The Consequences of Fatherhood for Men's Lives

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Online publication date: 28 May 2010
INTRODUCTION

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This essay introduces an issue of Research in Human Development devoted to understanding “The Consequences of Fatherhood for Men’s Lives,” highlighting its often counterintuitive findings and explanations. The opening field-building article (by Richard A. Settersten, Jr. and Doris Cancel-Tirado) is followed by three empirical articles built around the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and its offshoots. These articles explore the consequences of fatherhood for relationships with partners and parents (by Jaslean J. La Taillade, Sandra Hofferth, and Vanessa R. Wight), employment (by Kevin Roy, Colleen K. Vesely, Megan Fitzgerald, and Nicolle Buckmiller Jones), and assets (by Jeffrey Dew and David J. Eggebeen).

During the past two decades, fathers moved from the periphery toward center stage in family research and public policy. The newfound attention to fathers, however, largely focuses on how different levels and types of father involvement—with an emphasis on the problematic sides of father involvement—affect the development of children and the lives of mothers.

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This issue of *Research in Human Development* instead turns attention to the consequences of fatherhood for men’s development and life courses. It contains four articles, one of which is a field-building and agenda-setting article and the remaining three of which are empirical articles that were commissioned for this issue and peer reviewed.

In the opening article, “Fatherhood as a Hidden Variable in Men’s Development and Life Courses,” Doris Cancel-Tirado and I synthesize the state of scientific evidence on the topic and set an interdisciplinary agenda for the field. Our understanding of fathers today and in the future must be set against the great shake-ups that have occurred in family structure and relationships; in education, the labor market, and economy; and in gender roles and identity, among other arenas. Fathers and fathers’ experiences have also become more diverse than ever before. We highlight some of the powerful consequences that fatherhood brings to men’s personal growth and identity, social relationships, health and well-being, and work and education. Given the paucity of research on the consequences of fatherhood for men, we argue that fatherhood may be a critical but hidden variable that lurks beneath scientific knowledge about men’s development and life courses. We highlight some of the concerns of growing proportions of men who are, for a variety of reasons, vulnerable as fathers and who have largely been excluded from theories and research. However, we also draw attention to the fact that men who are struggling in their roles as fathers are not only men at the margins. They are, increasingly, every man. We ask whether being a “good” father is becoming a new privilege, and how social institutions and policies might be rearchitected to better support men and fathers. We also highlight important new directions for scholarship.

We then turn to three fresh empirical articles that explore the consequences of fatherhood for relationships with partners and parents, employment, and assets, respectively. All three articles have been built around the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth or its offshoots, which are arguably the best longitudinal data sources in the United States for understanding the early adult years. One article (by Jeff Dew and Dave Eggebeen) is based on analyses of the original 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) cohort, and data from the 1979 and 1985 to 2000 waves. The other two articles (by Jaslean La Taillade and her colleagues and by Kevin Roy and his colleagues) are based on analyses of the NLSY79 Young Adult Survey and anchored in the 2006 wave.

For readers unfamiliar with these data sets, the original NLSY79 cohort was a nationally representative sample of youth age 14 to 22 years in 1979. They were interviewed annually through 1994 and have been interviewed biennially since. The NLSY79 was later expanded to include the children born to all female respondents from the original cohort. These are known as the NLSY Young Adult Surveys. Since 1988, data have been gathered biennially from children age 10 and older. From 1988 to 1994, children were asked questions about a
focused set of topics appropriate to a pre- and early-adolescent population (e.g., parent–child interactions, attitudes toward school, dating and friendship, religion, health, substance abuse, and responsibilities at home). Since 1994, however, those age 15 and older have completed a comprehensive questionnaire similar to that administered to the NLSY79 respondents.

The first of the three empirical articles, “The Consequences of Fatherhood for Young Men’s Relationships with Partners and Parents,” comes from Jaslean La Taillade, Sandra Hofferth, and Vanessa Wight. Their article focuses on the transition to fatherhood and how the timing of first fatherhood, in particular, relates to the quality of men’s relationships with other key adults—partners and parents. La Taillade and her colleagues also disentangle these effects for men who did and did not live with their first child at birth. They find that becoming a father is associated with a greater likelihood of being in a committed intimate relationship over time, though this is not true of nonresidential fathers or men who experienced early fatherhood, even if they live with their child at birth. These men are no more likely to be in a committed relationship than men who are not fathers, and they have significant instability and conflict in their relationships.

La Taillade and her colleagues also find that becoming a father is associated with greater closeness in relationships with one’s own mother and father. Surprisingly, these positive effects are even stronger for fathers who did not live with their child at birth. Also contrary to their expectations, teenage nonresident fathers, especially those who are partnered, report greater closeness to their mothers than other men. However, being a young father at first birth is associated with being less close to one’s own father, and being an older father at first birth is associated with greater closeness to one’s father. Throughout their article, La Taillade and her colleagues offer provocative interpretations for their findings, some of which shock commonsense assumptions and those that underlie the research literature.

The next article is “Young Fathers at Work: The Influence of Parental Close-ness and Contact on Employment” by Kevin Roy, Colleen Vesely, Megan Fitzgerald, and Nicolle Buckmiller Jones. Their article explores how the relationships between young fathers and their parents affect the employment of young fathers during the early adult years. Research on the transition to adulthood has called attention to the twenties as a protracted period of human capital accumulation in which young people pursue higher education and training and delay marriage and childbearing. However, this moratorium for exploration is not typical of all young adults. A case in point: young men who become fathers early must confront the need to assume parental responsibilities. Their status as early fathers may exacerbate the risks that most of these young men already face—but it may also offer opportunities for growth, particularly in contributing to the well-being of their children. Roy and colleagues therefore turn their attention to young fathers’ attachment to the labor force, and to the role of closeness and contact with one’s own parents in aiding it.
Surprisingly, Roy and his colleagues do not find support for the hypothesis that greater levels of contact and closeness with parents, or greater parental involvement in adolescence, are associated with full-time employment or more work hours for young fathers. Upon closer examination, however, they find that the effects of closeness with fathers differ across three groups of young fathers. Surprisingly, young fathers at both ends of the spectrum—those who are employed full-time and with those who are unemployed—are nowhere near as likely to have close relationships with their fathers as those who are underemployed, who show the highest levels of closeness to their own fathers.

Roy and his colleagues also find little support for hypotheses that assume a strong link between risk factors rooted in traditional “demographic” factors (e.g., poverty, race) or one’s personal history (e.g., alcohol use, depression, delinquency) and the work patterns of young fathers. The only exceptions here are being very young or having a prior conviction—these carry strong negative effects on the employment of fathers. Roy and his colleagues bring some provocative interpretations to bear on their often counterintuitive findings.

In the final article, “Beyond the Wage Premium: Fatherhood and Asset Accumulation,” Jeffrey Dew and David Eggebeen examine how fatherhood is associated with the accumulation of assets over time. Their study charts new terrain, not only in examining the link between fatherhood and asset accumulation, but especially in considering unmarried fathers alongside married fathers. For all men, the transition to fatherhood is associated with an average increase in asset levels—but despite an initial spike for everyone, the assets of married and unmarried fathers diverge dramatically over time. Married fathers accumulate assets at a higher rate than their nonfather counterparts, and unmarried fathers have the lowest rates of asset accumulation of all men. The age and race of fathers also play surprising and counterintuitive roles. Men who are older at the transition to fatherhood have lower starting points and rates of accumulation, and being African American brings a much larger jump in asset levels than it does for White fathers. Dew and Eggebeen offer compelling explanations for their groundbreaking and often shocking findings.

In closing, I wish to thank Doris Cancel-Tirado for her assistance in tracking reviews and the many versions of files that have been exchanged, as well as Jack Day for his assistance in preparing the manuscripts for publication. I also wish to express my gratitude to former editor Erin Phelps, current co-editors Carolyn Aldwin and Bill Kurtines, and the editorial board for their interest in the project. Warm thanks also go out to Lauren White, Leslie Dickinson, and Amanda Taylor, who have all served as editorial assistants of the journal during the project. Finally, I send my deep appreciation to the 13 reviewers who provided critical and detailed feedback on the manuscripts—and to the authors, who took their already insightful articles through several rounds of revision to make them even better.