

## **In Their Own Voices**

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**Roy:** This is a study of men with multiple children and multiple families, looking particularly at the fathers' involvement with children. Narratives were collected on men's characteristics; then interviews probed who the men are as fathers currently as well as their experiences growing up, education and work history, and family history. These were charted on calendar grids so there were indications of when changes happened to fathers and the types of environment that they had at different points in their lives. Grounded theory was used when analyzing data.

One group is specifically from a Head Start site. The sample is drawn from 146 life history interviews collected during their participation in four different projects in Indiana and Illinois, mostly Chicago and Indianapolis. Two of those projects were fathering programs based in community colleges. One group of men was incarcerated in a work release program and another group lived in Chicago communities. Of those 146 fathers, 58 of them (approximately 40 percent) had children in multiple families. The sample is about 75% African American. Fathers' ages ranged from 18 to 45, with most of the fathers in their 20s. One common factor among all fathers was that their children were eligible for TANF.

There were 187 children, with about half of the fathers moving in and out of their lives. Of the 58 fathers who have multiple children, about half of them had consistent involvement across these families; that is, in first, second, and third families, involvement was always absent, always present, or always transitory. About 40% had greater involvement in later families, with 15% having less involvement in second families. If their first family was transitory, in subsequent families one quarter of fathers were present or at least transitory later on. Not many fathers went from absent to present.

Mothers' extended kin are for the most part the keepers of families. For men who have multiple children and multiple families, it is incumbent to keep in contact with the family of the mother if they want to stay involved in these families because typically mothers are not going to do that for them. In the first family the father is trying out his role at a young age with few resources and high expectations. Failure is common. Often, when they have second children they are not going to be as committed or involved because that first failure was difficult. On the flip side there were some men who became more involved, which was a majority in some of the data sets.

The third theme is of father-centered networks. Fathers in the study saw themselves as centers of a father-centered network of children. They were the ones that could bind children together through paternal ties.

Involvement within and across these families is likely to be transitory, dynamic, and difficult. It is inappropriate to say men are absent or present, even custodial or noncustodial, because fathers have different children in different situations that change over time. It is interesting that there are signs that if men, are successful with the second family, they may loop back and reconnect with children from the first family. The data are longitudinal so in many cases where men who have

never met their own fathers have them reenter their lives at the age of 20 or 25. Fathering needs to be thought of in a longitudinal sense.

**Cabrera:** The data presented comes from in-depth, qualitative interviews from 25 fathers, aged 21 to 46 years, with 5-7 year olds. The majority of the children are boys, racially and ethnically diverse. Similar to other mother-father relationship studies, 44% of the fathers lived with the children and the partners with 16% of them married. Thirty-six percent said that they were friends, 25% had no relationship and had not seen the child in over a year. Sixty percent worked full time, and the majority had a high school degree. Researchers looked at how these men think about and talk about relationships, not only with the children but also with the partners and extended kin. Grounded theory was used, and data were analyzed using techniques from grounded theory in analytical induction approaches.

Fathers generally described how they started dating as a gradual process of getting to know each other, spending a good deal of time together, and developing into a more serious relationship. It was not long after courtship that the relationship led naturally into moving in together, often because of an unplanned pregnancy. Although fathers perceived the relationship with their partners as loving, they did acknowledge having conflict. Many were reflective about the causes of the conflict stating that the main source of conflict was parenting. This was especially true as they transitioned from the courtship phase to parenting and having more responsibility.

Couples often tried to stay together, however they did not have the means to resolve the conflicts. Fathers did try to solve conflicts, and expressed many difficulties in trying to meet their partner's needs, their children's, and their own. This stress often led to conflict that seriously jeopardized their relationship with their partner. Although conflict was not resolved, they sometimes stayed together for the children's sake.

The fathers spoke of, "falling out of love." They did not understand it, but were reflective about the complexity of relationships and the desire to stay together. However, when love was no longer there conflict often escalated. There are rich qualitative data that give a sense of how these men form relationships, how they stay and maintain them, and what eventually breaks them apart.

**Fagan:** The previous paper focused on the formation, trajectory, maintenance, and disillusion of partner relationships among Early Head Start families. The authors indicated that the fathers were involved in various types of relationships with the child's mother. Similar to young married couples in general, the young parents had good intentions. Fathers talked about their positive feelings for the mother, being in love, and wanting to have a baby together. After the birth of the child there is increasing conflict and tension. Differences between adults in terms of their values and behaviors become pronounced. Fathers talked about having to strike a balance with mothers, the need for communication, the tendency to withdraw, and the effects of gate keeping. One of the key points the authors wanted to communicate was that cohabiting, romantically involved, friend-only, or acquaintance-only couples with low incomes have many of the same struggles and challenges as married couples with higher incomes.

This raises the question of why partner relationships are so tenuous, particularly among unmarried, noncohabiting couples. All relationships during the transition to parenthood are tenuous. If the status of only nonmarried, noncohabiting fathers is examined, most of them at that point are romantically involved with the mothers. At the birth of the child, the majority of the relationships are still romantic. Within 1 year, 60% of those couples transition out of a romantic relationship.

Research has generally shown that as the degree of closeness between fathers and mothers decreases, the likelihood that fathers stay involved with their children diminishes. However, there appears to be some empirical support from the Current Population Survey and The Fragile Family Study that this is changing, and that unmarried fathers have increased their involvement with children. If this is the case then more should be known about the ways in which unmarried and nonresident couples are negotiating parenting roles.

The propensity of these fathers to experience multiple transitions leads Roy to refer to a subsample of the fathers as transitory. The focus was on the transitions associated with having multiple children with multiple mothers. However, for fathers living in poverty in the United States, transitions are probably normative, due to multiple moves, legal entanglements, incarceration, job changes, and changes in income.

The family lives of fathers with low incomes are complex. An ecological perspective suggests that behaviors are a logical adaptation in an attempt to achieve balance with one's environment. Given the lack of stability in conditions of extreme poverty, it makes some sense that being able to adapt to regular family change is consistent with survival in poverty. Families with low incomes have learned to adapt to difficult situations and there is a great deal of skill and strength in their adaptation.

**Comment:** The Early Head Start father consortium developed a study to look at social fathers. They could be biological fathers who regularly saw the child or men who not biological fathers but were playing a role in these children's lives. Of 800 fathers that were interviewed, only 56 were identified as social fathers. The 56 fathers described were playing enormous roles in care giving, however, this was not as high a number as was expected.

**Cabrera:** Social fathers include uncles and boyfriends and anybody in between. Coding grandfathers is more difficult methodologically and conceptually because grandfathers are biologically invested.

**Comment:** Another point is the difficulty in having mothers identify the right person as a social father or perhaps not identify someone who is. There are instances where mothers say that their new boyfriend is now her child's father and is with him all the time. When that person was contacted, he would say that he had no intention of being there much longer.

**Cabrera:** People play different roles and functions at different points in time it may work out for the child. If there are many fathers, it can be a sign of instability; however one study of African American children showed that it was beneficial to have all these men involved and providing different things at different times.

**Roy:** There is a tradition in research on families with low incomes that men and women distrust each other, particularly among families of color. Much of it is related to not having resources and addressing the stresses of poverty. They have these long standing relationships that are not coresidential and not intimate, but they have potential. It is a relationship that stretches over many years. It should not be called “unrequited,” but it is an open-ended relationship that is full of conflict, yet it holds over time.

**Fagan:** There needs be a better understanding of what the relationship experience is like for children of men who are in transitory relationships.

**Cabrera:** That is our current interest. However, it is difficult to collect those data because access to the children is a challenge.