Father Stories
A Life Course Examination of Paternal Identity Among Low-Income African American Men

Kevin M. Roy
University of Maryland

Life history interviews were conducted with 40 low-income noncustodial African American men in three age cohorts. Using four elements of a life course perspective (human agency, linked lives, social context, and multiple rhythms of time), the author explored how the stories that men told of their fathers’ life experiences shaped their own paternal identities. Three narrative themes (stability, liminality, and inquiry) gave meaning to men’s struggles to become involved fathers and linked them to similar challenges faced by their fathers years earlier. Differences in narrative construction between cohorts suggest how sociohistorical context defines opportunities for men to become involved parents.

Keywords: fatherhood; African American; families; life course; identity

Recent advances in the study of men in families have been driven, in many ways, by the recognition that fathering experiences have grown more dynamic and complex over time. As men move in and out of households, intimate relationships, and family-supportive employment with increasing frequency during the course of their lives, family involvement is often characterized as transitory (Eggebeen & Uhlenberg, 1985; Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000; Mott, 1990). Sociohistorical shifts in recent decades, such as the rise and decline of the sole breadwinner role, declines in men’s wages, and the flow of mothers into the paid labor force have altered normative roles for generations of men within families (Tamis-LeMonda &

Author’s Note: This research is supported by a grant from the Purdue Research Foundation. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 1998 National Council on Family Relations, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Please address correspondence to Kevin M. Roy, Department of Family Studies, University of Maryland, 1204 Marie Mount Hall, College Park, MD 20742.
Cabrera, 1999). These changing patterns indicate that time is a central factor in defining contexts for men’s parenting (see Daly, 1996, for examination of time in families).

Relatedly, men’s efforts at meaning-making are important in understanding how fathers make sense of these shifting roles (Marsiglio, 1995). Identity, or the meaning of being a father, constantly shapes men’s motivation and behavior as parents (Lamb, 2000). To build meaning into their involvement with children, men reflect on how other important family relationships have changed over time. In this process of meaning-making, men’s relations with their own fathers take on new significance (LaRossa, 1995; Snarey, 1993). Reflection on these father-son relationships suggests that, during the course of personal development and family transitions, “age returns you to your father” (Wideman, 1994).

How do men interpret their own fathers’ experiences, given social changes and shifting role expectations? Few studies have examined men’s dual perspectives on being fathered and being a father. Daly (1995) found that middle-class European American men may distance themselves from their fathers’ experiences. Researchers have seldom focused on the experiences of fathers and sons in minority and/or low-income families (see Bowman & Sanders, 1998, for an exception). In particular, multiple generations of these men have faced social dislocation through unemployment and discrimination, often leading to relationship dissolution and residential mobility (Coley, 2001; Lerman & Sorensen, 2000). A life course perspective for families of color—which prioritizes time and context—may explicitly acknowledge such sociohistorical changes as they shape relationships between members of extended family networks (Dilworth Anderson, Burton, & Boulin Johnson, 1993).

In this study, I place time and context at the center of a life course analysis of three cohorts of low-income African American men and their fathers, all on the margins of work and family. First, I identify four sensitizing concepts that guided analyses of narrative accounts. I explore three types of narratives—stability, liminality, and inquiry—that men used to make sense of their own, and their fathers’, experiences. I also examine how older and younger men used different narratives to describe their experiences. Men related their own parenting experiences to the degree and quality of interaction with their own fathers, and to sociohistorical factors—such as diminishing access to good jobs—that shaped relationships with their own fathers and their own children.
Background

Life Course Concepts And Father-Son Relationships

The life course perspective offers tools for understanding the dynamics of relationship and identity formation in context and over time. Life course theorists consider ways in which individual lives both shape and are shaped by social structure (Bengtson & Allen, 1993), such as how changing social contexts transform normative roles like fatherhood. In particular, a life course perspective offers four sensitizing concepts (Patton, 2002) that I use to frame father-adult son relationships and identity change over time: human agency, linked lives, location in context, and multiple rhythms of time (Giele & Elder, 1998).

Agency. Individuals actively make decisions and organize their lives to achieve goals, such as being an involved father (Giele & Elder, 1998). Recent studies trace men’s agency through the ongoing construction of paternal identities (Fox & Bruce, 2001; Pasley, Futris, & Skinner, 2002). Drawing on the tradition of symbolic interactionism, these studies illustrate how fathers create unique paternal identities through daily monitoring and revision (Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Marsiglio & Cohen, 2000). Identity construction can involve integrating readily accessible models as well as creating new models. Daly (1995) considers how adult sons are often disconnected from their fathers’ experiences due to changing social expectations for providing and caregiving. Like consumers, they choose aspects of model behavior from a range of known parental figures as they transition into father roles. However, some men may occupy tenuous social statuses as fathers, workers, or partners due to social dislocation. They may be “neither here nor there,” caught in a liminal state during transitions between roles (Turner, 1974). Although some social transitions have become more individualized and less subject to cultural regulation in recent decades, many low-income and minority men have found themselves derailed between ambiguous roles, searching for appropriate identities on the margins of society (Modell, 1989).

Linked lives. Individual fathers are embedded in a family network of linked lives through which social expectations, norms, and meanings of fatherhood are integrated and internalized (Giele & Elder, 1998). Fathers’ role transitions through work and family domains shape their children’s role transitions through the same domains. For example, the consistency and duration of father involvement, due to divorce or job loss, may shape the nature of children’s identities, their entry into the workforce, or their estab-
lishment of families (Elder, 1999; Kost, 2001; Marsiglio et al., 2000). Stories that link these intergenerational experiences are not simply biographies but emergent co-biographies (Hagestad & Neugarten, 1985; Plath, 1980) of being fathered and being a father. As constructed narratives, they “may tell us as much about how one’s father performed as a role model as the process of identity formation for a young father” (LaRossa, 1995, p. 553).

Location in context. Explicit consideration of diverse social contexts provides new insight into father-child relationships and paternal identity processes. Although father roles and involvement patterns among middle-class European American men have shifted across generations (Elder, Robertson, & Conger, 1996), consistent engagement in employment and marriage among this group of men forms the basic social expectations of contemporary fatherhood (LaRossa, 1997). Examination of diverse life experiences of men who differ by race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, or regional context may uncover important distinctions that are obscured by these normative assumptions (Dilworth-Anderson et al., 1993; Griswold, 1993). Employment, marriage, and residential presence have been less consistent for low-income and minority men (Duster, 1995; Furstenberg & Weiss, 2000; McLoyd, 1989; Mott, 1990). In urban communities like Chicago, African American men’s access to family-supportive wages and opportunities for middle-class households declined with deindustrialization of local communities (Wilson, 1987, 1996). Unemployment among African Americans in Chicago climbed from 12% to 29% in the early 1980s, with upwards of 60% unemployment for African American youth (U.S. Department of Labor, 1976-1993). New cohorts of fathers emerged into dramatically altered economic landscapes, and they have struggled with both “legitimate” and “street” lifestyles during the course of this social transition (Jarrett, 1994; Pattillo McCoy, 1999; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). These men have pieced together providing and caregiving roles, often confined to the margins of work and family life (Johnson, 2000; Venkatesh, 2000; Young, 2000).

Multiple rhythms of time. A life course perspective weaves these three concepts together through consideration of the interplay of multiple time perspectives. First, men encounter specific ontogenetic imperatives at different times in their development. Young men may be consumed with establishing their own identity (Allen & Doherty, 1996), whereas older men may more readily incorporate their fathers’ experiences into their own identity construction. Second, the passage of generational time allows men to build within-family relationships. Some men sever themselves from seemingly distal paternal influences, whereas for other men, the influences of fathers
may continue to unfold for many decades (Daly, 1995). Third, similarities among cohorts of men across families reflect the effect of sociohistorical time. Intercohort variation in relationship patterns provides clues as to how social change occurs (Riley, 1987). For example, the distinct ways in which cohorts of European American and African American fathers experience the same historical events may shape how social opportunities have emerged (Burton & Snyder, 1998). These patterns reflect mechanisms that can link history with individual development and change (Elder & O’Rand, 1995).

**Narrative Study of Men’s Lives**

The life history approach is a person-centered strategy (Laub & Sampson, 1998) that allows for exploration of “configurations of relevant personal characteristics in developmental perspective” (Magnusson & Bergman, 1990, p. 101). One approach for life course analysis is to examine retrospective life history narratives to gather information on “what happened in the past” (Elder & Pellerin, 1998). The narrative study of lives, as framed by McAdams (1985) as well as scholars in family studies (Reisman, 1993), sociology (Giddens, 1991), criminology (Maruna, 2001), and psychology (Bruner, 1987), has both theoretical and methodological implications. The life history framework shifts the focus from a factual retrospective record of what happened in people’s lives to the meanings that individuals attribute to these facts, which serve as important reflections of their identities. The narrative becomes an agentic process that provides a sequence of events to integrate explanatory goals, motivations, and feelings (Maruna, 2001). It may guide future behavior, as people act in ways that agree with the stories that they have created about themselves (McAdams, 1985).

A life story reflects a viable biographic self (Gubrium, Holstein, & Buckholdt, 1994) that emerges through the work of being engaged and reflective parents (Palkovitz, 2002). The link between understanding and behavior is consistent with many theoretical approaches, including a life course perspective, and is rooted in an appreciation of agency in creating identity for men in families (Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Pellegrini & Sarbin, 2002). Recent studies have shown that the onset of fatherhood provides a turning point in men’s narrative identities and subsequent behavior (Edin, Nelson, & Paranal, 2001; Sampson & Laub, 1993).

Narratives also require a unique integration of past, present, and anticipated future (McAdams, 1989). For example, Marsiglio, Hutchinson, and Cohen (2001) explore how men construct procreative identities, which influence potential procreative behavior in intimate relationships. Men’s stories of their fathers’ experiences likewise shape who they themselves become as
parents, just as accounts of their own emerging parenthood rework those very stories of their fathers’ experiences in the past. In this complex, reciprocal process, narratives become lifelong projects that are constantly tailored by new experiences (McAdams, 1993). Perhaps most significant for life course analysis, an identity can be equated with “keep[ing] a particular narrative going” over time (Giddens, 1991, p. 54). This task may be challenging for persons who face ambiguous role transitions due to loss of job or family, who must continuously create and sustain narratives to provide continuity of self (Becker, 1997).

Method

Sample and Recruitment

For 3 years, I worked as a researcher in a community-based program for primarily African American, noncustodial fathers in low-income families in Chicago. I spent 20 hours each week conducting interviews and serving as a case manager. Some men voluntarily entered the program due to word-of-mouth references, and others were mandated to participate by child support courts. The program provided employment and parenting classes, helped men to establish paternity, and untangled complicated new welfare reform laws. Staff referred 40 regular participants in employment or parenting sessions. In many ways, these men had chosen to commit to being involved fathers, and they frequently acknowledged changes in self-concept and motivation toward generativity as a reflection of program participation.

However, the sample also reflected general demographic variation in age and education in the larger program population. Half of the men graduated from high school, and half of them had been incarcerated. Participants were typically unemployed and looking for work, with an average of 2.3 children. Regardless of their age, fathers had children of preschool age. Their family involvement was often transitory, with half of the sample establishing short-lived coresidence in the past 2 years, another third living as romantic partners, and yet a quarter of the men never seeing their children beyond sporadic visits.

During the course of several months, I developed trust and rapport with participants. I met their children at program activities, I worked with men during class activities, and I gave advice on dealing with legal requirements. Fathers were curious about my involvement in the program, as I was the only European American on a staff of African American caseworkers. However, during the course of the 40 interviews, I became a first-time father, and the
birth of my son gave participants a chance to provide me with life advice on parenting.

Cohort Boundaries

To capture a variety of father experiences across time, I designed a life history analysis to purposively sample among three birth cohorts (oldest cohort, 35 years and older, \( n = 15 \); middle cohort, 24 to 34 years old, \( n = 15 \); and youngest cohort, 17 to 23 years old, \( n = 10 \)). Older cohorts were oversampled to gather more extensive life history information.

Prior to data collection, I based cohort boundaries on two watershed dates. The recession of the early 1980s reached its height in 1982, with more than 30% unemployment in low-income African American neighborhoods in Chicago (U.S. Department of Labor, 1976-1994). These local effects of much broader changes in the postindustrial economy affected traditional industrial sector jobs and employers, which abandoned Chicago’s Black Belt. This year (1982) divided the older cohort of men, who had begun to establish themselves in the job market prior to the disappearance of industrial sector jobs, from the middle cohort of men, who entered a challenging local economic landscape for the first time at the age of 18. In 1992, the new political environment of the Clinton administration ended “welfare as we know it,” terminating general assistance to able-bodied men in Illinois. A surge of expanding violence, due to unstable neighborhoods, gang rivalry, and the emergence of the crack economy, led to “the beginning of the end of the modern ghetto” (Venkatesh, 2000). Many families began to take steps to combat environmental change, such as participating in the Million Man March in 1995, which focused explicitly on the new role for men in the family. This year (1992) separated the middle cohort of men, who had adapted to the new economic reality of Chicago neighborhoods, from a younger cohort of men, who never had even blue-collar work opportunities.

Data Collection

The four sensitizing concepts from a life course perspective informed data collection with men. During 2-hour sessions at the program site or in men’s homes, I conducted retrospective life history interviews and recorded the timing and sequencing of transitions and life events such as departures from parental homes, exits from and entries into the labor market, and births of children on calendar grids (Freedman, Thornton, Camburn, Alwin, & Young-Demarco, 1988). To understand how men’s lives were linked with family members and social institutions, I used semistructured interview
questions to explore histories of father, child, and coparent interaction (based on Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, & Levine, 1987), experiences with family of origin, residential changes, employment, and education. This structural component was complemented by a phenomenological component (Lupton & Barclay, 1997) in which I asked fathers to reflect on their agency by talking about how they imbued meaning in these events or transitions, in an effort to create identities as involved fathers.

Participants defined their own experiences as sons throughout the interviews. I asked a general question about who taught them to be fathers, as well as which adult was most influential during both childhood and adolescence. Only two questions specifically addressed men’s fathers: a description of sons’ relationships with their fathers during childhood, and a perspective on how men’s employment experiences may have compared to their own father’s employment experiences. In each of these questions, I gathered information on fathers’ and sons’ linked lives in local community contexts that changed over time. The dynamic patterns of father-son relations were noted in calendar grids, and often without my guidance, men spoke at length about the meaning of changes in these relationships.

I also wrote field notes after my informal observation of father-child activities, case management interaction with staff, and daily experiences in South Side communities. The notes focused primarily on men’s interactions with their children, both through my observation as well as men’s informal accounts of off-site interactions.

I relied on established processes to enhance trustworthiness of data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Use of multiple methods (retrospective calendar grids, meanings of life transitions, and field notes) and multiple sources (fathers as well as myself and program staff) allowed for triangulation and enhanced credibility of data (Patton, 2002). Through the process of informal member checking, I offered participants short verbal descriptions of paternal identities and father-son narratives, which allowed them to clarify initial codes and categories. To enhance dependability of the data, I coded data alongside an additional coder, who served as an on-site program intern for a semester. As a middle-class European American researcher, I relied on diverse sources of data and methods of data collection to critically examine my own assumptions and guide my interpretation of interview text and participant observation.

Data Analyses

Data analysis and collection occurred concurrently, as my field notes included theoretical notes or memos that compelled me to explore specific
codes or concepts more rigorously (Patton, 2002). Following the notion of theoretical saturation (Bertaux, 1981), I gathered data until no additional concepts emerged to add to developing constructs. Interviews were recorded on audiotapes and transcribed. Including interviews and field notes, more than 730 pages of text were coded using QSR Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing (NUDIST) software. Pseudonyms were used for each participant, and their age was referenced in an effort to place them in appropriate cohort groups.

Basic elements of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) informed a constant comparative method of analytic induction. Data were first open coded to identify a diversity of distinct categories (such as “son’s anger at father”; “father in protector role”; and “fictional stories of absent fathers”). Axial coding followed, in which I explored and compared patterns of coding within individual cases and across all three cohorts. In the final phase, selective coding, I combined specific patterns into a core category of father narratives and systematically linked related patterns with this core category (Strauss, 1990). For example, I integrated patterns of men’s paternal identities (including meaning of involvement, and influence of changing social contexts) to create a range of distinct narrative types.

As I analyzed patterns of caregiving, providing and personal interaction from calendar grids, meaning that men gave to relationships with their fathers, and men’s stories of sociohistorical changes, I noted distinct variation in interaction between men and their fathers over time, as well as very different but related expectations that men developed for their fathers. I also realized that these men were often transitory fathers with their own children and that they were deeply involved in negotiating expectations for their own involvement. Most important, each father worked to link these two stories of being fathered and being a father. Three types of narratives and related identity processes emerged from this analysis: (a) a narrative that emphasized fathers’ stability, in which men struggled to live up to their fathers’ consistent and influential involvement in their lives ($n = 8$); (b) a narrative that explored the meaning of transitory fathers’ liminality and the ambiguous expectations that men felt for being fathers themselves ($n = 18$); and (c) a narrative in which men were driven by not knowing their fathers and found meaning through inquiry into the potential of vacated father roles, which they built from scratch ($n = 14$). To create a coherent identity, men drew on one or a combination of these different narratives, although for this study I identified each father with the most salient type for his narrative.
Results and Discussion

Before exploring how men used narratives to shape their paternal identities, it is important to consider patterns of father-son interactions as related through life history calendar grids. In general, fathers of men in this study were present in their children’s homes for a very brief period of time. Prior to their birth, almost one fifth of all men in the study (18%, n = 7) did not have a father present in the household. More than half of their fathers (53%, n = 21) had departed from homes before men’s entry into grade school, and 70% of their fathers (n = 28) had departed by men’s entry into high school. Father-son interaction decreased over historical time as well. More than half of the fathers of the oldest cohort (53%, n = 8) had departed from their homes before their sons were 14 years old, whereas almost 70% (n = 17) of the fathers of the middle and youngest cohorts had departed from their homes before their sons were 5 years old.

Given these patterns, men had limited interaction to draw on for narratives about their fathers. However, actual interaction was not the basis of narratives. Instead, men garnered specific meaning from their fathers’ movement in and out of their lives. With little biographic material to rely on, men consciously created three types of narratives as the basis for their diverse and unique identities: stability, liminality, and inquiry. In this section, I will articulate each of these narratives and suggest how men used them to make sense of their own emerging paternal identities. I will also examine how older and younger men used different narratives to relate their own parenting experiences to the degree and quality of interaction with their fathers.

“He Persevered With Me”: The Challenge of Stability

Only one fifth of all men in the study drew readily on narratives of their fathers’ stability. These narratives were distinctly common for the oldest cohort, which accounted for six of the eight men who emphasized stability. Steeped in traditional values and transplanted from diverse Southern communities, many families equated father involvement with normative commitment to marriage and employment. As models for marital success, these men’s fathers remained in marital relationships for as many as 40 years. Rodney, 37 years of age, envied his parents’ marriage, in that “My father stayed with my mother and eight children, and you don’t get that much anymore. That’s the way I want it to be.” These men readily cited their fathers as model workers as well, with employment at Spiegel, Kraft, American Can Company, and the U.S. Postal Service that began in the late 1950s and spanned two to three decades. They proudly discussed how they were
directly exposed to the rigors of steady employment at their fathers’ workplaces. Muhammed, 35, learned personal interaction and management skills at his father’s construction site.

My dad taught me how to be responsible, how to understand people, and how to communicate. I used to hang out around my dad, kicking it with the fellas, and he explained things. I’d sit right behind the wheel watching him, in his office, just talking about his insurance bill, picking up side jobs.

Consistency was the core of these fathers’ lives, and men regularly interacted with their fathers on a daily basis. Four of these men still lived with their fathers, and all spoke highly of the reliability of the supports that these older men provided to them. Even as men became fathers themselves and strived for self-sufficiency and independence, their fathers continued in their roles as protector, provider, and teacher, embedded firmly in family networks. Stoney, 33, respected his father’s perseverance when he reflected on his father’s challenges:

I think about the things that my father went through. There’s times I had problems and look back and say “Dad never head for the hills.” He still came on home and put some food in the freezer and some clothes on my back.

Frequent contact and consistent involvement almost obligated men to link their own paternal identity to their fathers. Azanti, 35, knew that “when I get older, I’ll look like him. This is a chain here, and if I break the link, [the family’s] going to be mad at me.”

However, men from the oldest cohort had difficulty replicating the stable father role that had come to mean so much to their understanding of fatherhood. Their own fathers had benefited from a unique window of opportunity at midcentury in Chicago, which promised middle-class life-styles to rural African Americans emigrating from southern states (Pattillo McCoy, 1999). Men grew accustomed to high expectations for work and family life, but changes in local communities in recent decades forced them to confront their own instability in work and family roles. While considering his recent divorce and unemployment, Ronald, 35, discussed his frustrations in comparison to his father’s experiences.

After I lost my job after the divorce, things got ugly. I was in a big empty house, bitter and upset . . . I never really paid attention to [my father’s] jobs, but I knew he always had one. This is the worst that I have been through, and I am not bitter now, but I would like a job.
Only one of the men who drew on a stability narrative lived with his child, and more than half did not see their children regularly. Joe, 40, had recently left a substance abuse treatment center to return to his mother’s house to care for his young son. He directly traced many of his difficulties to his father’s death and his inability to live up to his father’s standards:

My dad was my father and my best friend. I miss him. His death was a shock. Sometimes I still have to deal with it—I think about him too much. That’s why I find myself in two or three different [substance abuse] programs. I used to beat the hell out of myself mentally. . . . People run away from you when you can’t be responsible even for yourself.

Due to this gap between expectations and behavior, many of these men felt that they failed their fathers and families by not establishing, from their perspective, a stable paternal identity. Doc said simply, “I tell [my kids] that I don’t want them to be like me.” Azanti took this failure to an extreme to remain loyal to the ideal of his father. He retaliated for the shooting of his father during a robbery of the family store, served time in prison, and was separated from his own children as a result.

In summary, most of the oldest cohort drew on themes of stability in creating a narrative of their fathers. They framed their fathers’ traditional values and normative commitments as spouses and providers. Men expressed desire for paternal stability and reliability like their own fathers, but the environment for participation in work and family life had changed significantly by the 1980s. Although their fathers’ stories could provide motivation in the midst of dramatic social changes that destabilized their lives, men were challenged to model their paternal identities on their fathers’ successes.

“He Might Be There, He Might Not”:
Liminality and Ambiguous Expectations

More than half of the middle and youngest cohort of men, compared to less than a third of the oldest cohort of men, drew on stories of liminal father figures who were never truly in or out of their lives. For example, some fathers sacrificed family and household ties as a result of the extreme demands of employment as sole providers. Rashan, 21, knew only that “my father worked nights for the gas company, and during the day I wouldn’t see him. After I got home from school, he might be there, he might not. I couldn’t tell the difference between him living there and visiting there.” Other fathers were some of the first African American men to lose work due to the depar-
ture of industrial jobs in the 1970s and early 1980s. The challenge for this group of men was to make sense out of sporadic interaction with their fathers.

Men’s narratives of their fathers’ liminal involvement emerged from four themes. First, these fathers stood in direct contrast to the secure, normative paternal role models of the older cohort. They were described, instead, as bicultural travelers who simultaneously lived in the legitimate world of work and family and in the dangerous world of the Chicago streets. Damian, 27, asserted that his father was heroic in his ability to survive with both “book smarts and street smarts.” Leon, 37, learned about masculinity and survival as a child from his father, who told him that “there are three things you never let anyone use: your woman, your pistol, or your car.” However, after his father left his three sons and wife while pursued for child support, he later realized the effects of this transitory involvement.

See, I was reading in kindergarten. But he left, and I messed up, didn’t go to school. I stopped everything, because I had to hustle to get lunch money. That’s when I was rough—in 7th, 8th grade, I was way out there, started drinking, smoking weed.

Others, like Malcolm, 35, witnessed their fathers’ transition from one world into another. After losing a steady job at Ford Motors, Malcolm’s father left his family and began to sell drugs. Jailed twice, he was strangled in the penitentiary. Many men experienced these traumas at close range and, like Damian, opted to “snap out of my nonsense” in street lifestyles.

Second, as men grew uncomfortable with their fathers’ transitions in and out of their lives, their narratives reflected anger and an adversarial stance toward their fathers. Their fathers were ill-prepared to be parents after limited participation in their sons’ lives. They expressed frustration with their own lives and could discourage their sons from pursuit of employment. Eddie, 25, felt that his father “doesn’t believe that I can do anything. If I showed him the site for my [potential car wash], he’d be like, ‘Get out of here. You’re not going to do anything.’” Although some transitory fathers provided guidance and even housing for adolescent sons who might have otherwise been “lost to the streets,” men confronted their fathers’ determination to establish ground rules as “man of the house.” Tyrell, 20, was kicked out of his father’s house as a “way of showing me how to be a man. . . . He wanted me to learn the value of what things are when he really didn’t know himself.” Reestablishing a relationship as adolescents was particularly difficult, when sons sought independent identities as African American men. Wesley, 21, kept his distance from his father, because “you had to prove yourself to him, and you give up after awhile, because you never please him.
That’s too simple, to be the opposite of what my daddy was. You just got to filter out what is right and what’s wrong and go with that.”

Maintaining high hopes for involvement proved difficult, and in time men lowered expectations of their fathers. The father role became more ambiguous, and most men accepted their fathers’ efforts to “be there” for them. Lamont, 27, lived for his first 5 years with his father, when his parents divorced and his father slowly withdrew from his life. Lamont became resigned to sporadic visits, which he interpreted as real but limited efforts. He insisted that “for the times that I spent with him, he was a great father.” Rich, 35, in the midst of breaking an addiction and recommitting to his wife and children, also accepted his fathers’ limited efforts.

I could never understand why daddy left us. I thought he was a bad father, that I learned it all on my own. But as you get older you understand things about your parents. My father did what he could do in the situation he was in.

Finally, fathers’ liminality persisted, as men became adults. Fathers remained just out-of-reach, accessible only if men took the initiative to contact them. Cory, 27, could see his father whenever he chose, but he said, “it’s up to me—he doesn’t come over to see me.” Most fathers remained in family networks, such as when fathers lived with and cared for their own ailing mothers. Some men in the study had replicated similar social arrangements by residing with their own mothers. However, men who used liminality narratives did not live with their fathers. Both men and their fathers were members of family networks who remained informed of each others’ whereabouts but did not interact regularly.

Reflecting on their fathers’ transitory involvement, men were forced to confront their own inability to secure work and family roles. They resolved a history of ambiguous expectations by building either an identity as a “good enough” father or an identity as a father driven by the potential to be highly involved. A group of 11 men, primarily those of the middle and younger cohorts, grew accustomed to sporadic contact with their children and lowered their expectations for their own parenting. In challenging economic and social environments, their priority was similar to their fathers’ priority: to try to be there as parents. Cory was satisfied with bus trips on occasional weekends to see his children in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Rich could only maintain occasional visits with his children throughout his rehabilitation. Jalen, 32, felt powerless to become involved with his son, who lived in Nevada with his remarried ex-girlfriend. He echoed his own father’s acceptance of marginality:
When I was young, nobody separated me from my father. After my parent’s divorce, I felt the whole world was messed up. If he didn’t care about me, how am I supposed to care about myself? I was never going to let that happen with my son. I’d do what [my father] didn’t do for me for my son. I hate that it got this far, where I can’t see my son.

Another group of seven men, primarily from the middle and oldest cohorts, did not settle for lowered expectations as fathers. They strived to attain the goal of involvement by establishing regular, day-to-day relationships with their children. Damian’s story of his father’s liminality emerged, in part, from his own difficulties in balancing “street” and “legitimate” lifestyles.

I am out of the norm, for young Black men . . . I’m college educated, no gun shot wound. I can’t be raising my son behind those jail walls, or dead. I made the choice to raise my kids.

Ruben, 32, moved his three sons and wife from Chicago’s housing projects as he attempted to finish his bachelor’s degree. He asserted that “my daddy brought stuff to me and he wasn’t in the house with me. . . . But, damn it, I’m in the house with these boys and I need to try to be a father.” Time also clarified men’s experiences with their fathers’ liminality. Nelson, a widower at 36, resolved his feelings about his father’s transitory involvement shortly before his father died, and as a result, he committed to raise both his biological and nonbiological sons.

My dad was an alcoholic, and I went off on him because he was never there. Before he passed, I finally let go of all that hatred I kept in me. We all sobbed. I told him I still loved him, and we made our peace, and then he passed not too long after that. I’m glad I have the chance to show my love to my kids. . . . Even if we spend a day apart, I go off to work and come back, and we hug each other and say how much we love each other.

In summary, primarily younger men in the sample presented narratives of liminality. Men struggled with ambiguous expectations of their fathers, who were involved in both legitimate and street lifestyles. This struggle was particularly pronounced during adolescence, when many young sons rejected a limited father-son relationship. Coping with their own tenuous participation in work and family life, some men modeled their paternal identities on lowered expectations for being there as a father. Others, however, found room to act on their agency, creating new opportunities for involvement and positive paternal identities.
“Who Is You?”: Inquiry Into Vacated Roles

Slightly more than one third of the men in this study used narratives shaped by inquiry about fathers whom they had never known. In contrast to the first two narrative types, this approach was not unique to a cohort group: 33% of the oldest cohort, 33% of the middle cohort, and 40% of the youngest cohort referred to the vacated father role in their lives. Although mothers could model paternal identities, most of these men relied solely on their own instincts for parenting. The difficulty of creating paternal identities from scratch was overwhelming for some men. Trying to find legitimate employment and to avoid streetwise friends, Marcus struggled to keep himself “out of trouble, which can be a full-time gig.” In the end, he avoided his daughter, because “nobody taught me to be a father.” After release from prison, Oscar, 25, struggled to gain access to his second daughter. However, he felt that “I’m not a father yet. Nobody taught me this—I’m making it up as I go.” Azanti echoed the enormous challenge of this lack of models and declared that “there’s no book on fatherhood. There ain’t no rules. It’s on you.”

As a result, most men searched to make absent fathers’ lives known and instructive. They created narratives, conjecturing about who their fathers were and filling in the gaps of knowledge with what they believed transpired in their fathers’ lives. Tremaine, 22, envisioned his father to be similar to himself: an absent but well-intentioned parent, discouraged from meaningful involvement with his child by a jealous ex-partner. Through this type of reconstruction, men reworked their fathers’ identities to define themselves by comparison. Bear was 3 years old when his father, a gang leader named Iceman, was shot and killed. He likened his own life to his father’s life (“I’m Iceman II”) even after blaming his father for “leaving me.” After years of gang activity and violence, he “started growing up” and imagined the circumstances leading to his father’s death. Bear, at 20, believed that he and his father faced similar challenges as parents at a distance.

I still think about my Pops, but it’s not anger anymore, more like relief. I know he was thinking “My son is only three years old and I’m fittin’ to leave him.” I didn’t want [my daughter] to look at me like I left her, so she grows up saying “You ain’t been in my life all this time—who is you?” Let me try to build something.

After decades of separation, some men stumbled into relationships with their fathers during important life transitions, such as deaths of family members or release from prison. The weight of many years made meaningful inquiry into their fathers’ lives a painful experience. Andre, 18, “felt like I was complete, like it was supposed to be that I didn’t have a father.” Speaking
with his father for the first time at age 18, he found “some roots” but realized that his father’s support and advice would have meant a safer passage through adolescence. Isaiah, 40, persevered through many months of courtroom scrutiny to gain custody of his two preschool-age daughters. In comparison, his father’s minimal efforts to establish contact in recent months did not qualify as appropriate first steps toward reconciliation.

I’m forty now, but he owes me an explanation. He said he didn’t have to kiss anybody’s ass. And I said “I know nothing about you. I was three years old when you left us. Don’t you owe us nothing?”

Other men did come to know their fathers later in life, however, and filled gaps in their fathers’ stories with newly contextualized insight into tense family relations, economic pressures, and life changes that shaped their fathers’ departures. Miles, 30, learned that his stepfather “didn’t want my father around” when he was a child, although his father watched him go to school everyday. Revisiting the past allowed Miles to reorient his future toward involvement:

I have been away from my sons and my father has been away from me; my mother was living with someone else, like my sons’ mother is. I feel like I can learn something—I am in the same situation. He can tell me things that were going through his mind at the time, and through his mind now. He can tell me what he should have done but regrets he didn’t do.

Whether resolved to not knowing about or still searching for unknown fathers, these men also remained question marks to their own children: More than half of this group of men had little to no contact with their children. Men from each cohort used this narrative at the same time that they attempted to make sense of their own lack of involvement. The inquiry narrative left men with few options. It could diminish trust and confidence, and some men simply accepted absence. In contrast, those who rejected father absence—such as Bear—showed an intense desire to search and create meaning in fatherhood, even if they had to build stories from scratch. However, starting from scratch proved difficult in local environments that offered little support to help men become involved in the workplace or in the lives of their children.

In summary, at least one third of each cohort did not know their own fathers. Men conjectured about their fathers as a basis for building their own identities. Some men were resolved to not knowing their fathers, but the need to integrate fathers’ and sons’ experiences led other men to inquire about their fathers’ lives and about fatherhood as a viable role. The use of this narra-
tive type across all cohorts suggests that father absence remained common in generations over time, even as men continued to organize their own lives around a search for meaningful roles as involved parents.

**Conclusion**

Many studies of father-son relationships focus on distal behavioral influences of fathers on their sons at a young age (Chen & Kaplan, 2001). In addition to the importance of consistent involvement over time (Hagestad, 1992; Kost, 2001), this study suggests that the ongoing construction of meaning of father involvement—a core component of men’s individual agency—is important in shaping paternal identity and behavior. Men who identified their fathers as stable or even liminal influences could choose from ready-made images and construct a story of involvement. Men who never knew their fathers, in contrast, had only the model of complete absence to embrace or reject. If they chose to be involved at all as fathers, they had to build their stories from scratch. Regardless of how much “material” men had, more than 80% of the men in this study reconstructed their fathers’ experiences, conjecturing about their motivation and challenges. Previous research suggests that men in other contexts also “[place] fathers’ shortcomings in context and take extenuating circumstances into account. . . . [Men] rework shortcomings by transforming their anger . . . into a sense of sadness for and understanding of the conditions under which their own fathers had functioned” (Snarey, 1993, p. 329).

Men turned to father narratives to make sense of their own tenuous paternal identities. Identity was not simply an individual expression but a consideration of linked lives in an intergenerational dialogue (LaRossa, 1995). Although narratives of stability might be expected to lead to stable paternal identities, identities were much more fluid, requiring constant editing to give sense to barriers that men faced. First, older men who emphasized stability faced the challenge of unattainable expectations for a strong father role, particularly in the face of men’s own role instability. Second, younger men who drew on narratives of liminality viewed their own transitory fatherhood as an optional role that required “good enough” efforts. Paternal identity also could prove consuming for many of these men who defined themselves in contrast to their fathers’ liminality. The final group of men had few expectations and could only inquire about their fathers. Many felt unprepared for involvement, and others continued to seek out their fathers to build narratives from scratch. The first type reflects how social change—stable economic opportunities that transform into neighborhood instability—may lead to
discrepancies in family experience. The second and third type reflect how even social continuity—instability and liminality shared by fathers and sons, or consistent rates of father absence from families—can also lead to diverse, individualized paths to family involvement.

The centrality of different notions of time extends beyond cohort similarities and differences. As a developmental imperative, tying father narratives to one’s paternal identity ensured continuity of self over time (Becker, 1997). In some contexts, such as for middle-class European Americans, men may choose to sever such ties to their fathers and insist that they are self-made men (Daly, 1995). However, “keeping a narrative going” (Giddens, 1991) may be particularly important for men who are marginalized by families and social institutions. African American fathers in low-income communities in Chicago typically stressed similarities, not differences, between their paternal identities and their fathers’ identities. In this way, meaning-making did not end at a particular developmental stage. Despite numerous ruptured relationships, men worked daily to search and resolve the meaning of fatherhood, in an effort to create new intergenerational linkages and secure a family “chain.”

Narratives of family continuity were integral strategies in adaptation to changes in local social contexts. Fathers and their sons faced similar marginal status as workers and students in Chicago, but changes in the global political economy have resulted in enhanced marginality in urban communities (Wacquant, 1996). Although these social changes limited men’s participation in work and family life, flexible paternal roles continue to emerge within family networks to meet the need for father figures (Allen & Conner, 1995).

Differences in narrative themes that emerged between cohort groups cannot be generalized beyond this sample and are only suggestive of experiences of the larger population of low-income African American men. However, this cohort analysis shows how social expectations are not static among lives or communities. An Arab proverb asserts that “men are more like their times than their fathers.” Despite men’s efforts to link their lives to their fathers’ experiences, recent socioeconomic changes in low-income communities erected new barriers to father involvement. Viable narrative identities were even more problematic, given the increasing mismatch between dissolving economic opportunities, unresolved motivation to be involved, and heightened social expectations for “new” fathers who both provide and give care.

This study offers important implications for programs tailored to the lives of low-income fathers of color. Transitions into and journeys through parenthood for poor African American men are shaped by prior and continuing relations with their own fathers. Programs that recognize the need for such
parenting models may assist fathers to build linkages with their own fathers, through narratives or even actual interaction. The strength of these relationships is significant not only for emergent parent-child relations but also for the creation of continuity and linkages among extended family members across and within communities.

Further research on men in families should address the limitations and implications of this study. Fathering is typically conceptualized as men’s involvement in providing and caregiving during childhood. However, fathering extends across the life course, as meanings of involvement evolve over time to exert far-reaching influences in families. The centrality of linked lives urges researchers to frame identities with “cobiographic” methods for fathers and children. Longitudinal studies of father-child relationships would also more accurately measure the cohort, period, and age effects that this study suggests are so important (Pleck, 1997).

This study offers insight into a challenging social context for involved parenting. It expands on research with African American men, but other culturally diverse samples of families must be developed to capture a range of complex processes of father involvement (Marsiglio et al., 2000). Exploration of other problematic contexts for men’s involvement in families would also continue a rigorous examination of the match between motivation, social expectations, and institutional resources that support meaningful and positive father involvement (Gerson, 1995; Orloff & Monson, 2002).

References


