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Family Man in the Other America: New Opportunities, Motivations, and Supports for Paternal Caregiving

By
MAUREEN R. WALLER

This analysis draws on longitudinal, qualitative interviews with disadvantaged mothers and fathers who participated in the Fragile Families Study (a U.S. birth cohort study) to examine how issues related to men's employment, social support, skills, and motivation facilitated their care of young children in different relationship contexts. Interviews with parents indicate that while some motivated and skilled men actively chose to become caregivers with the support of mothers, others developed new motivations, skills, and parenting supports in response to situations in which they were out of work or the mother was experiencing challenges. These findings suggest that disadvantaged men who assume caregiving responsibilities take different paths to involvement in the early years after their child's birth. Policies that overlook paternal caregivers may not only miss the opportunity to support relationships that benefit at-risk children but also unintentionally undermine this involvement.

Keywords: caregiving; fathers; custodial fathers; fragile families; low-income fathers; primary caregivers; public policy; shared parenting

During a time when the real wages of men were falling, more women were entering the paid labor force, and the number of single-parent

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families was on the rise, scholars in the 1980s and 1990s observed a growing division between “involved fathers” who were becoming more equal partners in parenthood and “uninvolved fathers” who were retreating from family responsibilities (e.g., Furstenberg 1988; Gerson 1993). Researchers interested in understanding the shift toward increased involvement tended to focus on men in married, middle-class couples who opted to share child care with their partners (e.g., Coltrane 1996; Ehrensaft 1987; Radin 1996).¹ Alternatively, researchers concerned with paternal disengagement typically turned their attention to lower-income, nonresident fathers (e.g., Garfinkel, McLanahan, and Hanson 1998). In recent years, significant legislation in the United States has also been directed toward nonresident fathers in poor communities to encourage paternal involvement and support.

The focus on disengagement among less advantaged men is understandable in light of data that indicate many fathers lose contact with their children soon after a nonmarital birth or divorce (Argys et al. 2006), with important implications for children’s economic well-being. At the same time, information from qualitative research suggests that lower-income fathers are often involved in ways that have not been fully captured by survey or administrative data (Nelson 2004; Waller 2002). Although some of these fathers might also resemble their higher-income counterparts who are sharing parenting responsibilities with women, much less is known about disadvantaged fathers who are highly involved in the care of their children (Arendell 1999).²

To assess whether our picture of involved fatherhood in middle-class households is relevant for families with fewer resources and less stable relationships, we need more information about factors that may encourage disadvantaged fathers in different residential contexts to play a significant caregiving role. This article uses two waves of in-depth interviews with new mothers and fathers who participated in one site of the Fragile Families Study, a U.S. birth cohort study, to examine how men’s employment, social support, skills, and motivation (Lamb et al. 1987) facilitated paternal caregiving during the first four years of their child’s life. Much of the qualitative literature on low-income fathers has relied on retrospective accounts of paternal involvement and has reflected the perspectives of either men or women. Longitudinal interviews I conducted with new mothers and fathers in this study make it possible to include information from both parents, to examine fathers’ early involvement prospectively, and to follow this involvement during a period when many fathers end their romantic relationships with their child’s mother.

In contrast to studies that indicate that either men’s motivation or economic constraints would drive their involvement, findings from this research show that disadvantaged fathers take different paths to becoming paternal caregivers in the early years after their child’s birth. Parents’ accounts also suggest that policies and programs that overlook these fathers may not only miss the opportunity to support relationships that benefit at-risk children but may also unintentionally undermine men’s involvement. The article concludes by discussing options for designing fatherhood interventions that better address the needs of paternal caregivers in poor and working-class communities.

Contexts for Paternal Involvement

Caregiving in coresidential unions. Previous research suggests that paternal involvement in two-parent families has increased in recent decades in absolute terms and in relation to mothers' involvement (Pleck 1997). Between 1965 and 1998, time diary evidence indicates that fathers in married couples nearly doubled the time they were engaged in child care as either a primary or secondary activity (Bianchi 2000). Although women continued to take on a disproportionate share of caregiving, the ratio of fathers' time with children to mothers' time increased from .30 to .45 (Bianchi 2000). One recent study using nationally representative data found that cohabiting fathers reported higher levels of involvement in physical and other caregiving activities of infants than married fathers, suggesting shared parenting was more common in these households (Bronte-Tinkew, Carrano, and Guzman 2006).

The situation of fathers who care for their young children while mothers are at work or in school has received particular empirical attention in this literature. Casper and O'Connell (1998) report that in recent decades about 15 percent of preschool children with employed mothers were cared for by fathers during mothers' working hours, with this number jumping to 20 percent during an economic recession. Paternal child care also appears to be more common in dual-income families where parents work different shifts (Averett, Gennetian, and Peters 2000; Casper and O'Connell 1998; Glass 1998). Although this literature has not specifically focused on disadvantaged households, some studies indicate that women in the low-wage labor market often have nonstandard shifts and rely on informal sources of care, such as fathers (e.g., Scott, London, and Hurst 2005).

Caregiving following union dissolution. Previous research finds that paternal involvement is highly sensitive to the status of the relationship with their child's mother (Coley and Chase-Lansdale 1999; Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991; Johnson 2001). When fathers approach their involvement with the mother and child as a "package deal," they may have difficulty maintaining a relationship with the child after their romantic relationship with the mother dissolves and they move out of the household (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991; Townsend 2002). The involvement of resident and nonresident fathers has typically been examined in different studies, making it difficult to compare these two contexts or to track individual men's involvement if they change residential statuses (Arendell 1999). However, data from several large-scale surveys show that most nonresident fathers are in contact with children under age five and see them fairly often (Argys et al. 2006). Reports from low-income men in the Early Head Start Study, for example, show that about one out of five regularly looked after their two-year-old child and more than half helped care for the child after their relationship with the mother ended (Cabrera et al. 2004).

While nonresident fathers' contact with children often declines over time (Argys et al. 2006), a significant minority of fathers appear to increase their

involvement (Coley and Chase-Lansdale 1999; Manning and Smock 1999), and some may begin to live with their children at least part-time. About 14 percent of single-parent families in the United States are now headed by fathers (Casper and Bianchi 2002). Cancian and Meyer (1998) suggest that the growth of single-father families in recent years may be due to an increase in shared custody arrangements in which children spend time in each parent's household. Although more higher-income, divorced men are granted custody, an increased proportion of single fathers have never been married (Casper and Bianchi 2002) and a significant minority live in poverty (Meyer and Garasky 1993). Research on visitation and custody arrangements in disadvantaged communities is very limited. One exception is a study by Hamer and Marchioro (2002), which suggests that fathers who become primary caregivers typically assume this role informally, with the help of their extended families.

Analytical Framework. To examine a common set of factors that may facilitate men's caregiving in different residential contexts, this analysis examines four key sources of paternal involvement identified by Lamb et al. (1987). In particular, the Lamb et al. framework highlights how men's employment, social support, skills, and motivation influence their involvement by providing important opportunities and constraints for caregiving. Pleck's (1997) review of research on these four sources of involvement shows that institutions such as the workplace may present important opportunities or barriers for men to spend time with their children. The support men receive for their parenting, particularly from the mothers of their children, may also enable or constrain their involvement both in coresidential unions and following separation (see also Arendell 1999; Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991; Marsiglio and Cohan 2000). Finally, paternal involvement may depend on the skills men have to care for children and their desire to do this. Socialization experiences, such as babysitting, may bolster men's skills and confidence as caregivers, while holding more positive beliefs about the appropriateness and ability of fathers to care for children may increase their motivation.

Although this conceptual framework was initially developed to integrate existing research on fathering, in later work, Pleck (1997) suggests other theoretical avenues to explore in regard to how multiple factors may work together to facilitate men's involvement. The approach he proposes would complement previous studies of why men share parenting responsibilities in higher income families and, in particular, those that explore the relative importance of ideological and structural factors underlying this decision (e.g., Arendell 1995; Coltrane 1996, 2000; Deutsch 1999; Gerson 1993). As Pleck notes, some studies have illustrated how issues related to men's employment, relationships, socialization, and beliefs may converge to facilitate their involvement (e.g., Gerson 1993), indicating these factors act in a cumulative way. It is also possible that these factors influence paternal involvement within a particular order. In particular, skill-based, social, and institutional constraints may not limit men's involvement unless they are already motivated to be involved with their children. While previous research has

suggested that men's involvement in the care of children may be initially motivated by a desire to share these responsibilities with women, other studies have found that fathers' motivation is largely shaped by new employment opportunities or constraints (see Coltrane 2000 for a review). Some evidence also suggests that lower-income fathers may be even more likely than higher-income fathers to care for children in response to blocked employment opportunities (e.g., Deutsch 1999; Gerson 1993), indicating that the sequence in which these factors influence involvement varies by context. Qualitative data are particularly appropriate for investigating how multiple factors may work together to enable disadvantaged men to care for children in different situations and for identifying ways in which policies and programs can better support this involvement (Pleck, Lamb, and Levine 1986).

Data and Methods

Data. This analysis draws on two waves of in-depth interviews I conducted with mothers and fathers living in Oakland, California, during 1998 to 2002 when their focal child was between the age of one and four. The sixty-two participants in this study were randomly selected from a larger sample of married and unmarried parents who participated in one site of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a twenty-city U.S. birth cohort study (see Reichman et al. 2001). To select participants for the qualitative study, the full sample in this site was stratified by the three largest race/ethnic groups (i.e., non-Hispanic black, Hispanic of Mexican descent, and non-Hispanic white) and a (10 percent) subsample of parents was selected within these strata. Fathers were not eligible to participate in the Fragile Families Study if the mother of their child did not participate in the baseline survey. Therefore, about three-fourths of families selected for the qualitative study were mother-father cases, while one-fourth were mother-only cases. About 86 percent of mothers and 88 percent of fathers selected for the qualitative subsample agreed to participate in the first interview. As in the survey, mothers in this study were more likely to participate in the follow-up interview than fathers (85 vs. 70 percent). In the study, I used semi-structured interviews following a "tree and branch" design (Rubin and Rubin 1995). This type of interview focuses on the same set of topics across interviews but is conducted as a "guided conversation" to facilitate rapport, to elicit "information-rich" responses (Weiss 1994), and to allow new information to emerge during the interview. Most interviews took place in parents' homes and lasted about 90 minutes at each of the two interviews (180 minutes total). I interviewed mothers and fathers separately.³

When this study began, the mean age for mothers was twenty-six and for fathers twenty-nine. Couples were disproportionately African American (44 percent) or Latino (32 percent), with a smaller number of mixed race/ethnic (18 percent) and white (7 percent) couples. About 42 percent of mothers and 35 percent of fathers did not have a high school degree, 39 percent of mothers and 35 percent of

fathers had a high school degree only, and the remaining parents reported some training or education beyond high school.⁴ Parents also had low incomes, with about half reporting household incomes below the official U.S. poverty line. About 26 percent of couples were married at the time of their child's birth, 32 percent were cohabiting, 32 percent had a romantic relationship but were living apart, and 10 percent were no longer involved. By the end of the study, about three out of five of these relationships had ended.

Analytical approach. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for data analysis. I used ATLAS.ti to facilitate the three basic steps of qualitative data analysis: coding the data, writing analytical memos, and creating visual displays (e.g., Miles and Huberman 1994; Weiss 1994). The analysis began with open, line-by-line coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998) and proceeded to more focused, analytic coding (Charmaz 2001). Codes for the analysis were developed inductively and by using sensitizing concepts from the Lamb et al. (1987) framework. Techniques such as my prolonged engagement in the field, triangulation of data from both parents at two times, and negative case analysis were used to promote the trustworthiness of the research (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

To understand factors that encouraged caregiving in different contexts, the analysis begins by examining the situations of fathers who acted as caregivers while they were involved in a coresidential relationship with the mother (about two out of five families in the sample). In this study, fathers were considered to be highly involved if they took on at least 30 percent of activities involving the direct care of their focal child and shared a majority of other parenting tasks for a sustained period during the first four years.⁵ This group includes fathers who were in relationships with the mother throughout the study and those who ended their relationships by year four. It then turns to the situations of fathers who acted as caregivers outside the context of a romantic relationship with the mother (about one out of five families). Since I examine the involvement of fathers over a period of time when many couples separated, these two groups need not be mutually exclusive. However, only fathers who maintained a romantic relationship with the mother had a high level of involvement throughout the study, and therefore, these two groups did not overlap.

Caregiving in Coresidential Unions

Employment

Parents' accounts suggest that fathers who were in a coresidential relationship with their child's mother tended to assume a significant share of caregiving duties when they were unemployed, underemployed, or working different shifts than the mother. Marie explained, "[He] watches them while I go to school and go to work." Tony, Marie's husband, put a positive spin on caring for their children while he was unemployed:

I'm the one taking care of both of them . . . it's something that a lot of men don't do, or don't have the opportunity to do. . . . Instead of being the nine to five father, and coming

home and having a couple of minutes or an hour or two with them, [I] take the whole day with them.

Over the course of the study, many of these fathers worked part-time or alternated between periods in which they were in and out of the workforce. The first time I interviewed Hope, a Latina mother of two, she said her partner took a 50-50 share in “changing their son’s diapers, changing his clothes, making his bottles” in the year after his birth while they were both unemployed. Three years later, Joaquin, her partner, explained that they continued to trade off caregiving responsibilities for their four-year-old son after she had gone back to work full-time as a housekeeper and he worked part-time at his brother’s automotive shop.

I’m the one with the teeth brushed and stuff like that. [Getting him] dressed and the bath, we’ll do it together. Take turns. If she’s too tired, I’ll do it. If I’m tired, she’ll do it. So we work with it together.

Other fathers who were more successful at finding full-time employment were able to care for their child when they worked different shifts than the mother. As one mother commented, “Her father watches her in the day, and he goes to work at night, so we change shifts.” Her partner explained, “We just agreed to change our schedules of work. For one, you don’t have to pay day care, and second, you don’t have to worry about it.” In comparison to fathers in coresidential unions who were less involved in the care of their children, these men had similar employment opportunities but had more flexible schedules.

Motivation, skills, and support

An important question in literature on shared parenting has been whether fathers’ motivation to care for children precedes or develops in response to their employment constraints (Coltrane 2000). Interviews with parents in this study suggest that fathers became caregivers in two different ways while they were involved in a relationship with mothers. In each situation, the order in which fathers’ employment, motivation, skills, and social support influenced their decision to become caregivers differed.

Choosing caregiving. In one situation, for example, parents’ accounts suggest that more highly motivated and skilled fathers actively chose to share parenting responsibilities with mothers. Fathers like James who chose to be caregivers were extremely enthusiastic about having a child, often responding more positively to the news of the pregnancy than their partners: “It was cool when we found out. I was juiced. I wanted to tell everybody.” Three years later, James expressed a similar level of excitement about having a child, “[He’s] my ace coom boom. My young pound puppy. My little homey. My first born. He always gonna be the star.” In addition to their strong interest in becoming parents, the experience of caring for younger siblings, cousins, and nephews, or of acting as a father figure to other children, had given these men confidence in

their parenting skills and a realistic idea of what to expect when their child was born. As James observed, "I had to babysit my little brother and sister all the way up, so I knew how to raise a kid. . . . I knew basically how to do it and what to do. . . . I wasn't looking at it like fun and games, but I look[ed] at it like a challenge."

Mothers coupled with fathers who chose a caregiving role clearly recognized their special qualities, often attributing their decision to begin a family with the father to a positive assessment of his motivation and ability. Renee, James's partner, said she was willing to take their relationship more seriously after observing how he interacted with her child from a previous relationship:

When I first experienced him being around my oldest one, I was like, "You sure you don't got no kids?" Because he always used to come over [and ask,] "Can I take the baby to the park?" "Did I have enough money to get the milk?" "Is the bottle warm?" . . . I thought—that's great. That's really what got me interested in him.

In studies of more advantaged families, parents highlighted their beliefs about parenting, gender, and intimate relationships when explaining why they share parenting responsibilities (Coltrane 1996; Deutsch 1999; Gerson 1993). For example, couples in Coltrane's (1996, 63) study cited child-centered ideals, which prioritized children's well-being; and equity ideals, which emphasized the fairness of dividing domestic tasks between men and women. In addition to developing an egalitarian orientation, Kathleen Gerson (1993) also found that involved fathers stressed ideas about commitment to the mother and child over autonomy.

Parents in this study referred to similar ideals, but they did so in a way that addressed their heightened awareness of the fragility of relationships between low-income parents, the difficulties of raising a child alone, and the negative consequences of paternal absence for children. James explains why he thought it is better for children to have two involved parents:

I respect single parents to the fullest because it's hard. It's real hard. Especially when the kids is young. But having the momma and father involved is more balanced. Because when Renee's tired, that's when I gotta pick up the slack. When I'm down, that's when she gotta pick up the slack. So it ain't always just so much pressure weighing down on one person.

Fathers like James who actively chose a caregiving role had an understanding with the mother before having the child that they would try to stay together—a promise that was kept by all of these couples during the four years of the study. Because these men were struggling economically, however, both parents realized that it would be difficult for fathers to keep the child for extended lengths of time if they separated and fathers could not afford their own place. Fathers' accounts suggest that they made choices to remain in the relationship at least partly out of a motivation to continue this parenting role. James contrasted his choices with those of his own father and his peers who were unable to "hold it down" by maintaining a good relationship with the mother or avoiding activities that could lead to their incarceration or injury.

Everybody telling me, "Man, you ain't ready for this." . . . So I say, "Okay, I show you all." Now seven years later, I'm still with the same woman, still got the same family, still holding it down. . . . I ain't no super dad or nothing, but I do the best I can. . . . Because my dad died when I was young. . . . He got shot up. . . . [My stepson's] pappy don't even try. . . . Just the mistakes that other people make, that you already know you can't make.

As this example suggests, fathers who had sufficient motivation, skills, and support from mothers to care for children also made decisions about how to earn a living with their children's needs in mind. For example, James said he stopped selling drugs out of concerns that he would be absent from his son's life if he were incarcerated. However, without a high school degree, this meant he had to "hustle to find work" in the year after his son's birth while he looked for something better: "Our jobs are temporary. . . . We put in a lot of applications, and sometimes they don't call me back. I get a little bit mad about that. One of these days, somebody's probably gonna call." While these jobs were barely enough to cover their expenses, James and Renee were concerned that their combined income would make them ineligible for cash assistance and subsidized housing. Therefore, they decided it would be better for Renee to report James was not living with her and their children rather than risk losing these benefits.

Three years later, neither partner's employment situation had improved considerably, and James had accrued child support arrears to the state for the time his family received assistance.⁶ As Renee's five-year limit on welfare benefits was nearly reached, James had begun to have seizures related to anxiety over their financial situation. This feeling—which he described as a "lightning storm in your head"—had also begun to affect their relationship.

If we don't have work then I got to find other things to do. And it be a whole lot of pressure on me. . . . And sometimes I may just have to get away, and just get out by myself. And then she be thinking it be something she did, and I'm just like, "No, it ain't you, just let me get out for a minute. Then I come back. I gotta clear my head."

Although James ultimately believed both partners needed full-time work at a livable wage to alleviate this situation, he thought that having a parenting support group would also help during this stressful period: "Everybody need a support group. . . . People that just think the world is gonna crumble down on them. Have somebody that they can talk to."

Men with better employment options could prioritize their child's needs by working different hours than the mother, but this decision could also make other aspects of their lives more difficult. Tyrell, a father in a dual-income couple, said that he and his partner decided to work different shifts not only because of the cost of child care but also because he believed "the most important thing I can do is to spend time with her." After maintaining this schedule for four years, Tyrell's fifty-five-hour workweek had begun to wear on him.

In the morning I watch her, and in the afternoon, her momma watches her. Cause I have to be at work at 2 (p.m.), and she had to be at work at 4 in the morning. . . . Depending

on what day of the week it is—Mondays I'm all right. Tuesdays, Wednesday, it's [tiring] because I work twelve-hour days.

His partner described how this schedule it was also beginning to take a toll on their relationship: "The only time we have is weekends. And we're so tired by that time, we just stay home and go to sleep."

Responding to employment constraints. In contrast to fathers who actively chose to share parenting responsibilities with mothers, other fathers in coresidential unions became caregivers in response to the constraints they faced in the labor market, when they had difficulty finding full-time work. Becky described the situation in which her partner cared for their new baby and her children from a previous relationship while she worked full-time as a cashier:

He do little side jobs [but] it's not like a payroll job, like everyday. He watches my kids every day . . . 'cause I'm having financial problems, too. I mean, I work, but when you have kids, it just goes like [snap] that, and then you have bills to pay. It's hard. . . . The hardest part, is finding babysitters.

Men in this situation did not initially have a strong desire to become caregivers or a special ability to care for children, although some of these skills were developed later. In fact, this role could initially feel overwhelming to them, especially when there was more than one child to look after. Becky's partner, Christopher, explained, "I just didn't know I would be having so many responsibilities with her. I knew from mine, but I wasn't expecting, I don't know."

Studies of low-income African American families have described kin-based networks in which family members exchange goods and services to meet immediate family needs. This research often suggests that mothers and children gain access to resources, such as child care, by incorporating fathers into these exchanges (Edin and Lein 1997; Roy and Burton 2007). Similarly, in this study, paternal involvement was considered beneficial by mothers who had difficulty affording safe, high-quality child care and made unemployed fathers feel like they were contributing to the household. Parents' accounts suggest that fathers were motivated to provide child care as part of an exchange of resources with the mother.

For example, Kimberly said she came to an agreement with her partner to increase his time in domestic work when he was having trouble finding a job, saying, "I feel you should help me with him whenever you need to. If you're working, yeah, that's understandable, you're gonna be tired at night. But if you're not working, you can't help?" Compared to men in coresidential unions who were less involved, these men seemed to be more willing to put conventional expectations about gendered parenting roles aside. Gary, Kimberly's partner, explained, "I would like to be the main provider for my son, but if my wife made more money than me, I mean, I'm not gonna argue about it, either." At the same time, both parents viewed this as a temporary arrangement until fathers could find better employment.

In fact, these caretaking arrangements were relatively short-lived, but not because men reentered the workforce. For a variety of reasons, including their precarious employment situations, these fathers often separated from their partners during the study. After fathers moved out of the household, the trust that was necessary for this kind of an informal exchange with the mother tended to break down. Their economic and housing instability also made it difficult for them to continue caring for their child or to offer much financial support. Christopher commented, "I don't have no money. I don't have no stable home for them. I don't have a stable home for myself." In this situation, fathers experienced reductions in their daily interactions with their children. As John said, "I miss being with my son all night, taking care of him when he wake up crying. I want him to open his eyes and see me. 'Okay, that's that man again.'" These fathers seemed to need more help stabilizing their economic situations, maintaining their motivation, and coparenting with the mother after their romantic relationships ended.

Caregiving Following Union Dissolution

While some fathers found it difficult to remain highly involved as caregivers following separation, another group of men moved into a caregiving role only after their relationship with the mother dissolved. Although few families in the study had established formal visitation or custody agreements, these fathers had informal agreements with the mothers that resembled shared or sole physical custody.

Employment. Fathers who became caregivers after their relationship with the mother ended viewed their employment situations as both an opportunity for, and a constraint on, their involvement. Compared to fathers who were not as highly involved following separation, these men more often held steady, full-time jobs. They also had housing situations that were more conducive to scheduling visits with children and keeping them for extended periods. Although maintaining stable work and housing initially helped them increase their involvement, fathers felt they could not be working so many hours that they were unavailable to do things like pick their children up from day care, make dinner for them, or take them on weekend outings. Several fathers changed work hours or jobs to spend evenings and weekends with their child. For example, working two full-time jobs had allowed Jim to make a deposit on his own apartment, after a period in which he was sleeping on couches at his mother's, sister's, and ex-partner's apartments. However, he later quit one of these jobs so that he could start spending time with his daughter in the evenings.

I was working two full-time security jobs. I worked sixteen-hour days. So it was hectic. That was just so I could get on my feet and get up enough money to get the apartment and get settled. . . . The most important part is to spend time with the kids, and that was the whole idea of changing jobs. . . . I'm home at 6, my daughter can be here. . . . Her

dinner's ready. We can do those things, bedtime, 9:00 whatever, then I get up and drop [her] off [at day care].

Motivation, skills, and support. Because most studies have focused on how nonresident fathers reduce contact with their children over time, we know very little about what leads men to reverse this course. Parents' accounts suggest that these fathers did not become caregivers primarily in response to their employment situations, but they were motivated to respond when mothers experienced new economic or personal constraints. Fathers then changed aspects of their employment, developed parenting skills, and sought out new sources of social support to facilitate their involvement.

Responding to family needs. These fathers typically became more involved following a change in the mother's circumstances, such as having another child, losing a job or apartment, experiencing problems with substance use, or entering a drug rehabilitation program, that made it more difficult for her to act as the child's sole caretaker. For example, at the first interview, Marcos explained that working extra hours made sense in a situation where the mother was the primary caretaker: "To be a good father's to be working. You have to take care of babies." Three years later, Marcos viewed his role as a father very differently after his ex-wife lost her job and her apartment, making it more difficult for her to care for their children full-time: "I changed from the job I had because of the hours. I want to spend more time with my babies." Paula, his children's mother, describes this shift in his involvement: "He's playing the role of the Mommy and the Daddy. He dresses them, you know, he does everything for them."

Fathers who redefined their obligation this way could be motivated to change their behavior quickly. For example, Michelle, a mother of one, was initially dissatisfied with the involvement of her son's father: "I tell him he needs to spend more time with his child, and do more as a father should." At the second interview, Mali, her child's father, had assumed informal custody of their son when Michelle entered a drug rehabilitation program:

There was no like big change as far as court and all that. Just a mutual agreement that this would be best. As parents, we decided that together . . . I've been feeling good about myself lately, knowing that I've been able to be there for my children. . . . I'm being able to play the position that I've been needing to . . . and I hope [Michelle] does better.

Fathers' motivation to help their families in a time of need seems to be consistent with ideas about family adaptation and familism in African American and Latino communities (Coltrane, Parke, and Adams 2004; Jarrett and Burton 1999) and with the "best interest of the child" doctrine used to determine child custody.

Men who were motivated to rise to this challenge not only changed some aspects of their employment to make more time for their children, but they also developed new skills as parents. Although these fathers were typically not new to parenthood, this was the first time they had assumed major caretaking responsibility for the focal child. Fathers described the process of learning how to respond

to the age-specific care and developmental needs of their child as a “hands-on” experience and “learning on the job.” Mali explains,

I'm learning as I go. . . . I'm not trying to instill any big, big lessons in him, he's only a baby right now. . . . I know as [he] gets older, the teaching process . . . will go into effect. But right now I think he's learning to prepare himself for school in the morning, what time to cut out the light to go to bed, and things of that nature.

All of these fathers had remained in contact with their children, but in some cases, this contact had been negotiated through their female relatives. The coparenting styles of most of these couples following their separation could perhaps be better described as conflicted or uncoordinated, rather than cooperative (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991). When fathers moved into a caregiving role, they sought out new sources of social support for their parenting, particularly their new partners and female family members. For example, living with a partner or other family member was often instrumental in allowing them to keep their child for extended periods of time. Men also relied on female relatives for child care and for practical advice. Mali explained, “I could call my mother. I'd call sisters and aunts. I have a lot of people who can counsel me and help me in situations when I'm not sure what's going on. Being a rash, or a bump on the head, or his behavior.”

While relying heavily on their family support networks, none of these fathers was able to access public sources of support. However, men's failure to access benefits did not seem to stem from a lack of interest. For example, Jim commented,

I hear about these programs, but my problem is lack of information or where do I find out? Tell me, and I'll sign up today. . . . I wish they would publish or somehow get the word out there to your general working class some kind of notification to people who just go to work every day and come home or read a paper, because a lot of it's not in there.

Because they were not legally recognized as their child's caregivers, these men were still considered noncustodial parents in the eyes of the state and, therefore, were excluded from most major public benefit programs. Some fathers like Jim who sought help were unsuccessful at receiving assistance, while others who assumed they would be ineligible did not apply.

Fathers generally wanted to establish informal parenting agreements with the mother for reasons such as distrust of the legal system and a desire to keep these arrangements flexible. However, they often had child support orders, which were established when the mother applied for assistance. When fathers did not know how to modify their child support orders or could not afford legal or court fees to pursue modification, their orders were not adjusted to reflect the child's current living arrangements.⁷ As such, men's ambiguous legal status not only made it more difficult to access benefits but also could easily put them in arrears for child support. In these circumstances, Jim thought it would be helpful to form a support group with other men who had difficulty navigating complicated legal procedures around custody and child support.

There are so many uneducated fathers on everything we talked about, and so many that are going through an experience in the same type of situation...A lot of times, if you show a person in your situation, then maybe yours don't look so bad....[and] maybe we'd be more of a voice and somebody would take notice.

Discussion

In contrast to research that suggests that either fathers' motivation or economic constraints would drive their decisions to become caregivers, this study provides new evidence that disadvantaged fathers take different paths to involvement in the early years after their child's birth (Deutsch 1999). In particular, interviews with new parents indicate that while some motivated and skilled men actively chose to become caregivers with the support of their partners, others developed motivations, skills, and parenting supports in response to situations in which they were out of work or the mother was experiencing new challenges. While previous research has highlighted the growing rift between fathers who are highly involved with their children and those who have disengaged from their lives (Furstenberg 1988; Gerson 1993), longitudinal interviews in this study further show that it is important to consider how the same father can be "engaged" or "disengaged" in different contexts (see also Coley and Chase-Lansdale 1999).

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birth*

By focusing on the situations of disadvantaged fathers who act as caregivers of young children, this study also points to some important similarities and differences with the literature on shared parenting in middle-class families in the United States. Because research on higher-income couples has often assumed that families can cover their basic expenses (Dodson and Bravo 2005), for example, men's employment has been approached primarily as an impediment to caregiving. In this study, fathers in coresidential unions who worked fewer hours or different shifts than the mother did have more time to care for children, but underemployment and nonstandard schedules could also take a large toll on them and their romantic relationships, threatening paternal involvement over the long term. Among those men who had separated from their child's mother, stable

employment was actually viewed as a prerequisite for transitioning into a caregiving role, even though these men then sometimes needed to change jobs or work schedules that interfered with their parenting duties. Overall, a more complex story about the meaning of work emerges among less advantaged fathers, indicating that employment can simultaneously provide an opportunity for and a constraint on men's involvement.

This study also shows that disadvantaged fathers' motivations for involvement took on specific meanings in situations where families experienced instability, but these motivations also varied by the situations in which fathers were caring for children. Although the motivations of some disadvantaged fathers in coresidential unions who actively chose to be caregivers echoed those of higher-income men (Coltrane 1996; Gerson 1993), these fathers talked about things like commitment, equity, and children's needs in ways that recognized the fragility of couples' relationships, the difficulty of sharing responsibilities when parents lived apart and the consequences of paternal absence for children. Other fathers in coresidential unions were motivated to care for children more as a way of contributing to the household when they were out of work. Some research suggests men who are economically dependent on their partners would be more reluctant to share domestic work with their partners (Brines 1994). The different response we see among some fathers in this study may be an adaptation to recent changes in U.S. welfare policy that have pushed more mothers into the low-wage labor market during a time when their partners have experienced diminished employment opportunities (Mincy 2006).

Even less has been known about why men increase their involvement as caregivers after their relationship with the mother ends. In this study, nonresident fathers' desire to respond to their children's needs when mothers faced new challenges appeared to be a powerful motivation to increase their involvement. The motivations of fathers who become more involved over time seem to be consistent with both the "best interests of the child" doctrine and with ideas about family adaptation and familism in African American and Latino communities (Jarrett and Burton 1999). Taken together, parents' accounts suggest that disadvantaged men can mobilize a diverse set of motivations for involvement, which give them different options for defining what it means to be a "good father" outside of the breadwinning role (Daly 1995; Gerson 1993; Marsiglio and Cohan 2000; Waller 2002).

Consistent with research on more advantaged families, this study also shows it was less common for highly skilled men to choose a caregiving role than for fathers to develop competence as parents "on the job" (Coltrane 1996). Similarly, when parents lived in coresidential unions, mothers' support for their partner's involvement was necessary to initiate and maintain a large caregiving role. However, parents' accounts suggest that fathers who became caregivers following union dissolution more often turned to new partners and female family members, rather than their child's mother, for support as parents. Some previous studies have shown that men tend to have weaker social support networks for parenting than women (Pleck 1997). At the same time, the reliance of some fathers in this study on female kin and new partners is consistent with other research on lower-income black fathers in the United States (Hamer 2001; Roy and Burton 2007)

and the United Kingdom (Reynolds 2009 [this volume]), suggesting that these types of social support may be particularly important for men in disadvantaged communities.

Developing Fatherhood Programs for Caregivers. In the United States, the federal government has sponsored three multisite demonstrations of fatherhood programs operating through community-based organizations.⁸ Within a context of stricter child support enforcement, these programs have mainly focused on helping noncustodial fathers find work so that they can better comply with their support orders.⁹ Other services have included helping fathers manage their child support orders; providing intensive case management and peer support; and, in some programs, offering support for parenting skills, cooperative parenting, and child access and visitation. Despite recent interest encouraging fathers' participation in their children's early lives, no federal-level demonstrations that I am aware of are designed to support men who play pivotal roles as caregivers in their families.¹⁰

Policies and programs that overlook paternal caregivers may not only miss the opportunity to support relationships that benefit at-risk children but may also unintentionally undermine men's involvement.

My conversations with parents show not only that some disadvantaged fathers are instrumental in the care of young children but also that these men are in real need of supportive services. Their accounts further suggest that policies and programs that overlook paternal caregivers may not only miss the opportunity to support relationships that benefit at-risk children but may also unintentionally undermine men's involvement. Although developing fatherhood programs for paternal caregivers would represent a new policy emphasis, this would advance the Responsible Fatherhood Initiative's goal of promoting children's well-being through more effective fathering and family stability. It would also help promote an ethic of care by recognizing daily parenting activities as critical contributions to society that deserve as much support through social policy as parents' economic activities (e.g. Gordon, Benner, and Noddings 1996; Sevenhuijsen 2003; Tronto 2001). Below, I discuss how we could draw on lessons from previous fatherhood demonstrations in the United States to design interventions aimed at supporting men's involvement as caregivers.

Recruitment. One lesson from previous fatherhood demonstrations is that programs with strict eligibility criteria can have difficulty recruiting participants. Although fathers in these programs often voiced a strong interest in receiving help with employment, distrust of organizations affiliated with child support enforcement may have dampened their interest in participating (Martinson, Trutko, and Strong 2000). Results from the current study suggest that fatherhood programs that target paternal caregivers might not experience the same difficulty generating interest, since these men have strong motivations to be involved with their children. Fathers also expressed a desire to improve their employment situations, to receive more support for their parenting, to be better informed about their legal custody and child support situations, and to learn about other supports. Despite having incentives to join in fatherhood programs, some fathers may still be reluctant to participate if the programs focus on child support compliance rather than legal assistance.

Child support and custody. Evaluations of fatherhood programs have also found that it is easier to increase men's participation in the child support system than to increase their child support payments. Previous research shows many fathers have low skills, lack stable employment, and may not have sufficient income to pay child support without impoverishing themselves or their families (Garfinkel, McLanahan, and Hanson 1998; Mincy 2006). Fathers rarely have the option of hiring a lawyer to assist them with child support and custody problems and may be distrustful of legal assistance provided through the courts (Pearson and Thoennes 2000). Given the complexities of legal child support and the custody system in the United States, some men in this study were not aware that they could suspend or modify these orders when their child lived with them, and others were unable to do this without legal assistance. Without this help, men were at risk for accruing large arrearages and being subject to enforcement actions, including incarceration. In addition to providing legal assistance to men around child support and custody, programs could work with states to reduce the arrears of men who are caring for their children (Pearson et al. 2003).

Employment. Evaluations of fatherhood and welfare-to-work demonstrations that include fathers have shown relatively modest increases in men's earnings and employment. These outcomes may be partially explained by the fact that programs have focused on providing job search and readiness services to help unemployed fathers find work quickly (Martinson, Trutko, and Strong 2000). They have generally not provided educational opportunities, vocational training, or other training programs that would help men gain skills and acquire better-paid jobs with potential for growth (Pearson and Thoennes 2000).

In this study, fathers said they needed to work full-time to meet their family's needs, but they did not want to work multiple jobs or extra hours that prevented them from caring for their children. These fathers would benefit from training programs that helped them secure higher-paid employment, perhaps through paid apprenticeships and on-the-job training opportunities that allow them to cover their basic expenses while they participate (Pearson and Thoennes 2000). Many fathers also wanted more support combining caregiving and full-time

employment. Although the United States expanded funding for child care as part of welfare reforms, most families who are eligible for support under this program are not receiving assistance (Dodson and Bravo 2005). The United States also lags behind many other countries on policies that help parents balance work and family, such as paid maternity and paternity leave, paid annual leave, paid leave to care for sick children, and maximum work week regulations, indicating a major need for improvement in this area (Heymann et al. 2006).

Peer support. Previous evaluations have also shown that peer support sessions were a popular component of fatherhood demonstrations. Participants reported that sharing experiences with their peers helped them to feel less isolated and to make positive changes in their lives (Martinson et al. 2007; Pearson and Thoennes 2000). Some programs were also successful at combining peer support with workshops on parenting, child development, and coparenting. The accounts of fathers in this study also suggest peer support could help them manage the stress associated with routine caregiving, learn from other men in their situation, and develop new parenting skills. Because social support from their child's mother, a new partner, or female family member was often critical for men to move into and maintain a caregiving role, help negotiating different kinds of coparenting arrangements would also be beneficial.

Other supports. Finally, evaluations have also shown that fathers need help connecting to services in their communities. Because fathers in this study were considered noncustodial parents in the eyes of the state, however, they did not qualify for cash assistance through Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) or for wage supplements through the more generous Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Noncustodial fathers cannot receive health coverage through Medicaid unless they are disabled. Although eligibility for Food Stamps is not based on the presence of a child in the home, benefits for "childless adults" are time-limited (Sorensen and Zibman 2001). When fathers coreside with the mother and child, means-tested benefits calculated on the basis of the household's income also make it more difficult for two-parent families to qualify for these benefits. If mothers report that they do not live with the father to maintain eligibility for assistance, fathers are likely to incur child support arrears. The kind of intensive case management offered by fatherhood programs could help men connect with available services, but as these examples suggest, larger policy changes are also needed for paternal caregivers in diverse contexts to access critical sources of support.

Notes

1. For an insightful study of primary, caregiving fathers in Canada, see also Doucet (2006).
2. There are important empirical reasons why this issue has not received more attention. For example, fathers at lower socioeconomic levels have been underrepresented in many national household surveys until recently (Cabrera et al. 2002; Garfinkel, McLanahan, and Hanson 1998), while considerable data

have been collected on higher-income, dual-income couples. Couples at lower educational levels also have a higher risk of union dissolution, and measures of nonresidential fathers' involvement with children have been more limited.

3. Of the 109 interviews in this project, a bilingual male research assistant also conducted interviews with four fathers in Spanish.

4. Because this analysis focuses on disadvantaged fathers, it excludes a few cases where fathers had a college degree. Compared to the national Fragile Families sample, the Oakland survey and qualitative samples have a larger representation of Latino parents and are of slightly lower socioeconomic status.

5. This classification was based on an inductive analysis of parents' reports of paternal caregiving between birth and one year and between one year and four years. These reports suggested that fathers could be divided into two groups: those who performed 30 to 50 percent of direct care and shared the majority of parenting tasks and those who performed 0 to 20 percent of direct care and shared fewer parenting activities. In three cases, fathers who acted as sole caregivers after their relationships with the mother had dissolved were placed in the former group.

6. In the United States, Temporary Assistance to Needy Family (TANF) recipients must cooperate in identifying the noncustodial parent and pursuing a support order. Custodial parents must also assign their rights to all child, spousal, or medical support to the state up to the amount of aid received. The noncustodial parent's monthly child support payment then goes toward reimbursing the government for TANF payments.

7. In California, the amount of child support fathers owed was based on the income of both parents and the percentage of time that each parent had primary physical responsibility for the child. This state was unusual in providing some educational materials and limited legal assistance for both parents through the court system.

8. These include the Parents' Fair Share Program, Responsible Fatherhood Demonstration Projects, and Partners for Fragile Families Demonstration Projects.

9. Important legislation was also passed in the 1980s and 1990s to strengthen child support enforcement. Among other things, these changes led to the adoption of expedited procedures for the establishment of legal paternity and support orders, the development of guidelines for setting support levels, the establishment of automatic wage withholding, the creation of a Federal Case Registry and National Directory of New Hires to track noncustodial parents across state lines, and increased criminal penalties for child support noncompliance (Waller 2002).

10. See <http://fatherhood.hhs.gov> for U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' full list of "responsible fatherhood" initiatives.

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