be highly plausible.

Such a test is worth undertaking, but there is reason to be skeptical about the prospects of finding this result. Just as stronger child support enforcement discourages men from entering parenthood, the guarantee of financial support from nonresidential fathers makes nonmarital childbearing relatively more manageable for women. Most of the limited evidence on marital decision making among young and disadvantaged women suggests that only a small proportion see early marriage as a desirable choice when they become pregnant. The advantages of a precipitate marriage are likely to remain small, especially with the guarantee of child support by the nonresidential fathers. If anything, child support enforcement is likely to reinforce the increasingly popular view that single parenthood is a preferable alternative to hasty marriage. The Family Support Act could actually increase rates of nonmarital childbearing by increasing the proportion of pregnant women who elect to remain single.

In contrast to the child support provisions, the other components of current welfare reform, particularly the JOBS (Jobs, Opportunities, and Basic Skills) program, are primarily aimed at improving the economic prospects of welfare mothers. Up to five states are permitted to offer the JOBS program to noncustodial parents (fathers) in order to increase their potential contributions to child support. Clearly,

however, the legislation is principally designed to make mothers more capable of providing for their offspring without providing parallel incentives for fathers. As such, it will do little to promote collective strategies between parents and perhaps might even work in the opposite direction – discouraging parents from forming separate households. It will be interesting to observe whether trends differ in the five states that direct job-training resources to fathers and those that cater exclusively to young mothers.

There is one provision of the Family Support Act of 1988 that explicitly intends to strengthen existing unions, referred to as AFDC-UP. Jobless fathers are permitted to live with their families without affecting eligibility for welfare payments. Higher earnings are allowed in the form of income disregards (job earnings permitted before AFDC is reduced). These stipulations could conceivably have some effect on union formation and stability though the magnitude of the disregards is quite modest, suggesting that their potential effect on union stability probably will be small if at all. A number of states have already instituted AFDC-UP, but little is known about the effect of this provision in maintaining family unions. Studying the impact of broadening this provision on union formation and stability would be worthwhile.

States are also permitted to require single mothers who are minors to live with their parents in order to receive benefits. This provision might encourage youthful parents seeking independence to enter marriage precipitously if they would qualify for AFDC-UP, but it is implausible to believe that this strategy will become common. Most teen mothers are not eager to marry and prefer instead to reside with their parents. Indeed, if anything, this requirement may discourage coupling because symbolically, and perhaps in actuality, the regulation reinforces the young mother's dependency upon her family.

Summing up, the overall effect of the Family Support Act on the occurrence of marriage and its stability is not likely to be large. If anything, it is likely to reinforce current trends away from early marriage and marital childbearing. Fathers are recognized from a policy standpoint more as potential economic contributors outside the home than important socializing agents inside the home. The Family Support Act protects against the absence of unions between parents more than it actively promotes unions or ensures their permanence. It must be said that stimulating family formation was not the principal intent of the legislation. But to the extent that children are best served by the presence of a father in the home, current welfare reform promises little in the way of assistance.

*The impact of the Family Support Act of 1988 on fathering among noncustodial males*

One of the main objectives of the Family Support Act of 1988 is to increase the child support provided by fathers living outside the home. Will these efforts to strengthen father's economic obligations lead to greater claims from males for a share of child rearing and greater acceptance from mothers for a more active paternal presence?

Men are more likely to retreat from the family when they are unable or unwilling to pay child support. And when they do not pay, mothers are more hostile to their participation in the family. It is entirely plausible that the provision of more regular support will lead to more regular visitation and greater involvement in child rearing (Seltzer, 1994). More involvement may then have the impact of reintegrating fathers into the family. These potential outcomes ought to be studied by looking at changing levels of paternal involvement over time and by comparing the participation of nonresidential fathers in states that are more or less effective in enforcing child support.

At the same time, we must be prepared to examine critically the benefits of paternal participation among fathers not living with their children. Unlike marriage, where couples presumably have a strong interest in coordinating their parenting roles, parenting apart can create competition between mothers and fathers and their respective extended kin. Thus, increasing economic obligations might expand conflict in some families while promoting greater cooperation in others.

The possibility of adverse side effects is perhaps greatest when fathers deny paternity, when they have been reluctant to pay child support, or when they have been denied access to their children. It will be especially important to consider the consequences of the Family Support Act on paternal participation and family functioning. Funding is allocated for special demonstration programs to increase access of noncustodial fathers to their children by encouraging judicial procedures when child visitation has been denied. The language of the legislation is vague, only calling for judicial experimentation. This possibly affords another opportunity to examine the impact of paternal involvement on family functioning, especially when such involvement may not be unwelcomed by the residential parent.

#### *The impact of the Family Support Act of 1988 on relations between fathers and their children*

The provisions of the Family Support Act aimed at increasing child support may significantly raise the standard of living of children of economically disadvantaged parents. If this were to happen, the social and psychological benefits to children would be enormous because poverty affects children's development and well-being in a variety of direct and indirect ways (see Garfinkel & McLanahan, this volume). Regarding the noneconomic effects of paternal participation on children, the research on how fathers, both inside and outside the home, affect the well-being of their children is not a good guide for evaluating the impact of the Family Support Act. To the extent that we can extrapolate from existing research, there is little reason to expect any dramatic effects on children.

It seems far more plausible that the child support enforcement provisions might increase paternal contact somewhat over time. The impact for children is likely to be relatively small, for the involvement of nonresidential fathers is not likely to rise enough to have strong positive effects on the well-being of children. Moreover, the

participation of reluctant and sometimes recalcitrant fathers could diminish as often as promote family harmony.

### **Research opportunities**

Much of the speculation in this chapter is based on a very slender pedestal of research. We need to consider and reconsider a number of unsettled questions involving fathers' roles and children's well-being.

1. Almost nothing is known about the practical dilemmas faced by prospective young parents making decisions about marriage and household formation. We know that they are increasingly reluctant to marry, but not why they are electing to remain single. How are their decisions influenced by the availability of resources? How do federal, state, and local policies enter into their choices about marriage and nonmarriage, if they do at all? We need to think more broadly about whether there should be a public interest in private decisions involving family formation.

A minor sort of experiment might be mounted to examine the effects of current welfare reform on the stability of family unions. Would the infusion of economic support help stabilize newly formed unions? Among the states that permit fathers to receive the JOBS program, is there any evidence that unmarried couples will elect to live together in marriages or informal unions? These questions address the link between precarious economic conditions and marriage patterns. While the legislation is unlikely to spawn powerful enough interventions to test the significance of the economic determinants of marriage, they may lead to bolder sorts of natural experiments.

2. Based on existing studies, there is some reason to believe that fathers' claims for participation in the family will escalate if they are providing child support. We do not know much about how paternal participation shapes relations between unmarried or formerly married parents. We need to assess how policies may influence alternative patterns of family functioning. Nonnuclear families are probably every bit as diverse, or perhaps even more so, as nuclear families. Exploring the circumstances that promote effective collaboration between parents living apart is important. Does a marriage, even one that does not survive, improve the chances of cooperation or does it have the reverse effect, creating a larger legacy of enmity and distrust? A comparison of the parenting experiences of never-married and formerly married parents would shed some light on the benefits or liabilities of promoting marriage as a matter of public policy.

3. We know little about the consequences of paternal involvement inside or outside the home for the well-being of children. We must confront our ignorance about this topic, for it raises the question of whether and how much children will benefit if their fathers become more active in child rearing. It can be assumed that a father's economic contribution will improve the child's well-being, but the psychological effects of paternal involvement are less clear. The evidence collected to date



simply is too weak to instruct policy makers. Rather than regarding paternal participation as either positive or negative for children's well-being, it would be most helpful to examine the conditions under which greater involvement by fathers increases or decreases a child's welfare. It is also essential to examine how these child support enforcement policies, in turn, may affect long-term family relations and the adjustment of children later in life. Carefully planned longitudinal studies on the development of children are required if we are to appreciate the full ramifications of fostering more active paternal participation.

## Conclusion

Some readers might conclude that my appraisal of how the Family Support Act may affect the role of fathers is unsympathetic to the aims of the legislation, which was primarily designed to improve the status of poor women and their children. In emphasizing how this legislation could reinforce the prevailing pattern of single parenthood, I do not intend to suggest that it is poor public policy to insist that fathers contribute economic support or help mothers become more economically independent. But I insist that we should recognize that such efforts do little to promote the interdependence of fathers and mothers through formal and informal marriage. As such, legislation of this sort strengthens individualistic rather than collective tendencies in our kinship system and may reinforce the separate worlds of men and women.

In an earlier paper on the changing role of fathers, I traced the origin of two current and seemingly contradictory trends – the appearance of nurturant and involved fathers in family life and the retreat of formerly and never-married fathers from families – to a common source. The breakdown of the gender-specific division of labor set off both of these tendencies, which I termed the *good dads/bad dads complex* (Furstenberg, 1988b). I concluded that it is easier to figure out ways of reenforcing obligations of fathers outside the household than to craft policies that increase the involvement of fathers inside the home. This is partly because we do not know how to domesticate men once the vestigial privileges of patriarchy have been removed. Thus, our production of good dads is occurring at a much slower rate than our production of bad dads.

The concerns that I have expressed in this chapter are consistent with my earlier argument. Many of our policies that purport to support the "family" in fact give all too little consideration to involving men in ongoing domestic relationships with their children and their children's mothers. The situation is most acute among disadvantaged minorities, the target population of the Family Support Act. The legislation, I believe, is likely to widen the existing fault line that divides men and women by directing job-training and educational resources primarily toward young mothers while providing only limited services to their partners. We must be more creative in devising ways to increase the capacity of men to become good dads. This

means giving equal attention and directing resources to residential fathers and men, living outside the home, who aspire to share parenting responsibilities but do not have the means to do so.

Of course, this is easier said than done. As one who has spent a professional lifetime studying both adolescent childbearing and marital dissolution, I am acutely aware that relations between young parents are fragile. It is unwise policy merely to promote marriage when parents lack the material and emotional resources to enter into stable relationships. Unquestionably, we ought to be discouraging with all the means available premature parenthood, which contributes disproportionately to our very high rates of nonmarital childbearing and marital instability. An important way of strengthening families is to postpone childbearing until both parents are able to meet its financial and emotional responsibilities. One potentially attractive feature of the new emphasis on child support enforcement is the possibility that raising the costs of fathering a child could deter premature parenthood.

At the same time, we must begin to think about other ways of making stable domestic partnership more attractive and more viable if such arrangements really best serve children's interests. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to develop a set of policies designed to promote union formation and stability. There is reason to be skeptical that any single policy is likely to have a powerful effect on family formation patterns. The declining significance of marriage is the product of a confluence of powerful social and economic trends and is not likely to be reversed by government policies. Still, it is worth thinking through what it might take to strengthen relationships between parents.

I suspect that this battle will have to be fought on two fronts. One direction might consider ways of enhancing the benefits of pooling resources between parents, thus restoring some of the economic incentives for coupling. Doing so without disadvantaging single parents is a problem, but our objective ought at least to be designing policies that do not make it economically unattractive for parents to live together. And we may want to tip the balance in the other direction so that incentives exist for establishing and maintaining unions.

The other policy front is even more complicated. It involves reducing the divergent cultural experiences associated with gender that make it difficult for men and women to live together. This problem may be especially acute among disadvantaged minorities, where children sometimes grow up having stable and attentive contact with fathers and father surrogates. I am convinced that gender distrust, which may itself have economic roots, complicates the process of stable coupling (Furstenberg et al., 1992).

These concerns go well beyond the important issues raised by the Family Support Act of 1988. Still, they have some relevance to the potential ripple effects of the legislation, which, if I am correct, may reinforce what Garfinkel and McLanahan have termed a "new American dilemma" (1986). We must think more broadly and more boldly about the advantages and disadvantages of alternative family arrangements. It has become almost an axiom of public policy that we can exercise little or

no influence on our family futures. Is this true, or are we simply afraid of discussing the troubling value choices that are exposed by family change? A thorough evaluation of the Family Support Act will not yield a definitive answer to this question, but it may force us to reconsider the wisdom of our present policy of ideological stalemate and benign neglect.

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# Escape from poverty

## What makes a difference for children?

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