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Longitudinal Influences on Men's Lives: Research from the Transition to Fatherhood Project and Beyond

In this paper we discuss findings from the Transition to Fatherhood Project, as well as other research, to consider how changes in fatherhood may affect men. We first outline how the context of fathering has changed over the past half a century; we focus particularly on non-marital fatherhood, non-custodial fatherhood and multiple-partner fertility. Then, in the second part of the paper, we summarize what the literature can tell us about the employment and health consequences of fatherhood for men in different contexts and the intrinsic benefits from direct involvement with children. We close with a call for more research on the motivations for fatherhood, how fatherhood affects men differently and on how men think about fatherhood. In addition, we call for public policy based on the idea that children need time as well as money from their fathers.

Keywords: fatherhood, non-custodial fatherhood, multiple partner fertility, men's health

The changes in family behavior—high divorce rates, non-marital cohabitation and fertility—that began in the last third of the twentieth century have been the subject of much research. Until fairly recently, most research on family behavior focused on women and children. In the mid-1990s, however, the research and policy communities began a sustained effort to increase our knowledge about fathers. The early efforts included a series of meetings and conferences documenting what was known about fathers and making recommendations for future research. There was also a focus on improving measures such as data on male fertility and conceptualizing new measures of father involvement. These activities culminated in the Conference on Fathering and Male Fertility: Improving Data and Research, which was held on March 13-14, 1997 (Emig & Greene, 1998). This conference produced specific recommendations for changes in how information on fathers and male fertility should be collected. The activities resulted in new data collection efforts that explicitly included fathers.

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As more data about fathers became available, researchers began to analyze those data to learn more about the timing and circumstances of becoming a father, the consequences of different types of fathering for children, and outcomes for men. One such research effort was the Transition to Fatherhood Program Project Grant (P01) funded by the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). From 2005 to 2012 a diverse group of researchers including demographers, economists, family scholars, public policy scholars, psychologists, and sociologists worked together to study various aspects of the transition to fatherhood in the United States.

We draw on findings from this project, as well as from other recent research to discuss the consequences for men of becoming a father. Because these consequences are likely to differ for men who enter into and experience fatherhood under different circumstances, we first discuss how the context of fathering has changed over the past half a century. We specifically focus on the marital context of fathering, the residential status of fathering, and fathering across households due to multiple partner fertility. In the following section we briefly review trends in these three aspects of fatherhood concluding with a discussion about how the experience of fatherhood is diverging by socioeconomic status for men. Then, in the second part of the paper, we summarize what the literature can tell us about the employment and health consequences of fatherhood for men in different contexts and the intrinsic benefits from direct involvement with children. We also draw out some of the implications of these trends for researchers who are interested in fatherhood in America. Our intention is not to exhaustively review the literature, but rather to point towards directions that field of study must take in order to understand increasing inequality among families and to better target programs that are intended to help families and fathers.

TRENDS IN FATHERHOOD

Marital and Residential Status

One of the most notable demographic trends in fatherhood (and motherhood) is the increase in births outside of marriage. Over the past 40 years the percent of all births that are outside of marriage has almost quadrupled from 11 percent in 1970 to 41 percent in 2012. This non-marital birth ratio differs substantially by race, with 70 percent of all births to black women occurring outside of marriage, compared to 28 percent for white women (J.A. Martin et al., 2013, Martinez, Daniels & Chandra, 2012). It is also important to note that about half of these parents report living together at the time of their first non-marital birth (Martinez et al., 2012).

Couples who are unmarried at the time of a child's birth—even those who are living together—exhibit a great deal of relationship instability. Five years after a birth, only a third of unmarried couples are still in a romantic relationship, compared to over three-quarters who are in a romantic relationship at the time of the birth (McLanahan, 2011). The most obvious consequence of relationship instability among unmarried parents is to reduce the continuity of co-residence of fathers with their children. Only 36 percent of men who were unmarried to their child's mother at the time of the child's birth are still living with their child five years later (McLanahan, 2011). Although some fathers who do not live with their children are very involved in their children's lives, there is no question that, on average, non-co-resident fathers have much less contact with and involvement in their children's lives (Hofferth et al., 2002).

Of course, married couples sometimes divorce which also results in non-co-residence between fathers and children. Divorce rates, however, are declining, especially among younger

cohorts (Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014; Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007), and this is particularly true among college educated women, where only 16 percent of those married in the 1990's divorced within 10 years of marriage compared to 38 percent of those with only a high school diploma (S.P. Martin, 2006). As a consequence of these trends, an increasing percentage of non-residential fathers were unmarried when those children were born, in contrast to earlier decades when most non-resident fathers were divorced from their children's mothers (Ellwood & Jencks, 2004).

Multiple Partner Fertility

The weakening of the institution of marriage and the high prevalence of parenthood outside marriage is one of the major factors accounting for the increase in *complexity* in American families (Furstenberg, 2013). A prime example of this complexity is the phenomenon of multiple partner fertility (MPF), which refers to adults having children with more than one partner. Until the last few decades MPF occurred primarily as a result of divorce and subsequent remarriage. The rise in non-marital childbearing, however, has increased the opportunities to have children with more than one partner.

Because mothers are much more likely than fathers to live with their children after the breakup of a marriage or cohabitation, all of her other children from multiple partners are likely to live together in the same household. In contrast, MPF for a father means that his children are most likely to live in different households—he may live with some or none of them—and this leads directly to increasing complexity in a father's relationships with his children and with the mothers of those children (Manning et al., 2013). Estimates from the 2002 NSFG suggest that 8% of all men and 18% of fathers aged 25–45 had experienced multiple partner fertility (Berger, Cancian & Meyer, 2012; Cancian & Meyer, 2011; Guzzo & Furstenberg, 2007; Manlove et al., 2008; Meyer, Cancian & Cook, 2005). Among fathers who experienced multi-partner fertility, 29% had all births outside of marriage, and the remaining 71% had at least one birth in a marital relationship.

Diversity and Heterogeneity in Fatherhood

In sum, fewer and fewer men are conforming to the traditional fatherhood pathway of having all their children within an enduring first marriage. Moreover, the new pathways to fatherhood are associated with socioeconomic disadvantage. Men who become fathers outside marriage are younger and more likely to be ethnic minorities, to have mothers with lower levels of education, and to have lived in a non-traditional family type when growing up (Martinez et al., 2012; Hofferth & Goldscheider, 2010). Men are more likely to have children with multiple partners if they had their first sexual experience at a young age, if they fathered their first child at a young age, and if they were neither married to nor cohabiting with the mother of their first child at the time of the child's birth. Multi-partner fertility is also more prevalent among certain groups: African-American men and men who grew up in households that were not headed by two biological parents. In contrast, men from more advantaged backgrounds and those with higher levels of education and earnings potential are more likely to live with their children and be married to their children's mother.

The potentially negative implications of the association of socioeconomic disadvantage with non-traditional pathways to family formation for children have been extensively discussed (McLanahan, 2004). Only very recently have the potential negative implications for men of this association been brought to the foreground. Settersten and Cancel-Tirado (2010) raise the concern that a traditional pathway to fatherhood may become an option that is only open to men of higher so-

cioeconomic status. If this traditional pathway confers benefits on men, above and beyond the advantaged status that men who take it typically have, then it is possible that these non-traditional pathways may play a role in maintaining and reproducing disadvantage. In the next section, we turn to this question of consequences, for men, of these pathways to fatherhood.

IMPLICATIONS OF THESE TRENDS FOR MEN

Methodological Considerations

Any discussion of the consequences of fatherhood must be prefaced with an acknowledgement of selection and the problems it presents for drawing firm conclusions on this subject. In particular, when there are characteristics that are associated with the likelihood of becoming a specific type of father *and* with the potential consequences of fatherhood, it becomes difficult to know if a given outcome is caused by a particular pathway to fatherhood or by the factors that are associated with that pathway. To give a particular example, if we find that married fathers are generally healthier and wealthier than non-married fathers, it is not certain whether becoming a married father caused that positive outcome, or whether the outcome was simply due to the initially advantageous circumstances of men who become married fathers.

If family background factors (e.g., race/ethnicity, parent's education and economic status, and family structure and parenting experienced while growing up) were the only differentiators of pathways to fatherhood, however, we could hold these factors, which are typically observed in the data we use to study fathers, constant. There is reason to believe, however, that there are other differences among men, typically unobserved, that may affect both the pathways to fatherhood that they take and the outcomes we theorize might stem from those pathways. Examples include self-regulation, behavioral problems, mental health conditions, and preferences for spending time with children. Although there are statistical techniques that try to account for these unobserved selection factors (e.g., using longitudinal data and natural experiments), all of these approaches have weaknesses (Moffitt, 2005).

An alternative to statistical corrections is to better understand the factors that lead to selection and to try to directly capture those factors in data. One characteristic of men that is typically unobserved, but that would be important to understand better and to measure, is their motivation to become a father, since the consequences of fatherhood might depend on these *motivations* (Hofferth et al., 2013).

To briefly explore motivations we ask why might American men want to become fathers and choose to be involved with their children? To be sure, fatherhood confers a level of status on men. Even among men who do not actually decide to become fathers, when a decision is made to continue unplanned pregnancies to term, men are initially happy about their transition to fatherhood as an indicator of status (Edin & Nelson, 2013). In addition, men get pleasure from interacting with children and feel that it is important for fathers to spend time with children for the children's sake (Waller, 2010). They often feel that fatherhood is the best way to leave behind a legacy for the future (Marsiglio, 2009). Having a child can make other relationships stronger, most notably marital relationships (Morgan, Lye, & Condran, 1988) but also relationships with one's own family and in-laws. Astone and her colleagues (1999) argue that having children constitutes investment in social capital because it strengthens other family relationships, and Eggebeen and his colleagues (2010) have found this to be true. In the case of multiple partner fertility, some men have additional children in order to cement and honor new partnerships (Vikat, Thomson, & Hoem, 1999), whereas other men are motivated to have more children in order to spend time with and enjoy their children, because they do not live with their older children.

Evolutionary theory provides an explanation for how the same motivation might lead to different strategies. The primary motivation for having children in evolutionary theory is to maximize “genetic fitness” defined as the number of offspring that survive to carry the father’s genes on to future generations (Cox, 2007). This motivation may be similar to the idea mentioned above of leaving a legacy, but this legacy is the propagation of one’s genes. The theory suggests two possible strategies to achieve that goal. One strategy is to have many children, but to invest little in each. Multiple partner fertility in a non-marital context could be an example of such a strategy. The other strategy is to have few children, but invest a lot in their survival and success, and having children within marriage is an example of that type of strategy (Waynforth, 2013). Willis and Haaga (1996) develop a related theory. He suggests that when men are in short supply and women have resources to support children on their own, higher quality men will be able to attract high quality mates, and will find it most advantageous to marry the mother of their children, and to coordinate their joint investments to produce higher quality children. Lower quality men, however, may be able to free ride off of the investments of the mothers, and their optimal strategy may be to have many children with different mothers and invest very little in those children. Under the assumption that non-marital fathers invest very little in their children, we might expect these fathers to be mostly unaffected by becoming a father.

Consequences: Fatherhood and Work

With the birth of each child, *all* parents are expected to re-allocate resources—time and money—for the care and rearing of that child. Men (and women) who live with their children forego consumption for themselves, savings for the future, and time for leisure activities in order to financially provide for their child, promote his or her well-being, and ensure that the child is safe. Traditionally, however, it was fathers who were the “breadwinners” and this role is still central to fatherhood (Christiansen & Palkovitz, 2001). Non-custodial parents are also responsible for supporting their children financially. A recent review of the evidence reports that 75% of people who owe child support (of whom 80% are men) pay some and about 40% pay as much as they owe (Grall, 2013). Because of the breadwinner role, many researchers have hypothesized that fatherhood will alter labor market behavior and outcomes for both residential and non-residential fathers.

There is a large literature on the association between fatherhood and men’s wages and work effort (see Eggebeen, Knoester, & McDaniel, 2013; Killewald, 2013 for recent reviews). The hypothesis tested in this literature is the proposition that fatherhood increases men’s work efforts, wages or both (Lundberg & Rose, 2002), which is a prediction of both Becker’s (1981) theory of the division of labor in the family and identity theory (Killewald). In Becker’s theory one person in a household specializes in market work and the other specializes in non-market work, both of which are essential to maintain the household and to produce high quality children (Bishai, 2013). Identity theory also points towards the breadwinner role as a central component of fatherhood and predicts that men will intensify work efforts after fatherhood in order to perform this role.

Empirically there is a positive association between employment outcomes and fatherhood, but it varies by the characteristics of the father. Eggebeen and his colleagues (2013) argue that the body of evidence suggests that young unmarried men increase their work effort when they become fathers (e.g. Astone et al. 2010), whereas older married men (especially those whose wives do not work full time) experience a fatherhood wage premium (e.g., Killewald, 2013). They attribute this to fact that, among men who do not plan to become fathers, fatherhood constitutes a “jolt” that changes their behavior and that planned births give rise to deliberate strategies to increase productivity that are also planned. Alternatively, Correll, Benard, and Paik (2007) find evidence that the fatherhood premium is due to employers rewarding fathers more than non-fathers, and they sug-

gest that this may be due to cultural beliefs, based on the prevailing breadwinner role that fathers are more committed to the workplace.

An important theoretical advance that has not been incorporated into scholarship on work and fatherhood is Oppenheimer's (1988) idea that, in post-industrial societies men and women are no longer seeking partnerships with high levels of specialization (i.e. in market and non-market work). Oppenheimer points out that there has been: 1) an increase in the time it takes for men to reach a level of earning adequate to support a family (Duncan, Boisjoly, & Smeeding, 1996); 2) an increase in precarious employment for both men and women (Kalleberg, 2013); and 3) changes in gender role expectations for both mothers and fathers. Hence, she argues, men and women are now looking for *substitutability* rather than complementarity in partners as the best defense against insecurity. That is, men are looking for women who can shoulder some of the burden of providing for the family economically and women are looking for men who can do more of the non-market work of household and child production. With respect to identity theory one could imagine that changes in gender stratification and ideology might make other roles associated with fatherhood (e.g., caregiver, mentor) more salient now with consequent reductions in the salience of the provider role. These ideas give rise to the prediction that men may reduce their work effort in response to fatherhood in order to spend more time on child rearing tasks (Eggebeen et al., 2013), and there is some evidence that married men who become fathers in their late 20s do just that (Astone et al., 2010).

A key question for the field is whether there are gender, social class or ethnic differences in how necessary it is for men to perform the breadwinner role in order to claim, enjoy, or profit from the status of father. There is evidence, from the U.S. and South Africa, for example, that socially excluded blacks—who have endured high rates of joblessness for decades—have developed cultural forms that allow men to be involved in familial activities, through the status of father, that do not depend on employment (Madhavan & Roy, 2012). One of these is the “social father,” a man who is involved like a father with children but who is not the biological father and therefore has no obligation to provide financial support (Roy & Burton, 2007).

Yet the existence of the stereotype of the “deadbeat dad,” who tries to sire as many children as possible without supporting them, reflects the mainstream American belief that the breadwinner role is an essential aspect of fatherhood. And this norm does not just characterize a middle class view; ethnographic accounts are replete with evidence that low income mothers from different cultural backgrounds also regard breadwinning as an essential condition for giving men access to their children (Edin & Nelson, 2013). Participants in responsible fatherhood programs report that the emphasis on the breadwinner role results in feeling that they are not entitled to spend time with their children if they cannot fulfill it (Avellar et al., 2011). Another study finds that men who choose to withdraw from the labor force and become full-time parents experience stigma (Doucet, 2006).

In sum, the limited ability of some men to get and hold a job that pays well enough to at least partially support children constitutes a barrier to those men fully enjoying whatever rewards inhere in the status of father, including contact with their children. An example of a positive outcome from the increased enforcement of child support payments is the study by Peters and her colleagues (Peters et al., 2004) who find evidence that stringent public policies that increase the collection of child support subsequently increase the amount of contact that fathers have with their children. Waller (2009), however, warns that public policy to increase levels of financial support should be designed so as to avoid the unintended consequence of reducing the amount of non-financial caregiving willing men are ready to offer their children. If they do have such unintended consequences, children will suffer from a lack of father involvement, single mothers will not have relief from the solitary burden of care, and fathers will not be able to derive the benefits that come from both the status of fatherhood and involvement with children.

Consequences: Fatherhood, Health and Well-Being

In the previous sections we discussed the direct implications for fathers of their investments of money and time while they are raising their children. The life course perspective posits that certain events constitute turning points in people's lives and provide a structured opportunity to alter one's trajectory in domains of life other than the domain within which the event occurred (George, 2009). Some argue that fatherhood constitutes such a turning point with respect to men's social connectedness and behavioral health.

Fatherhood within marriage is associated with a strengthening of family ties, an increase in participation in civic organizations (Eggebeen, Dew, & Knoester, 2010) and heightened involvement in organized religion (Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, & Waite, 1995). This increase in social connectedness among fathers appears to persist over time; studies consistently find that childless people have fewer social ties in later life than those who have been parents (Albertini & Mencarini, 2014; Pollmann-Schult, 2011). Fathers appear to be healthier than other men; there is extensive documentation for an association between fatherhood and longevity (Chereji et al., 2013; Grundy & Kravdal, 2008; 2010; Kravdal et al., 2012; Jaffe, Eisenbach, & Manor, 2011; Keizer, Dykstra, & Poortman, 2010; McArdle et al., 2006; Tamakoshi et al., 2011). One hypothesis put forth to explain this association is that men desist from unhealthy behaviors (risky sexual behavior, substance use, criminal activity) when they become fathers (Eggebeen et al., 2013).

Findings about fathers and social connectedness in general find that the associations are weaker or non-existent among fathers who are unmarried and fathers who do not live with their children (Dykstra & Keizer, 2009). Differentiating between types of fatherhood in studies of mortality is rare, but one study found that the associations were weaker among divorced men who did not live with their children (Kravdel et al., 2012). In addition, the consequences of fatherhood for health may depend on the cultural context. In Egypt, where sex preference for male children is high, fatherhood of daughters, but not sons, was associated with poorer health (Engelman et al., 2010).

The issues of selection that we raised earlier are particularly salient to discussions of the correlation between fatherhood, social connectedness and health, especially in later life. What appear to be associations between fatherhood and outcomes in later life often disappear when marital status is controlled. Moreover, studies of older adults are often unable to distinguish between childless people and people who have outlived their children.

Consequences: Father Involvement

Research has documented how patterns of father involvement differ across different types of fathers, and we know something about how that involvement may affect children's outcomes (Cabrera, Hofferth & Chae, 2011). There is very little research, however, about how different levels, types, and quality of involvement affect the men themselves. Time-use data show that married fathers who live with their children are more involved with their children now than in previous decades (Sayer, Bianchi, & Robinson, 2004), but we do not know whether that greater time involvement translates into higher or lower levels of well-being compared to the stereotypical breadwinner father. Although fathers do not report that they are always multi-tasking as much as mothers who work full-time, they are just as likely as mothers to report that they have too little time to themselves (Milkie, Raley & Bianchi, 2009). More generally, however, mothers seem to suffer from parenting stress more than fathers (Umberson, Pudrovska & Reczek, 2010).

Generally, there is less detailed information about the nature and quality of the involvement of non-residential fathers compared to residential fathers. Most data sources measure non-residential

father involvement by an indicator of whether the father has any contact with his children or the number of days of contact or overnights he spends with his children. Among non-residential fathers, divorced fathers are more likely to maintain contact with their children than never married fathers (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Argys et al., 2007). Most unmarried fathers are involved with their children early in life, providing child support and visiting frequently (Cheadle, Amato, & King, 2010). But, by age 5, more than one-third of children born to unmarried couples do not see their fathers more than once per month (Lerman, 2010).

A few data sets have some information about the nature of the relationship between the father and his children. Data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 cohort show that youth whose parents divorced are more likely to report that they think highly of their fathers or that they want to be like their fathers compared to youth whose parents were never married to each other (Argys et al., 2007). This differential could be related to the greater amount of time that children of divorce spend with their fathers, but the differential could also reflect other factors that are different in divorced families compared to those where the parents did not marry each other. Although we might expect that fathers receive some intrinsic benefit from having children who think highly of them, that link has not been explicitly investigated.

There are other barriers to father involvement that derive primarily from the complexity of family forms that exist today, most particularly, the complexity of MPF. When fathers form new partnerships or marriages, their “new” family often takes precedence over their “old” family. This is especially the case when the new family contains other children of the father (Baxter, 2012). Some men, especially those who have experienced conflict with their older children’s mothers or difficulties in the relationship with older children see having children with a new partner as a way of “starting again” (Edin & Nelson, 2013). In addition, new partnerships on the part of mothers cause interruptions in father involvement. This can be due either to a father’s feeling that the new partner can provide better for the child than he can himself (Edin & Nelson, 2013) or because they are reluctant to provide any resources—especially money—that may be appropriated by the mother’s new partner or his children (Meyer & Cancian, 2012).

DISCUSSION

Research has documented the increasingly complex and heterogeneous pathways to becoming a father. The traditional pathway of having children with one woman within an enduring first marriage—is associated with positive outcomes for men. Moreover, men who take this pathway have recently begun to increase the amount of time they spend actively parenting their children. However, it is not clear if spending more time in fathering confers any benefits to men. The advantages that the traditional pathway to fatherhood appears to confer may be completely due to selection into that status of men who are disposed to have good employment outcomes, good health, and social connections. If traditional fatherhood and father involvement do confer any advantages, however, it is possible that non-traditional pathways to fatherhood are mechanisms for the maintenance and reproduction of inequality, not just for children, but for men.

We still know very little about how the motivations for becoming a father and the intrinsic benefits of fatherhood may differ across men and whether these differences completely account for differences in men’s fatherhood behavior. Similarly, we know very little about why changes in fathering behavior have occurred, why the changes might differ for residential versus non-residential fathers and why they might differ across men within these groups. We do not know if increased involvement benefits men in the short term or perhaps constitutes an increased source of stress in their lives. Another unanswered question is how different types of father involvement may affect long-run relationships with their children for both residential and non-residential fathers. For example,

does greater involvement with children translate into greater emotional, financial, and time support as fathers transition into middle and older ages?

Parental provision of time and money in the production of children benefits society as well. Societal institutions are set up to reward men and women who engage in this production by strengthening their social ties to their families and communities as well as affording them honor. Moreover, there are aspects of parenting that are pleasant and even fun. Under low levels of mortality, most children outlive their parents and therefore constitute an enduring testament to a difficult achievement, because parenting involves drudgery as well. Potential motivations for parenting, then, are intrinsic pleasures, stronger social ties, pride in succeeding at something tough, and honor for contributing to the larger group.

Traditionally, women invested time in children and men invested money. There has been substantial change in ideology surrounding the division of labor in the home to produce children and this is reflected in the increase in the time resident fathers spend taking care of their children and the evidence that some married men reduce their time in paid work when they become fathers. Nevertheless, resident fathers are highly likely (and much more likely than resident mothers) to work full-time. Non-resident fathers who cannot or do not support their children financially are likely to exclude themselves or be excluded from their children's lives. This constitutes substantial evidence that in most if not all groups in the U.S. today, the *status of father is contingent on being a breadwinner*. Public policy, at least until very recently, has reinforced this by its focus on the provision of financial child support by non-custodial parents, most of whom are fathers.

New directions in public policy, that place emphasis on the rights of non-custodial parents and their children to have contact with each other are an encouraging sign. These new directions suggest that society is creating new institutions to reflect the idea that children need more from their fathers than money and that *fathers want to provide their children with time*. This is far from accomplished, but if this idea took hold it would accord men who provide time to their children at least some of the rewards of parenting, even if they were unable to be breadwinners.

New research on how parents perceive parenting—how they organize their ideas about it and how they feel about the different activities that constitute it and the consequences that flow from it—is badly needed. Such research is likely to be revealing about what the benefits and costs of parenting are and whether they may differ by culture, by family background, by gender or by the age of the child. This information would be helpful in reforming social institutions, designing public policy, and shaping public opinion to incentivize those aspects of parenting that are not perceived to be intrinsically satisfying. It is important that these research efforts focus not only on the well-being of women and children, but also on the well-being of men.

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