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Viewing Low-Income Fathers' Ties to Families through a Cultural Lens: Insights for Research and Policy

MAUREEN R. WALLER

Associate professor of policy analysis and management at Cornell University and author of My Baby's Father: Unmarried Parents and Paternal Responsibility (Cornell University Press 2002)

Abstract

Policy makers have become increasingly interested in addressing the cultural dimensions of child support, "responsible fatherhood," and marriage in poor communities. However, policy studies have primarily focused on identifying economic determinants of these issues, with a substantial amount of variation in their statistical models left unexplained. This article draws on in-depth interviews the author conducted with disadvantaged mothers and fathers to illustrate how a systematic investigation into the meaning of low-income men's ties to families may fill in or provide alternative explanations for some important questions related to paternal involvement. In particular, it suggests that analyzing fathers' relationships through a cultural lens may not only reveal new information about the meaning of their emotional involvement, informal support, care of children, and conflicts with mothers which future policy studies should consider but may also inform policy initiatives by reducing the risk that they will be misdirected or have unintended consequences for poor families.

Keywords

child support; cultural analysis; father involvement; low-income fathers; marriage; responsible fatherhood; union transitions

With the creation of the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement in 1975, the fathers of poor children assumed an important place on the national policy agenda. Although the "Moynihan Report" had brought the issue of father absence to the attention of policy makers a decade earlier, it was the changing composition of the single-parent families receiving welfare, together with the rapid growth of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) caseload, that prompted strong legislative action (Pirog and Ziolk-Guest 2006). Soon after its passage into federal law, the Child Support Enforcement Program quickly gained bipartisan support because of its promise to both alleviate poverty and recover welfare costs. Policy makers also viewed the program as upholding a larger moral consensus that all parents have a responsibility to support their biological children.

Since 1975, the proportion of children who are living apart from at least one parent has grown from about 20 percent to about 30 percent (see U.S. Census, <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/ch1.xls>). During this time, Child Support Enforcement also mushroomed into what is now a \$5 billion program that serves more than 17 million children, but it continues to show somewhat mixed success (Pirog and Ziolk-Guest 2006). Partly in response to these concerns, Congress began funding "responsible fatherhood" programs in the 1990s to encourage low-income, nonresident fathers to take a more active role in parenting their children, while also making it easier for them to comply

with child support regulations. Under the Bush administration, marriage initiatives were also introduced as a way of preventing father absence and encouraging their involvement. Although marriage promotion has been more controversial than child support enforcement, all states now have programs in place to strengthen marriage or discourage union dissolution (Ooms, Bouchet, and Parke 2004).

As these examples suggest, policy makers have become increasingly interested in addressing the cultural dimensions of child support, “responsible fatherhood,” and marriage in poor communities. However, policy studies have primarily focused on identifying economic determinants of these issues, with a substantial amount of variation in their statistical models left unexplained. This article draws on in-depth interviews I have conducted with disadvantaged mothers and fathers to illustrate how a systematic investigation into the meaning of low-income men’s ties to families may fill in or provide alternative explanations for some important questions related to paternal involvement. In particular, it suggests that analyzing fathers’ relationships through a cultural lens may not only reveal new information about the meaning of their emotional involvement, informal support, care of children, and conflicts with mothers which future policy studies should consider but may also inform policy initiatives by reducing the risk that they will be misdirected or have unintended consequences for poor families.

Low-Income Fathers in Policy Research

Although policy-oriented research on poverty is now dominated by the disciplines of economics and, secondarily, demography, this has not always been the case. In a historical account of this field’s development, Alice O’Connor (2001) describes a scenario in which sociologists and anthropologists, who received funding through federal research and community action projects, held significant sway in the debates about poverty until the late 1960s. Many of these scholars who worked within the ethnographic, community-studies tradition placed culture at the center of their analytic frameworks, producing, among other things, Oscar Lewis’s well-known investigations into a “culture of poverty.” According to the culture of poverty thesis, poor communities displayed a set of values, dispositions, and behaviors that deviated from “mainstream” culture and led to the reproduction of poverty. As part of this investigation, Lewis (1959) also observed that poor fathers often abandoned their children, while those who remained in the household tended to have weaker emotional ties to children, to be authoritarian, and to spend a significant amount of time away from the home.

While other community studies scholars departed from Lewis’s negative characterization of disadvantaged fathers, they tended to share his assumptions about the cultural homogeneity of poor communities as well as his concern with understanding how poor men’s values undermined their attachment to families. For example, three important ethnographic studies of fatherhood within this tradition (Clark 1965; Liebow 1967; Rainwater 1970) adopted a “value stretch” perspective, which focused on how poor men modified “mainstream” values to deal with their failure as providers. Although the value-stretch approach called the cultural isolation of poor families into question, it suggested that disadvantaged men had a weak commitment to the conventional values that these men often endorsed.

O’Connor (2001) notes that after the release of the Moynihan Report brought these and other cultural investigations of poverty into disfavor, the loss of political support for community action programs opened the way for policy makers to embrace what were considered more scientific approaches to analyzing poverty. As policy makers turned increasingly to economists for guidance, the use of large survey and administrative data sets replaced analyses of primary, observational, and interview data collected in poor

communities (O'Connor 2001). Armed with new econometric modeling techniques and rational choice theory, researchers attempted to identify individual-level factors that had a causal influence on the poor's decision-making processes. Rather than putting the question of culture to rest, however, O'Connor argues that the focus on individual behavior was compatible with earlier assumptions about a culture of poverty and may have facilitated a "new consensus" on welfare reform that focused on personal responsibility and family values.

An important part of this consensus was that poor fathers should take greater financial responsibility for their children by complying with child support enforcement, rather than allowing their families to turn to the welfare system for help. To strengthen key features of the child support enforcement system, Congress passed a series of important legislation prior to, and coinciding with, the 1988 and 1996 welfare reforms.¹ Despite major efforts to increase the effectiveness of child support enforcement, however, the proportion of custodial parents receiving child support has been relatively low and has increased little over the past three decades. In 2005, for example, only about three-fifths of custodial parents had a child support agreement, and fewer than half of these parents received the full amount of child support due (Grall 2007).²

Economists have offered different explanations about why some fathers fail to provide support for their children, consistent with rational choice theory, including the possibility that men who live apart from their children gain less utility from supporting them, that nonresident fathers can free-ride on single mothers' parenting efforts, and that policies provide disincentives for disadvantaged men to pay support when their children receive welfare (Beller and Graham 1993). At the same time, their statistical models only partially explain men's behavior, leaving many unanswered questions about why more fathers are not fully complying with child support orders, even in a climate of heightened enforcement (Lerman and Sorenson 2003). Without a more complete picture of why some low-income fathers fail to provide support for their children through the legal system, policy makers have often turned to anecdotal information suggesting these men are disconnected from mainstream ideas about paternal responsibility. To systematically examine these assumptions, however, more information would be needed on how low-income parents interpret fathers' obligation to children—including the meaning of their economic support relative to other types of paternal involvement—and how parents' interpretations are connected to broader ideas about fatherhood in contemporary culture.

The type of noneconomic involvement that has received the most empirical attention is fathers' contact with children following a nonmarital birth or divorce. A key goal of community-level responsible-fatherhood programs initiated over the last two decades has been to encourage men to spend more time with their children while making it easier to comply with child support regulations, and these programs are likely to be of continued policy interest.³ Several policy studies have tested hypotheses about the link between men's economic support and contact with children. While some of these hypotheses suggest that fathers who have more contact with children would be more likely to provide economic support because they can monitor how their contributions are being spent (Argys and Peters 2003; Y. Weiss and Willis 1985), others suggest that the causal direction could go the other way or result from unobserved variables, such as men's desire for involvement (see Nepomnyaschy 2007). However, disadvantaged fathers' non-economic motivations for

¹The Office of Child Support was established in 1975. Other key pieces of legislation include the Child Support Enforcement Amendments of 1984, the Family Support Act of 1988, the 1993 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act, and the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act.

²However, the changing composition of single-parent families receiving child support services conceals recent improvements for some subgroups, like never-married mothers (Lerman and Sorenson 2003).

becoming highly involved in the care of their children have received limited direct empirical attention. As a result, we do not know whether the kind of shared parenting that has been observed among middle-class couples also occurs in disadvantaged families and is justified by them on similar grounds.

An even larger number of policy studies have examined low-income couples' union transitions—an issue that is also at the heart of efforts to reconnect disadvantaged fathers to families through marriage. The standard economics approach in this field has followed Becker (1981) in suggesting that men and women will be more likely to marry (and less likely to separate) if their material gains from marriage are higher than from remaining single. As such, economists have examined both partners' potential earnings as well as other sources of income that depend on their marital status (such as welfare benefits) as key determinants of union transitions (Burstein 2007).

While men's economic characteristics have been found to be consistent predictors of marriage and union dissolution, as with studies of paternal contact and support, much of the variation in these models is still left unexplained (Ellwood and Jencks 2004). It is likely that cultural factors could account for some of this variation, but Ellwood and Jencks (2004) note that it has been difficult to test the causal effects of attitudes and norms on family formation, since it is unclear how the timing of attitudinal changes relates to the timing of behavioral changes. Recent research on marriage in poor communities also suggests that low-income men and women seem to hold similar aspirations for marriage as their higher-income counterparts (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Waller 2001). Even in the absence of stronger empirical information on this topic, policy makers have become increasingly interested in addressing cultural factors that may undermine marriage in poor communities. As an alternative to examining the influence of negative values and attitudes on behavior, investigating the cognitive frames, or filters, through which low-income couples perceive the challenges they are facing may help us better understand their decisions to maintain or dissolve their romantic unions. However, this type of analysis has generally not been pursued by policy researchers.

Investigating Fatherhood through a Cultural Lens

Some large-scale data collection efforts are now turning their attention to low-income fathers, following an executive directive asking federal agencies to include men in studies that traditionally focused on mothers and children (Cabrera et al. 2002). Until recently, however, low-income fathers' interpretations of parenting and union formation have typically been “unobserved” (i.e., unmeasured) in policy research, at least in part because of data limitations.⁴ Consequently, researchers have identified important economic and demographic correlates of paternal support, contact, and marriage in low-income

³Then-Senator Obama was the cosponsor of the Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Families Act, which called for additional funding for fatherhood programs as well as other reforms to the child support system directed toward low-income families. On his first Father's Day in office, President Obama also initiated what his administration called a “national conversation on responsible fatherhood and healthy families” through a series of events, regional town hall meetings, and public service announcements focusing on this theme. During his campaign the previous year, Obama gave a Father's Day speech at an African American church on a similar theme that prompted Rev. Jesse Jackson's controversial off-air remarks on Fox News about “talking down to black people.” An Obama campaign spokesperson clarified that while the issue of parental responsibility was of personal interest to the candidate, he also recognized the importance of society's responsibility to help its disadvantaged members, saying, “As someone who grew up without a father in the home, Senator Obama has spoken and written for many years about the issue of parental responsibility.... He also discusses our responsibility as a society to provide jobs, justice, and opportunity for all. He will continue to speak out about our responsibilities to ourselves and each other” (“Rev. Jesse Jackson Apologizes for Obama Remark,” CBS, July 10, 2008, <http://cbs2chicago.com/>).

⁴Some household surveys have collected data only on mothers, while others are missing fathers who were in jail, in the military, homeless, or “loosely attached” to households. Among fathers who agree to participate, fertility also tends to be underreported, making it difficult to examine fathers' involvement with at least some of their children (Garfinkel, McLanahan, and Hanson 1998).

communities, but they know less about the causal mechanisms or stories that help explain these relationships. As Ann Lin (1998) has argued, however, policy makers need this type of information to avoid making (at best) plausible inferences and (at worst) uninformed guesses about why causal relationships exist. It is also possible that the focus on economic predictors and outcomes has led researchers to overlook some important patterns of involvement among men in poor communities.

As noted earlier, the overwhelming focus on economic factors in the policy literature on fathers may also be understood as a reaction to the earlier culture of poverty thesis. The reluctance of researchers to examine culture makes sense in light of the many theoretical, empirical, and political critiques that have been leveled against the culture of poverty approach over the years (e.g., Katz 1989; Valentine 1968). At the same time, policy makers interested in addressing the cultural dimensions of paternal involvement and marriage in poor communities are turning to older concepts, which are consistent with this approach, rather than benefiting from alternative ways of conceptualizing culture.⁵ Since the culture of poverty battles were first waged, researchers have moved away from an empirical focus on the link between values and behavior toward linguistic approaches for investigating how intersubjective meanings are constructed and cultural practices are organized. Many researchers also have begun focusing on the shared cultural symbols and categories through which reality is perceived and through which it attains meaning (Gusfield 1989; Lamont and Small 2008; Wuthnow 1987).

These developments in cultural theory also offer researchers a different set of analytical tools to examine questions of current policy interest. For example, little is known about how low-income couples engage ideas from media, popular culture, and other sources when making decisions about parenting and romantic relationships (Fein and Ooms 2006). One concept that could be particularly useful for policy research in this area is Ann Swidler's (1986, 273) idea of culture as a repertoire or toolkit of "symbols, stories, rituals, and world views" that people use to construct strategies of action. Specifically, an investigation of low-income parents' cultural repertoires would be helpful for understanding the kinds of cultural tools they can mobilize to develop romantic and parenting strategies. Other scholars, such as Michèle Lamont (1992, 2000), have analyzed how people use symbolic boundaries to differentiate themselves from other groups, situations, or ideas; to define their own identities; and to uphold conscious or unconscious perceptions of worthiness. Among other things, this type of investigation could tell us how low-income parents actively define themselves and their partners in relation to ideas of responsible fathers and "deadbeat dads" represented in the policy discourse. Finally, studies have also examined the interpretive filters, or frames, through which people perceive, identify, and label their experiences in order to make sense of them (Goffman 1974), often by locating them within one or more narratives (Somers 1994). This approach may help policy investigations move beyond a focus on deviant attitudes and values in poor communities toward examining the shared interpretive or cognitive categories low-income men and women use to understand their relationships as partners and parents, thus making some outcomes more likely than others (Benford and Snow 2000; Lamont and Small 2008).

Data and Methods

This article draws from two previous qualitative studies I have conducted of low-income mothers and fathers to examine the meaning of paternal involvement. Research for the first

⁵For example, the goals of the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (OMI) state, "As the initiative's services become more widely available, known and used, OMI leaders anticipate that changes in norms and attitudes about marriage will follow, strengthening the institution of marriage at the individual and community level" (http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/publications/pdfs/OMI_fnlprpt.pdf).

study took place in central New Jersey in 1994 to 1995, primarily in the city of Trenton and its surrounding suburbs. The data were derived from in-depth interviews I conducted with sixty-five unmarried parents (thirty-six mothers and twenty-nine fathers) who had a child receiving welfare. I contacted African American and white mothers through several locations of the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program in and around Trenton. To schedule interviews with mothers, I talked to women informally at the clinics. If a woman met my criteria and was interested in participating, we set up a time and place to meet for the interview. I also asked for referrals from mothers to complete a quota sample (stratified by race and gender), but limited the number of referrals from each respondent to ensure sampling from diverse networks. Because African American fathers were a visible presence in the neighborhoods where I interviewed women but were also “invisible” in formal organizations in the community, I sampled fathers directly from places where low-income men congregated in Trenton with the assistance of a community member who could vouch for my legitimacy and provide me with access. As with mothers, I also asked for targeted referrals to fathers from different neighborhoods in the city to generate the remainder of the sample. Because unmarried white fathers are not concentrated in particular neighborhoods in or near the city, they were contacted primarily through referrals.

Research for the second study took place in 1998 and 2002, in the city of Oakland, California. Data for this study were derived from two waves of in-depth interviews with sixty-two parents (thirty-five mothers and twenty-seven fathers) when their focal child was about age one and age four. The participants in this study were randomly selected from a larger sample of parents who participated in one site of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a twenty-city birth cohort study designed to provide new information about the experiences of unmarried parents and their children. To select participants for the qualitative study, the full survey sample at this site was stratified by the three largest race/ethnic groups (i.e., African American, Hispanic of Mexican descent, and white), and a 10 percent subsample of parents was selected within these strata. In about three-fourths of families in the sample, both partners were interviewed, while one parent was interviewed in the remaining one-quarter of families.

Despite the differences in sampling methods and locations, the participants in both studies had very similar characteristics. In particular, the majority had a child under age five born outside of marriage, were in their twenties, did not have education beyond high school, and had poverty-level incomes (see Waller 2002, 2008). In both studies, I also used semistructured 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 it is conducted as a “guided conversation” to facilitate rapport, elicit “information-rich” responses (R. Weiss 1994), and allow new information to emerge during the interview. Most interviews took place in parents’ homes or another location of the participant’s choosing, and mothers and fathers were interviewed separately. Interviews ranged from ninety minutes to four hours, and all were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using a qualitative data analysis software program.

Interpreting Low-Income Fathers’ Ties to Families

Paternal responsibility and economic support

Political and social commentary has often advanced the view that low-income fathers fail to pay child support because they lack a sense of paternal responsibility; however, this assertion has received little empirical attention. To examine this issue in greater depth, I asked unmarried mothers and fathers in New Jersey about how they understood unmarried men’s obligation to their biological children (Waller 2002). An important part of this analysis involved examining the models of fatherhood parents could mobilize within their

cultural repertoires to define paternal responsibility. I also explored how parents drew symbolic boundaries between “good” and “bad” fathers to define their own or their partners’ identities and worth as fathers (Lamont 1992, 2000).

Although responsible fathers are often represented in policy debates as those men who act as economic providers for their families, the parents I interviewed identified emotional involvement as the primary component of paternal responsibility, highlighting the importance of fathers’ establishing a consistent affective presence in their children’s lives and expressing their love and concern to them. Parents also regularly distinguished between good and bad fathers on the basis of men’s efforts to “be there,” to spend “quality time” with their children, and to communicate with them. For example, Tricia, an African American mother I interviewed, echoed the views of many other parents in saying, “A [good] father to me is where they would come get their kids and spend time with them. Spending time with them—that’s the most important part—and giving them love.” Researchers have described how particular models of fatherhood have gained prominence during different historical periods (Lamb 1987; Pleck 1987). By emphasizing men’s emotional involvement with children, parents in this study seemed to endorse the “new” involved model of fatherhood more commonly associated with ideas popular in middle-class families (Griswold 1993). These ideas about fatherhood—which suggest that men should nurture their children and establish strong emotional bonds with them—emerged as the breadwinning model of fatherhood became less attainable for many men and when a therapeutic discourse about the personal growth and satisfaction that men could realize as fathers became more widely disseminated in popular culture (Gerson 1993; Lamb 1987).

The parents I spoke with identified guidance as another important component of paternal responsibility, invoking traditional ideas about the benefits of paternal role models, teachers, and disciplinarians as well as contemporary ideas about the salience of role models for young black males in urban communities (Griswold 1993; Kelley 1996). When discussing this aspect of paternal responsibility, parents characterized good fathers as providing close mentoring and a strong sense of direction for their children, while inferior fathers were characterized as those unwilling to act as role models, educators, or moral guides for them. Elaborating on his view of a “bad” father, William, a white father of two, explained,

I don’t see how you can turn your back on something that needs upbringing, that needs help. You know, has no direction in life. You have to be there to guide the child. When you abandon that responsibility, you’re just leaving that child out there with no direction, and [the child] can go in any way.

Somewhat more consistent with ideas about fatherhood represented in recent policy debates, New Jersey parents identified economic support as a third component of paternal responsibility. However, they emphasized the importance of men’s effort to provide support over their ability to act as the sole family breadwinner—a model of fatherhood that historians suggest was dominant from the onset of industrialization until the last quarter of the twentieth century (Griswold 1993). Although offering some form of material support was often considered a basic responsibility of fatherhood, these statements about support were also typically accompanied by the argument that simply providing for children was not sufficient to make someone a good father. Following broad socioeconomic changes in the post–World War II period, such as the increase in women’s employment, the decline in male wages relative to women’s, the rise of feminism, and the increase in single-parent households, scholars have argued that the breadwinner model of fatherhood has lost much of its cultural resonance (Gerson 1993; Griswold 1993). Of course, many African American fathers and lower-income white fathers never earned the kind of “family wage” that would allow them to become breadwinners. In a context where men at lower educational and skill levels have experienced dramatic declines in wages and employment, particularly in African

American communities (Mincy 2006), some parents actively resisted equating a good father with a good provider.

I feel as though most of the good fathers is the ones that don't have nothing, but still insist on raising and taking care of their kids. That's where you find all the good fathers at. Just because you made it—you're a lawyer, you're a doctor, you're a judge, and your kids got everything they need—that doesn't necessarily say that you're a good father. You [are] a good provider, but half of the time these people ain't even get time to spend with their kids. So I feel as though a good father is somebody that's out there trying to make things work. (Salaam)

The accounts of unmarried parents in this study suggest they had a diverse cultural repertoire, or toolkit, of ideas about fatherhood from media, popular culture, therapeutic discourses, their religious traditions, and other sources to define paternal responsibility (Pleck 1987; Swidler 1986), at a time when no single model of fatherhood is dominant (Gerson 1993; Griswold 1993). In particular, parents tended to blend contemporary models of emotionally involved fatherhood with more traditional ideas about paternal guidance and role-modeling when describing ways disadvantaged men could demonstrate their responsibility for children.⁶ In contrast to assumptions of the culture of poverty thesis, these results strongly suggest that low-income, unmarried parents shared many of the same ideas about emotionally involved fatherhood as have been documented among more advantaged families.

It is possible that by emphasizing the importance of noneconomic forms of involvement, parents were simply offering justifications for low-income men's failure to fulfill a traditional breadwinning role, as earlier proponents of the value stretch perspective argued. At the same time, studies of both higher- and lower-income families have found that people tend to be more skilled in using some parts of their cultural repertoires than others and will identify lines of conduct around things they are able to do well (Hannerz 1969; Swidler 2001). The tendency for low-income parents to combine different models of fatherhood is also consistent with research on more advantaged fathers, which shows that they actively select, interpret, and redefine ideas about paternal involvement in ways that are consistent with their abilities. For example, Kerry Daly (1995) writes that the more advantaged men in his study drew up models of fatherhood that "were fragmented as they selected particular behaviors to incorporate into their roles." The finding that both higher- and lower-income men draw on different models of fatherhood also reflects a cultural context where men in different socioeconomic locations now have more choices about how to be a good father (Gerson 1993).

This way of understanding paternal responsibility also had implications for parents' participation in the child support system. Policy debates have often distinguished responsible fathers, who act as economic providers for their families, from "deadbeat dads" who try to evade child support enforcement. However, the parents I interviewed more often drew symbolic boundaries between responsible and irresponsible fathers on the basis of whether they were forced to pay child support through the legal system rather than fulfilling their obligations voluntarily. As Larry, an African American father I interviewed, explained,

A lot of dads are deadbeat dads. A lot of mothers are deadbeat mothers. But they call them deadbeat dads because they're not paying child support to the

⁶To assess the generalizability of these results in a nationally representative sample of unmarried parents, I placed a question on the Fragile Families survey asking parents to rank fathering activities. Consistent with the parents I interviewed, "love and affection" was ranked as the most important activity, "teaching children about life" and "acting as an authority figure" together were ranked as the second most important activity, and "providing financial support" appeared as the third most important fathering activity (Waller 2002).

establishment. You know, a lot of people, a lot of people don't like paying child support. A friend of mine just got out of jail day before yesterday. Spent ten days in jail for child support, and he does everything in the world for his son. He just doesn't like the idea of [them] taking the money.

While parents in this study endorsed the principle of child support, they typically believed that establishing a legal support order was appropriate only when fathers did not willingly accept their responsibility. According to parents' accounts, part of the reason they were reluctant to participate in the formal system had to do with the special rules that applied to child support when the custodial parent is receiving public assistance. Specifically, welfare recipients are required to cooperate with the state in locating noncustodial parents and obtaining support payments; they must also assign all rights to child support to the state up to the amount of aid received. Paralleling the findings of previous qualitative studies (e.g., Edin and Lein 1997), the parents I interviewed typically believed that their children could benefit more financially if they could keep informal support from the father on top of the mother's welfare payment.⁷

Although economic theory also predicts that these disincentives would deter parents from participating in the formal system, less has been known about the meaning of economic support for low-income parents and how this relates to their preferences for informal support. Cultural sociologists and anthropologists have examined how money is classified within the context of social exchanges, for example, by designating some types of money as more affective than instrumental in character. Writing about the emotional significance of gifts in American society, Viviana Zelizer (1994, 79) observes that the value of a financial gift exchanged between family members "was not determined by its price; a gift was thus to be set apart from a payment." Similarly, the parents I interviewed drew distinctions between the meaning of fathers' "forced" child support payments and their voluntary gifts of both cash and in-kind contributions, such as diapers, clothes, food, medicine, or toys. Within this classification, voluntary contributions were viewed as more authentic expressions of paternal love and responsibility and were assumed to have greater emotional significance to children than mandatory child support payments. As Tony explained,

It would be a whole lot better for the kid, for the dad, for the mother, if the money was coming straight from him ... 'cause eventually the child as it gets older knows what child support is, knows that his father ain't been around. So it's like, "Damn. My father don't buy me nothing, but he pay child support." Who wanna say that? What kid wanna grow up knowing, "Well my father pay child support, but he don't buy me nothing"? ... A child would rather have his father bring him five pair of jeans and some sneakers and some shirts than a check in the mail.... The material stuff, [at] a child's age, is a whole lot more than paper.... It would show more love.

It is important to note that many fathers in this study also had difficulty complying with their child support orders while providing informal support and meeting their own basic expenses.⁸ When fathers chose to make direct contributions to their children rather than making support payments to the state, they were subject to tough enforcement practices, including the threat of incarceration.⁹ Fathers in this situation often believed that heightened enforcement efforts were directed at nonresident fathers indiscriminately, regardless of their effort to support or be involved with their children. Some mothers also worried that enforcement practices that attempted to force compliance would increase conflict in their

⁷See Waller and Plotnick (2001) for a review of these qualitative studies.

⁸In addition to fathers having low skill and educational levels, orders could also be set at high percentages of their incomes when men's income was imputed, orders were set retroactively, and/or men were charged high rates of interest on child support arrearages. Without legal representation, fathers could also have difficulty modifying their child support orders if they lost their jobs or were incarcerated (see Waller and Plotnick 2001).

coparenting relationships, ultimately reducing fathers' willingness to establish close emotional bonds with their children or to provide direct support. As such, many mothers said they would turn to the formal child support system only as a last resort for those men who were unwilling to make an effort to accept their responsibility for children voluntarily.

Paternal caregiving

In recent years, many community-based fatherhood programs have tried to encourage men's active participation in parenting in addition to their child support payments. Survey data show that unmarried and divorced fathers often decrease their involvement with children over time (Argys et al. 2006), but others remain highly involved with their children, and a minority actually increase their involvement in the years after separating from their children's mothers (Manning and Smock 1999). Scholars interested in understanding fathers' motivations for involvement have often focused on middle-class men who share caregiving responsibilities with women, but the reasons why some disadvantaged fathers are highly involved with children have rarely been investigated.

To examine the meaning of noneconomic forms of paternal involvement in disadvantaged families, I was again interested in understanding the cultural repertoire or "toolkit" that informed disadvantaged men's and women's parenting strategies. By taking advantage of longitudinal data I collected from parents at the Oakland, California, site of the Fragile Families study, I observed that men who assumed major caregiving responsibilities in the first four years after their children's birth took three different paths to involvement (Waller 2009). In particular, interviews with parents indicate that while some motivated and skilled men actively chose to become caregivers with the support of mothers, 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. In each of these situations, parents gave somewhat different rationales for why fathers assumed a nontraditional parenting role, some of which overlapped with those documented in studies of shared parenting in middle-class families.

In particular, previous research suggests that ideas about equity (which emphasize the fairness of dividing domestic tasks between men and women), child-centeredness (which prioritize children's well-being), and commitment (which prioritize their relationship with the mother and child over male autonomy) explain why some middle-class fathers choose to share child care responsibilities with their partners (Coltrane 1996; Gerson 1993). The fathers in my study who actively chose a caregiving role referred to similar ideas, 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, an African American father of one, explained why he thinks it is better for children to have two fully 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.

⁹State and federal governments now have a number of new tools to strengthen their compliance and collect payments when fathers are delinquent on their payments, including a national system for locating and tracking noncustodial parents; automatic wage withholding; intercepting tax refunds; imposing liens on noncustodial parents' property; restricting or suspending driver's, professional, and occupational licenses; hiring private collection agencies; and bringing criminal or civil cases against noncustodial parents (Waller and Plotnick 2001).

In contrast to those men who “selected into” caregiving, another group of disadvantaged fathers became motivated to care for children in response to the constraints they faced in the labor market, when they had difficulty finding full-time employment. Becky, a Latina mother of two, explained that her partner began caring for her children on a daily basis when he was out of work: “He [the father] do little side jobs [but] it’s not like a payroll job, like everyday.... He watches my kids every day.” While men’s child care represents a real economic contribution to their households, parents also talked about it in reference to ideas about mutual obligation and reciprocity between the mother and father. These results parallel both older and more recent studies of low-income, African American families of kin-based networks in which family members trade goods and services to ensure their family’s survival (Edin and Lein 1997; Roy and Burton 2007; Stack 1974).

Finally, a third group of nonresident fathers 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 caregiver. For example, Mali explained why he assumed informal custody after Michelle, his former partner, 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.

Previous studies have documented how an adaptive family structure can be a critical tool for managing life transitions and meeting important parenting responsibilities in low-income African American households (Jarrett and Burton 1999). Coltrane, Parke, and Adams (2004, 186) also interpret the willingness of many Mexican American men to share family work in regard to ideas about familism, or “high levels of family cohesion, cooperation, and reciprocity [which] may encourage them to focus on the health and well being of their children and to interact with them in intimate ways.” In this study, parents’ explanations about why fathers were motivated to take on primary caregiving responsibilities when mothers faced new challenges reflected these community-based ideas about family adaptation and familism. They were also generally consistent with the “best interests of the child” doctrine now typically used to determine child custody in the United States.¹⁰

The fact that parents could cite diverse motivations for paternal caregiving again conflicts with earlier assumptions about the cultural homogeneity of low-income communities. In *Soulside*, Ulf Hannerz (1969, 191) observed that residents of poor communities have a broad cultural repertoire, or “items of culture which are somehow stored in [them],” based on their exposure to “mainstream” to “ghetto specific” beliefs and modes of behavior. More than three decades later, David Harding (2007) found that residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods exhibited greater cultural heterogeneity in regard to sexual and romantic relationships than their more advantaged counterparts. According to Harding, this diversity allowed them to deploy multiple, and sometimes competing, cultural models to solve different types of problems. Indeed, cultural diversity may be necessary for residents of low-income communities to manage the complex challenges associated with poverty (Lamont and Small 2008).

¹⁰This idea has largely replaced the “tender years” doctrine, which usually gave a strong preference to the mother as the primary caregiver. See American Bar Association, “Deciding Factors in Awarding Child Custody,” http://www.abanet.org/publiced/practical/custody_momdat.html.

In both the New Jersey and California studies, low-income parents' participation in different families and communities, their institutional memberships, and their consumption of media and popular culture all seemed to contribute to the richness of their cultural repertoires (Gadsden 1999; Pleck 1987; Waller 2002). By drawing on a variety of cultural resources to explain why some men were highly involved as their children's caregivers, parents were able to respond to situational challenges associated with the care of their children. Parents' ability to access different cultural tools also gave them the flexibility to switch rationales for involvement over time, as their circumstances changed.

Union transitions

Recent policy initiatives have also begun to emphasize marriage and union stability as a third way of strengthening men's ties to poor children, in light of evidence that fathers seem to view their relationship with the mother and child as a "package deal" (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991; Townsend 2002). Some of these efforts have been guided by the assumption that low-income couples, and men in particular, need to be convinced of the value of sustaining long-term commitments. However, we know little about how low-income couples' perceptions of the many challenges they are facing may shape their decisions to maintain or dissolve their romantic unions (Fein and Ooms 2006).

To examine the question of why some low-income couples are more likely to stay together than others, I again turn to the longitudinal interviews I conducted with new parents who participated in my Oakland study. For this investigation, I drew on Mario Small's (2002) narrative frame analysis to examine how disadvantaged couples interpreted some of the tensions they faced in the early stages of their relationships (Waller 2008). In particular, I approached narrative frames as the cultural categories through which low-income couples' perceptions of the relationship are filtered, highlighting some aspects of their experiences over others, and which make sense within the ongoing stories they tell about their relationships (Small 2002). Narrative frames may be thought of as mechanisms that make some outcomes more possible or likely than others. They are also dynamic because they emerge from ongoing processes of interaction (Benford and Snow 2000; Small 2002; Tannen 1993).

In the first part of this analysis, I examined the narrative frames through which couples in stable unions (those who stayed together in the four years after their children's births) interpreted tensions in their relationships compared to couples in unstable unions (those that dissolved during the study). Interviews when their child was age one showed that partners in both stable and unstable unions identified common tensions over their economic and housing situations, the division of child care and household responsibilities, and personal problems with one or both of the partners. In addition, partners in unstable relationships also highlighted tensions around communication, trust, and their family and social networks, which they viewed both as resulting from and fueling other tensions between them. Perceiving several interacting sources of tension led partners in unstable unions to frame the tensions they were experiencing as problematic and intractable. In contrast, partners in stable unions who had some of the same risks for union dissolution viewed tensions in their relationship as more manageable and amenable to change.

The accounts of two young African American couples with similar socioeconomic barriers to relationship stability illustrate how tensions that were considered intolerable in one situation were viewed as manageable in another. While economic problems were identified by both couples as a major source of tension, partners in stable relationships identified some concrete changes, such as obtaining a GED and "a good job with benefits," that would reduce their conflicts over money. These partners also highlighted strengths in other areas of their relationship that made their economic difficulties more manageable. As Renee

explained, “He’s coming out to be a great father.... I trust him a lot.... My mom likes him a lot.... We get along real well. We might argue, but we’ll sit down, talk it over.” In contrast, partners in unstable unions, like Tina, often viewed economic problems as exacerbating other conflicts in their relationships. As such, she felt that a series of changes would need to take place to ease these tensions, such as her partner’s “growing up,” trying harder to obtain a job, and finding different friends.

The way couples framed these challenges makes sense within the narratives couples told about their relationships. For example, parents in stable unions often presented their relationships as being on a positive trajectory, either because of making a good “choice” or having a strong “commitment” to the relationship. Jane, a white mother of two, attributed her progress with Arthur to the fact that “we had both been in real bad relationships in the past” and had consciously chosen a relationship that was free of drugs and violence. Arthur also explained the progression of their relationship in regard to choosing a compatible partner:

I liked Jane’s company, we got along, she’s real mellow and mature.... So it’s like we just kind of jived together on a lot of levels. And then one day she said “I got something to tell you. I’m pregnant.” ... I could just tell down here it was going to be okay.... I felt like I could probably stay for a long time. I didn’t see any major changes occurring or it wasn’t like she had any character defects that really bothered me that I was going to have to like shut my eyes to.... On a deeper level, I think we’ve grown closer.

Other parents in stable unions used language about the natural “growth” of the relationship or willingness to “work” on it to explain why their relationship continued to progress.

Conversely, couples who dissolved their unions tended to describe the course of their relationships as both volatile and uncertain, drawing on some of the same ideas about romantic unions to explain their failure to make progress. Jim said that he and his partner did not continue to grow as a couple because they never consciously chose to move in together or made a commitment to being in a long-term relationship.

To me, it didn’t happen right. There was never a commitment.... The timing was bad, the relationship was not good. She was into breaking up with me anyway.... We still have good days and bad days.... Personally, deep inside me, I don’t think anything’s been resolved.... So from one day to another, I’m really not sure. And I cannot build or plan our future based on that.

While partners in unstable unions suggested that the kind of tensions they experienced generated both public and private misgivings about the relationship, the narratives of stable partners also helped them construct an identity as a highly compatible or committed couple that could make it against the odds.

Cultural sociologists have examined how partners’ explanations of union longevity and dissolution reflect shared languages for talking about enduring unions in contemporary society (Reissman 1990; Swidler 2001). This literature suggests that partners’ interpretations of the success or failure of their relationship are drawn from an accessible repertoire of accounts that allows them to make sense of their experiences in the relationship. Ann Swidler (2001) has noted that two of the primary ways of talking about enduring unions in contemporary American culture—as either a voluntary choice or as a binding commitment—have roots in expressive individualism and religious traditions. Similarly, Eva Illouz (1997) has described a “realist” model of relationships informed by therapeutic and economic discourses that suggest that love develops over time from a process of information-gathering and “work” on the relationship. According to these and other

scholars, the way couples characterize their relationship trajectories seems to be less important for its stability than the fact that they are able to make sense of it within an existing cultural model (Swidler 2001) and perceive their relationship to be moving forward (Karney and Frye 2002).

In the second part of this analysis, I drew on interviews with parents when their children were age four to examine the conditions under which parents maintained or changed narrative frames and how these interpretations guided parents' decisions about their relationships. Follow-up interviews with parents showed that the narrative frames they constructed around tensions in their relationship at the first interview were typically applied to new and ongoing issues they faced in the coming years, and these interpretations informed couples' decisions to maintain or dissolve their unions. For example, when interviewed three years later, partners in stable unions, like Arthur and Jane, continued to frame tensions in their relationship as manageable and to suggest that their relationship was on an upward trajectory, even after new tensions emerged over their division of child care responsibilities and their interactions with Arthur's ex-wife: "I just basically say something and he says, 'Oh, oh okay, I understand.' And then it's taken care of. And that's it.... You know how some people grow apart from each other? I think him and I are growing together."

Although narrative frames are likely to be reproduced if people's expectations about the future are met (Tannen 1993), previous research suggests that certain unexpected events may make it more difficult to sustain an ongoing narrative, and they may shift frames to make sense of these new developments (Small 2002). Similarly, couples in this study sometimes modified their accounts in response to unexpected negative or positive developments that transformed their basic understanding of the relationship, such as abuse by the father or either partner overcoming a drug problem. For example, at the first interview, Joaquin, a first-time Latino father, was uncertain about his future with Hope, saying there was "no use either, in being with someone if you don't trust." In addition to tensions over trust, Hope believed problems in their relationship were intractable because of Joaquin's drug use, their "constant arguing," and their unstable living situation. At the second interview, however, Hope framed the economic tensions they were facing as more manageable in the context of a committed relationship that was moving forward.

Most of the time why we argue is because of that. But other than that, we get along fine.... A lot has changed, I think. He's grown up a lot.... He came out a different person. He's more family oriented. He worries if there's milk, or we have to go get the baby what he needs. He helps me. I think he changed.

Joaquin explained that this change occurred after he participated in a program for incarcerated fathers that helped him stop using drugs, agreeing with Hope that "we don't really have no trips no more.... She hung in there, and I had to make a change to come back."

By interviewing parents at two different periods of time, I can have more confidence that these narrative frames were articulated before couples decided to either maintain or dissolve their relationships. At the same time, it is possible that some partners in unstable unions could already anticipate what would happen in a relationship at the first interview. As such, the narrative frames they initially used could be interpreted as a justification for couples' future behavior rather than as guiding their subsequent decisions. As noted previously, researchers have often had difficulty identifying values and attitudes in poor communities that have a causal influence on couples' behavior. Rather than operating like independent variables, however, Small observes that it may be more useful to think of narrative frames in regard to a "constraint-possibility" relationship, making some outcomes more possible or

likely than others (Lamont and Small 2008). This distinction is important because it helps us understand why low-income couples who seem to have the same aspirations for marriage as their higher-income counterparts may be less inclined to make this transition when facing a particular set of challenges that they perceive to be unmanageable or intractable within the context of their current relationships.

Discussion

This article has illustrated how viewing paternal involvement through a cultural lens can provide a more complete picture of disadvantaged fathers' connections to mothers and children than has been presented in the policy literature. In addition to suggesting mechanisms and outcomes that could be considered in new large-scale data collection efforts focusing on low-income fathers (Cabrera et al. 2002), the results from these studies point to some specific ways of redesigning policies and programs to take the cultural dimensions of low-income men's ties to families into account.

First, policy studies have tended to model fathers' decisions about paying child support primarily as a function of their economic incentives. By examining the meaning of paternal responsibility and support in low-income families, we can see that these decisions are also informed by tools within parents' cultural repertoires for defining what it means to be a good father. The picture that emerges is not one of parents' disconnection from, or weaker commitment to, mainstream values, as earlier cultural studies and anecdotal evidence about poor fathers suggest. Overall, however, parents' accounts do indicate that the models and criteria they use to differentiate responsible from irresponsible fathers—based on ideas about emotional involvement and paternal guidance—conflict with some key assumptions and goals of child support policy.

An important implication from the results of this analysis is that child support policies should be sensitive to the models of fatherhood that resonate in low-income communities. Some community-based fatherhood programs have acknowledged the importance of these models by offering a variety of services to facilitate men's emotional bonds with and mentoring of children, in addition to their compliance with child support enforcement. My interviews suggest that recognizing the meaning of fathers' direct monetary and in-kind contributions may also help increase the legitimacy of the child support system in the eyes of disadvantaged parents, making participation more likely. For example, in cases where such informal contributions were well documented, courts could use them to offset child support arrearages men accrued while paying informal support or consider them in determining current child support orders (see also Waller and Plotnick 2001; Waller 2002). Finally, parents may be more willing to cooperate with child support requirements if men's voluntary efforts to support their children are recognized, honoring the boundaries they draw between a "responsible father" and "deadbeat dad." One way to validate these efforts might be for the federal government or individual states to match support payments made by low-income fathers and phase out those matching funds at higher income levels (Primus and Daugirdas 2000). On the other hand, parents' accounts suggest that heightened enforcement practices that attempt to "force" men's compliance and ignore their efforts to be responsible fathers could have the unintended consequence of reducing their involvement.

A second set of observations from my interviews with disadvantaged parents relates to the policy literature on low-income men's engagement with children. While previous studies have often focused on explaining the link between men's child support payments and their interactions with children, cultural factors that may encourage paternal involvement have often remained "unobserved" in empirical analyses. Parents' accounts suggest that disadvantaged fathers have motivations to become highly involved with their children that

extend well beyond their concerns about child support, some of which overlap with those of involved fathers in middle-class families and some of which reflect community ideas about family stability. The rationales parents give for why men may be expected to assume a caregiving role not only illustrate the cultural heterogeneity of low-income communities but also indicate how the richness of disadvantaged parents' cultural repertoires helps them develop different parenting strategies in response to the complex challenges they face.

Despite the almost exclusive focus on shared parenting in middle-class families, these results suggest that fatherhood policies and programs should also recognize that many disadvantaged men are assuming important parenting responsibilities for at-risk children. Federal demonstrations of fatherhood programs have tended to target men who are behind on their child support payments and who have lost contact with their children, sometimes offering these men the choice between participating in a program or going to jail; few fatherhood programs have been designed specifically to meet the needs of paternal caregivers (Waller 2009). Evaluations of these programs also show that recruitment of uninvolved fathers has often been difficult. By understanding and building upon the reasons low-income men give for taking on a caregiving role, fatherhood programs may also have tools besides the threat of child support enforcement to encourage these men to participate. On the other hand, excluding men who have already shown a willingness to share parenting with mothers does little to promote a type of involvement that may be highly beneficial for children and may even discourage it.

Finally, taking a closer look at how low-income parents make sense of early challenges they are facing as a couple helps fill in a story about union transitions that is based primarily on an examination of the economic determinants of marriage. In particular, it shows that couples framed economic and other tensions in their current relationships as more or less manageable depending upon how they characterized the complexity of problems they were facing and their relationship trajectories. In recent years, states have taken a number of steps to address the cultural dimensions of marriage, including establishing media campaigns and other initiatives to promote its importance (Ooms, Bouchet, and Parke 2004). An investigation of low-income couples' narrative frames also indicates why disadvantaged parents who embrace "mainstream" ideas about enduring unions may dissolve their relationships, making paternal involvement more challenging, and points to different avenues for policy intervention.

In the same way that individual therapy may be thought of as an opportunity for story repair (Howard 1991), for example, interventions for low-income couples may be able to help partners frame early challenges as more tractable, to create a shared identity as a couple who can "beat the odds," to recognize progress as individuals and as a couple, and to rethink older narratives in light of positive developments. Phil and Carolyn Cowan (e.g., Cowan and Cowan 1992/2000; Cowan et al. 2009) have described the success of their "preventive interventions" in strengthening couples' romantic and parenting relationships, before distress and dissatisfaction in these relationships become intractable. The goal of these intensive interventions led by highly trained clinical staff has not been to promote a particular type of relationship as normative, as is common in many recent marriage programs and initiatives, but rather to maintain relationship satisfaction, to facilitate fathers' interactions with children, and to enhance children's well-being.

As these examples illustrate, a cultural analysis of men's ties to families may help increase the effectiveness of new policy initiatives by shedding new light on the meaning of low-income parents' choices related to parenting and romantic unions. At the same time, it is important to remember that for many disadvantaged parents, these decisions are made in circumstances of economic duress. Rather than diverting money from other social safety net

programs for disadvantaged families to support fatherhood initiatives, policy efforts to address the cultural dimensions of low-income men's ties to mothers and children are therefore likely to work better by complementing, rather than replacing, efforts to alleviate socioeconomic barriers to paternal involvement.

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