

7-1-2003

Situated Identities of Young, African American Fathers in Low-Income Urban Settings

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Reprinted from *Family Court Review*, Volume 41, Issue 3, July 2003, pages 381-399.

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SITUATED IDENTITIES OF YOUNG, AFRICAN AMERICAN FATHERS IN LOW-INCOME URBAN SETTINGS

Perspectives on Home, Street, and the System

Vivian L. Gadsden, Stanton E. F. Wortham, and Herbert M. Turner III

Young, low-income, African American fathers have been at the center of research, practice, and policy on families over the past decade. This article uses a “voicing” analytic technique to examine identities among young, low-income, African American fathers living in an urban setting; the intersections of these identities; and the fathers’ perceptions of the influences of familial, peer, and legal systems as barriers and resources in their development as fathers and the sustainability of their fathering roles. The primary questions addressed urban fathers’ representations of their transition to fatherhood, intergenerational relationships, transformative events, and visions of a possible self. Results from a survey, focus groups, and interviews suggest that the fathers seek to reinvent themselves and reconstruct their identities by separating from street life, redefine home as a place of stability, and challenge the practices of social and legal systems that appear to work against their responsible fathering.

Keywords: African American fathers; minority fathers; young, low-income fathers; urban fathers

For almost a decade, young, low-income African American fathers in urban settings have been at the center of research, practice, and policy discussions on fathers and families (Cochran, 1997; Waller, 1999). Often referred to as urban fathers, these men experience a set of life circumstances, problems with schooling and educational access, difficult social and legal encounters, and poverty that set them apart from other fathers, such as those who are middle class, White, or living in rural settings (Burton et al., 1998; Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 2000).

The concept of urban fathers is used as an umbrella term designed to capture the full gamut of characteristics associated with limited opportunity and social problems in urban settings. It reflects the tendency in academic and popular discourse to link urban-related issues with poverty, hardship, crime, incarceration, and a series of harsh life circumstances and negative characteristics. In discussions about fatherhood, the moniker typically serves as a code to designate African American and Latino fathers whose profiles include being poor, growing up in a mother-headed household, receiving poor schooling, and fathering children out of wedlock. However, the broad use of the term to denote the wide range of young fathers who are poor, living in urban settings, and minority is informative and problematic—narrowly depicting the nuanced experiences of this diverse population whose individual practices as fathers are derived from individual and shared contexts which have shaped their images of fatherhood (Gadsden, in press; Gadsden & Ray, 2002).

Fathers who occupy current public attention are disproportionately minority, living in urban settings, and intergenerationally poor. There are multiple reasons for the enormous

Authors’ Note: We wish to thank several people involved with this project: Aisha Ray, Howard Pinderhughes, Waldo Johnson, and Teresa Wojcik.

FAMILY COURT REVIEW, Vol. 41 No. 3, July 2003 381-399
DOI: 10.1177/1531244503254760
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interest in poor, unmarried fathers. First, such fathers often share the same socioeconomic status as poor mothers, and they have poor children. Second, issues around fatherhood have been tied to welfare reform outcomes, with high expectations that the two policy issues combined will result in reductions of pregnancies outside of marriage, since fathers traditionally have been considered to be culprits in the rise of welfare-dependent families. Observers expect that if these fathers become financially responsible for their children, the need for government support to these families will decrease.

Each of these reasons for the high level of interest in these fathers demonstrates how restrictive current frameworks used to study them actually are, as well as how limited the descriptors used to paint public portraits of them can be. First, prior to the recent wave of attention to fatherhood, African American fathers, irrespective of class, were among the least studied population of parents, with most research examining mothers and Caucasian fathers (Greene & Moore, 2000; Hans, Ray, Bernstein, & Halpern, 1997). Second, prior to the 1990s, most research and policy discussions about fathers focused on middle-income, typically Caucasian families and ranged from issues related to attachment and children's early development to questions about fathers' financial contributions to children and families (Gadsden & Hall, 1996; Lamb, 1998). Last, and related to the second point, research attended almost exclusively to married fathers who were coresiding with their children or to the effects of father absence in divorced and separated families. Little was known about never-married fathers, neither those who coresided with their children nor those who were absent from their children's daily lives (Lerman & Sorensen, 2000; Mincy & Pouncy, 1997).

This article attempts to address the narrow frameworks and portraits that have been used to examine the lives of low-income African American fathers in urban areas. Throughout this article, we are concerned with issues of individual identity among adolescent and young adult, low-income, African American fathers; the intersections of these identities; and the men's perceptions of the influences of familial, peer, and legal systems as barriers and resources in their development as fathers and the sustainability of their fathering roles. From the 1980s through the early 1990s, no body of work rigorously investigated the combined effects of personal, economic, racial, and familial dimensions of fatherhood which contribute to boys' and men's identity formation as fathers. Similarly, little work examined the ways in which educational, legal, and social systems complicate, constrain, or mediate young, African American fathers' ability to transition to new roles as responsible fathers and situate their new identities within family and community contexts.

TRANSITIONS TO PARENTING AND FATHERING: RESEARCH ISSUES AND CONTEXTS

Although motherhood and fatherhood are highly honored familial roles in most societies—particularly in the United States—the issues surrounding role transitions are poorly examined across all ethnic and income groups. In other words, our understanding of how young mothers and fathers identify with new parental roles, and how they are prepared by their society to assume roles as parents, is relatively limited (and often defaults to the norms of White, middle-class families), as is our knowledge of the nature of their transition to parenting and the responsibilities associated with it (Florsheim, Moore, Zollinger, MacDonald, & Sumida, 1999; Jordan, 1996). These issues have particular significance for conceptualizing the potential of fathers to be caring, engaged parents during the transition to adult-

hood and parenthood and for responding to the varied needs confronting different groups of young parents.

Issues around fathering are experienced and responded to differentially by virtue of a father's age, culture, ethnicity, gender/masculine identity, race, and class; the interplay of these characteristics are complex for a number of reasons—biological, psychological, and social (Gadsden, Wortham, Ray, & Wojcik, 2000). The most obvious reasons stem, in part, from the restricted expectations of boys as caregivers. Often separating boys from the world of childrearing, the tendency in Western societies has been to assign girls and mothers to roles of primary and sometimes sole caregivers of children. Although the biological, psychological, and social factors that separate boys from childrearing operate in most places around the world, they have greater significance in some communities and cultural settings than others, for example, where men's behaviors as fathers are influenced by local habits, unchallenged beliefs, and defined intergenerational practices. Urban, low-income, African American communities represent one kind of setting in which the issues of culture, race, community practices, and intergenerational transfer converge in especially sensitive and important ways to support or mitigate against the well-being of children and families.

Equally important is the fact that economic and social factors such as the loss of jobs in the past three decades of the 20th century has created chronic poverty among African American fathers in urban settings and, as a result, has undermined the instrumental roles (e.g., economic provider) they play in supporting their children and families (Cochran, 1997; Wilson, 1997). Similarly, increases in the number of incarcerated African American men within the past 20 years has increased the vulnerability of their children, families, and neighborhoods (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999; Mumola, 2000). Fathers affected by these circumstances may no longer be breadwinners, relying increasingly and heavily on their wives and partners for economic support. The loss of personal and parenting prestige associated with this loss of perceived status, coupled with the growing inability of wives and women to feed both their children and their husbands or fathers of their children, may have the pejorative effect of forcing many fathers out of the home (Darity & Myers, 1995, 2001; Sorensen & Turner, 1996). In addition, federal welfare policies of the past often encouraged father invisibility, if not absence, by withholding benefits from women whose husbands or partners lived at home (Edin, Lein, & Nelson, 1998; Lerman & Sorensen, 2000; Roy, 1999). These social and economic factors began to remove lower income African American fathers from their children's homes and typically from communities to a greater extent than for other U.S. neighborhoods and communities (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1996). Despite these barriers to economic and expressive involvement (e.g., Bowman, 1993; Bowman & Sanders, 1998) faced by African American fathers, increasingly, researchers such as Sullivan (1993) suggest that inner city African American youth tend to acknowledge their paternity readily, although not formally, and that the African American community facilitates the informal establishment of paternity and a young father's involvement in informal child-support arrangements. Others such as Waller (1999) find that the breadwinner role is less important than a father's desire to provide guidance and discipline for his children. The fathers in Waller's study (part of the Fragile Families Study) emphasized the need to ensure that their children lived comfortably and that their children's needs were met, either through in-kind informal support or more formal payment arrangements.

Although fathering practitioners who work with young, African American fathers do not disagree with these assessments, they point to the complexity in gauging, with consistency, the indicators of young fathering and young fathers' willingness to assume responsibility for

their children (Gadsden, Kane, & Armorer, 1997). They quickly note that, unlike the studies cited, fathers are rarely the sources of data about their own behaviors and practices—that research has relied on mothers' reports historically to determine father engagement, a problem to be found even among the most well-known studies. Despite the concern about using mothers' reports as the source of data on fathers, mothers' reports, particularly in ethnographic studies, do not diverge significantly from those of fathers, although as Dallas, Wilson, and Salgado (2000) suggest, mothers' accounts may fit better with the researchers' observations of reality in the homes of the mothers and children.

A recent ethnographic study derived from reports by 100 mothers and semistructured interviews with 17 fathers (Ray & Hans, 2001) found that more than half of the fathers were involved with their children and that these fathers envisioned their role as multidimensional, including teaching, disciplining, and providing moral guidance. The authors note that the fathers' images of an engaged father included involvement with children's schooling and ensuring that their children felt secure and protected, both at home and in the highly vulnerable neighborhoods in which they lived, and that their reports were supported by the mothers of their children. As they also suggest, the degree to which environmental stressors contribute to paternal role strain among very involved fathers and/or deepen their sense of responsibility for children's well-being has yet to be understood fully (for similar findings, see also Hanner, 1998).

The current public discussion on paternal involvement among young African American fathers has projected a range of images. However, there are but a few profiles of African American unwed fathers that capture the critical dimensions not only of outcomes but also of the lived experiences of young African American men as fathers. An impressive core of studies produced by the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study has provided sound insights. For example, Carlson and McLanahan (2002), following a birth cohort of children and their families, found that the provider role was important for unmarried fathers. They note that the mother-father relationship was crucial to understanding fathers' contributions to their children. When there was a relationship, the likelihood was greater that the fathers would stay involved. As they note, nonetheless, there are persistent issues about the continuity of father involvement and the significance of personal and contextual characteristics.

Chase-Lansdale, Gordon, Coley, Wakschlag, and Brooks-Gunn (1999) and Coley and Chase-Lansdale (2000) in a multigenerational study of 135 low-income minority fathers in Baltimore find that the nature of father involvement is as important as the level of involvement. The study concludes that father characteristics, household composition, and family relationships are important predictors of father involvement. Employed men were seven times as likely as unemployed fathers to have moved from low involvement to high involvement or to have always been involved. Fathers with at least a high school education were less likely to reduce involvement over time. Paternal age, the child's age, and maternal human capital characteristics were not significant predictors of involvement. Married or cohabiting fathers were more likely to be highly involved than nonresidential fathers were, regardless of their involvement at the time of birth. The presence of a new maternal partner or the child's grandmother did not decrease father involvement. Mother reports of emotionally close relationships with fathers increased the likelihood that fathers would be highly involved, regardless of involvement at birth or whether the father lived with the child's mother. The authors suggest that the first few years after the child's birth provide a window of intervention for efforts to increase father involvement. Furthermore, they note that more research is needed to determine the factors that affect a father's ability and inclination to pay child support.

Research conducted in the early 1990s (e.g., Achatz & MacAllum, 1994; Bloom & Sherwood, 1994; Sullivan, Sherwood, & Furstenberg, 1992), at the outset of the fatherhood effort, also draws attention to the background issues of education, employment, and employability of young, African American fathers. In a study using survey and ethnographic methods, Achatz and MacAllum (1994) studied 155 young fathers, aged 16 to 25, participating in six programs throughout the country. Of these fathers, 75% had left school before graduation and did not have a general equivalency diploma (GED) at the time they enrolled in the program. The majority of the participants either had left school already or were at risk of leaving school before the pregnancy. The reason which fathers mentioned most frequently for leaving school was boredom or lack of motivation, followed by a desire to "get rich quick" through drug dealing and other hustles, followed by expulsion, prejudicial treatment by other-race students and teachers, family programs, and frequent moves or changes of household. In addition, 83% of the fathers who did not have a high school diploma indicated that education was highly valued in their households and by their family and that their leaving school created or worsened tensions between themselves and their parent(s). Moreover, only 36% were employed when they entered the program. Most had sporadic work histories, were paid an average of \$6.00 an hour, and worked for employers who did not provide health insurance.

Finally, several researchers (e.g., Gordon, 2000) point to what is considered to be the stark disconnect between current vestiges of fatherhood and historical expectations, perceptions, and practices in African American communities. As Bowman and Forman (1997) argue, existing literature on fathers and families consistently reveals that most African American men have sought to be responsible fathers, at times against incredible odds (Billingsley, 1992; Bowman, 1993; Staples, 1998). Bowman and Forman (1997) go on further to suggest that this evidence collides, in many ways, with popular beliefs and common stereotypes about the persistent tendencies of African American fathers toward irresponsibility. Yet even during the chattel slavery period, our best historical evidence shows that African American men on plantations somehow managed to respond in surprisingly adaptive ways to discouraging restrictions on responsible fatherhood (e.g., Blassingame, 1972; Gutman, 1976). This pattern of responsible fatherhood continued within African American families during the postslavery era (Berry & Blassingame, 1986; Frazier, 1939). Father presence and responsibility, the researchers note, was the norm on both Southern tenant farms under Jim Crow laws and during the subsequent Industrial Period within working-class families in Northern cities.

A series of social factors over time have shifted the practices, patterns, and nature of father engagement in many African American communities, challenged by the onslaught of high levels of incarceration and social problems. On one hand, the focus on low-income African American fathers in urban settings is not unwarranted or unnecessary—not simply as a research and practice issue but also as a community and social concern. Nowhere is there more urgency about decreasing father involvement than in inner-city African American communities. On the other hand, the focus on these communities is much more comfortable when we are able to assign the problems to father absence rather than to engage in the substantial analysis and acts that are necessary to uncover problems of poverty, poor schools, limited employment, subtle forms of racism, social isolation, and vulnerability which reshape the character and culture of these neighborhoods and those who live within them.

Most studies about low-income, African American fathers are predicated on the assumption that they do not systematically provide for their children financially; in other words, the studies are focused on why low-income, African American fathers do not provide for their

children with little focus on whether and how they provide. These studies, as well as others, provide some information about the economic and social burdens that urban fathers face (Darity & Myers, 1995). However, the very framework used to study them often further marginalizes fathers, by making salient features of their experience that are disproportionately affected by societal barriers. If we are to avoid oversimplification of the issues—that is, blaming fathers for the problems of childrearing in low-income urban communities—and if we are to help these fathers become more involved in their children's lives, we must seek out more information and insight on the challenges of urban fathering from the father's point of view. In short, to understand how the economic and social challenges they face shape their development as fathers, we must ask African American fathers themselves how they perceive these challenges.

THE STUDY OF YOUNG AFRICAN AMERICAN FATHERS

In this article, we draw on a study of fathers in an urban setting to examine the ways in which young, low-income, African American fathers' preparent experiences; identities as men and fathers; perceptions of familial, community, and institutional resources and barriers; and current expectations around constancy, change, and knowledge of options create a sense of possibility and contribute to their perceptions of personal responsibility, family commitment, and fathering behaviors. Such issues, we believe, are fundamental to any discussion of social and legal systems as well as public policies in which the lives of disproportionate numbers of young, low-income, African American fathers are affected and potentially situated in the short term and intergenerationally.

The larger purpose of the study, which is also the focus of this article, was to identify factors that enable or motivate young African American fathers in low-income communities to become involved in the lives of their children and sustain that involvement. We also hoped to examine our findings in relationship to stereotypes that have been used to caricature an entire population and in the construction of what Markus and Nurius (1986) have described as possible selves. Our more narrow research questions examined the ways in which fathers were situated or had situated themselves within the different contexts of importance to them. The questions were,

- How do urban fathers themselves represent the transition to fatherhood? That is, how do they represent the difference that fathering a child made in the progress of their life up to that point? How do they represent the changes that subsequently occurred as they interacted with their children?
- In particular, how do these urban fathers represent intergenerational relationships in their families? Do they represent their fathers' behavior as a precursor of their own, or do they behave differently than their fathers did?
- In cases where urban fathers represent their own behavior as breaking the cycle of intergenerational father-absence, what transformative events encouraged them to become involved with their children?
- What are the characteristics of the possible self that these fathers might envision?

Over the course of a year, we focused on 53 African American fathers from a sampling frame of 127 fathers. We collected information using three sources: (a) a questionnaire administered to 53 fathers, (b) focus groups with all the fathers, and (c) semistructured interviews with a purposive sample of 16 fathers. All fathers were identified through a hospital-

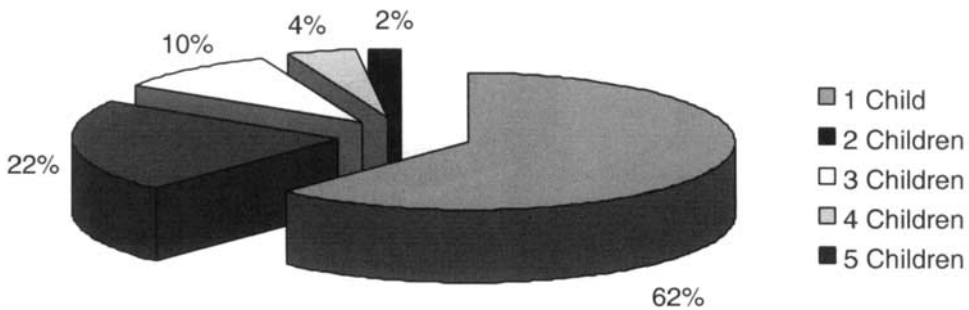


Figure 1. *Urban fathers' number of biological children*

based fathering program, which is located in a large, Midwestern city, and were drawn from fathers who had participated in the program as well as those who had not.

SITUATED IDENTITIES: EVIDENCE FROM THE SURVEY

Fathers' ages ranged from 18 to 30 years ($M = 23$ years; median = 27 years). A majority of responding fathers ($n = 40$) never married their first child's mother; of the 13 who were married, 9 were either divorced or separated from these mothers. When fathers were not married to their first child's mother, almost 50% reported envisioning a positive relationship with these mothers, either by marrying their first child's mother (43%) or maintaining a friendship with the mother.

A majority of fathers (60%) were teenagers at the birth of their first child, with the age of this first child, at the time of the survey, being 3.9 years. Sixty-one percent reported having only one child. For those fathers who reported having fathered multiple children ($n = 19$), 22% had two children, 10% had three children, 4% had four children, and 2% had five children (see Figure 1). Most of these fathers (85%) reported having fathered these children with different mothers.

More than 50% of the fathers reported having at least completed high school. Of the fathers who had not completed high school, approximately two thirds (63%) imagined that within the next 10 years they would obtain their high school diploma or GED. Among fathers yet to complete college, approximately two thirds (67%) imagined that within the next 10 years they would obtain a college degree.

At the time of the survey, approximately 90% of the fathers reported being involved with their first child (see Figures 2, 3, and 4) and having a loving relationship with this child (81%). Slightly more than one third of these fathers (34%) had custody of their children, and only one third of those who had custody reported having had a loving or close relationship with their own fathers. Most fathers ($n = 39$) had contact with their first child at least 2 days each week, and this level of contact was not influenced by the lack of custody; they visited their children even when they did not have custody. Most fathers reported that they expected their role to include providing social, psychological, and financial support, such as offering advice (95%), comforting the child during difficult times (95%), setting high expectations for the child's schooling (95%), and working to support the child financially (95%). In contrast, a minority of fathers ($n = 4$) in the sample were not involved with their first child.

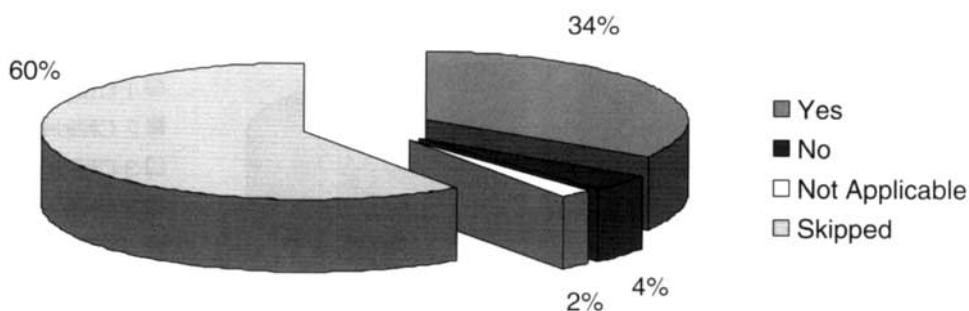


Figure 2. *Urban fathers with custody of their biological children*

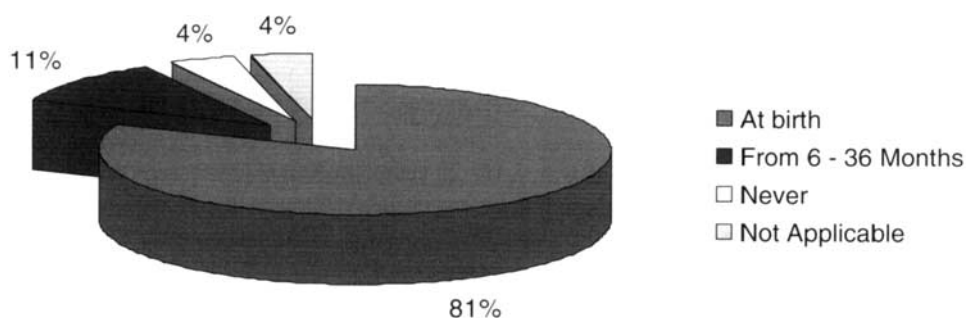


Figure 3. *Urban fathers involved with their first biological child*

Seventy-two percent of fathers ($n = 38$) were employed at the time of the survey (see Figure 5), 90% of whom ($n = 34$) reported that their employment was with an established organization. Seventy-nine percent of working fathers ($n = 30$) worked a full 40 hours or more per week. However, within the past 3 years, approximately two thirds of employed fathers held three different jobs, indicating that a majority of these fathers were still trying to find an employment niche. Unemployed fathers (28%) attributed their unemployment to not having the right skills ($n = 4$), personal problems ($n = 4$), and denied employment ($n = 3$). Less frequently cited reasons for being unemployed were that few jobs were available ($n = 1$) and that fathers did not want the responsibility that comes with employment ($n = 1$). All of the jobless fathers reported that they could imagine themselves working in the future, which suggested that unemployed fathers had job aspirations, but their skill level ($n = 4$) or personal problems ($n = 4$) held them back from achieving these aspirations.

Of the working fathers ($n = 37$), almost two thirds (61%) reported that working affected their involvement with their children. When asked to be specific about its effect, 79% reported that working took away from the quality time they could spend with their child because after work they were too fatigued to spend time with their child(ren). For nonworking fathers ($n = 25$), one third (33%) reported that being unemployed affected their involvement with their children.

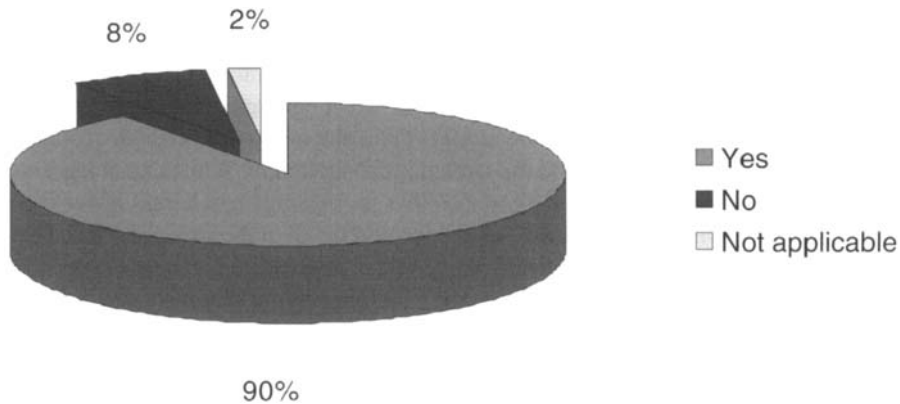


Figure 4. *Urban fathers still involved with their first biological child*

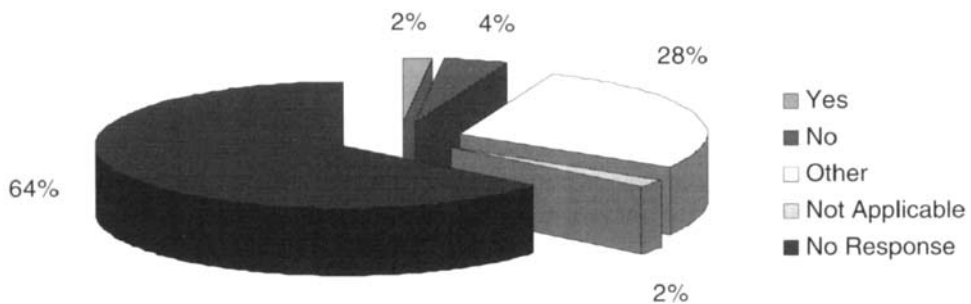


Figure 5. *Urban fathers who were employed at time of interview*

Research shows that the prevailing public perception of young, urban fathers is that, as a group, they do not want to provide the support necessary to foster the growth and development of their children (Ray & Hans, 2001). In contrast, all fathers in this study reported providing financial contributions to their child(ren). More than three quarters of the fathers (77%) paid between \$50 and \$100 or more per week in financial support to their children, whereas the remaining fathers (23%) paid less than this amount.

SITUATED IDENTITIES WITHIN HOME, STREET, AND SYSTEM: EVIDENCE FROM FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS

We also were interested in examining the transition to fatherhood as represented by fathers' ($n = 53$) participation in focus groups and by a subset of the larger group of fathers. Sixteen fathers told us about their goals and expectations; their lives with their own fathers, mothers, family members, and mothers of their children; and experiences with their children. By allowing them to tell their own stories, we have learned something about how they view the challenges of fathering and how they account for their irresponsible and promising behavior as fathers.

We drew heavily on a framework from Anderson's (1999) ethnographic research—which suggests that urban, African American fathers often represent the world as having at least three distinct realms of the street, the home, and the system—to examine the issues identified by the young fathers. In Anderson's framework, the street belongs to men, a realm of self-presentation and sometimes violence; the home is the realm of women, a realm of child care and relative safety from the street; and the system is constituted by Whites, or at least members of the middle class, with laws and policies that shortchange and harass lower income urban Blacks. Although the framework does not account for all of the issues identified by the fathers in our study or for the diversity of women's roles, we believe that urban spaces are in some ways analogous to simpler societies that maintain a separation between men's and women's spheres. Moreover, this framework captures much of the commentary of the young fathers whom we interviewed, although the fathers' attributions and situated selves vary from those in the Anderson study. A full account would, of course, have to explain in detail the distinctiveness of social roles and spatially segregated realms of activity in inner city neighborhoods. At a minimum, these divisions are among the least understood aspects of urban life, particularly for poor African American children and families and the educational and social institutions that form part of their communities.

Our interviews with the young fathers suggest that when a father is forced out of his children's home, when he leaves on his own, or when he never lived there in the first place, he lives in the more male street realm. This is an inappropriate environment for young children, so the father cannot care for his children there, although some fathers did tell us that they interact with their children like peers, in ways partly drawn from the street. Some men try to establish a domestic space in their own apartments, but this is difficult—partly because the move to these settings and the isolation often do not fit with their identities or accommodate their need for a community, and partly because they have not learned the necessary skills to care for children on their own. The system sometimes intervenes by forcing fathers to support children financially. However, given these men's justified hostility toward the system, this does little to encourage intrinsically motivated connections between a father and his child. Thus, low-income, young, African American fathers in urban settings often face a difficult situation. For both universal and socially specific reasons, they cannot easily access the domestic sphere most appropriate for childrearing. How, then, are they to involve themselves and establish themselves as positive forces in their children's lives?

We analyzed the resulting narratives using techniques highlighting the voicing that young fathers did of important characters in their narratives (see Bakhtin 1935/1981; Wortham, 2001). After identifying these voices, we focused on the patterns of voices used to characterize two critical themes: (a) intergenerational learning/relations and (b) transformative events. These categories emerged from the data as widespread and central in many of the narratives. Young fathers were encouraged to talk about their relations with their own fathers and how these relationships might have influenced their own parenting. We believe that this is an important process in the reproduction of urban poverty (Gadsden, Pouncy, & Brenner, 1997). The young fathers themselves also referred often to transformative events that changed their relationships with their children. Using our techniques for analyzing the voices attributed to major characters in the narratives, we looked for consistent patterns in how the urban fathers represented intergenerational learning/relations and transformative events.

The commentaries of the 16 participants suggest that the fathers in this study consistently represent the three realms from Anderson's model: the street, the home, and the system.

Eleven out of 16 young fathers used evaluative terms to characterize the street as destructive, dangerous, and unproductive. Activities commonly associated with this realm included “hustlin’,” “hangin’ out,” and “partying.” For at least three of the young fathers, this lifestyle resulted in their incarceration, and about half of them had been or were involved in illegal activities. A recurring theme was that life on the streets was free and unrestricted, with no responsibilities “holding one down.” Several of the fathers associated life on the street with their youth: “I was still playin’. I was still bein’ a boy.” For one father, referred to here as PR, incarceration was a “wake-up call”—one that awakened him to the realization that a street life was inconsistent with fatherhood:

Yeah. I would have to say that was when I was really, you know, “I have to get a grip.” Because even though she was born. . . . Let’s see, I was about 19, it wasn’t up until 21-22 that I realized, these streets and this party life, you know, I can’t, it’s not for me anymore. Because I could easily wind up dead or . . . anything!

Several of the fathers characterized their transition from the street to the home as “slowing down.” Street life, they stated, is fast and involves concern primarily for oneself, whereas domestic life is slow and involves significant responsibilities for others.

For men who spend most of their time in the street realm, issues of their own schooling and the schooling of their children may become secondary to the daily acts of surviving. A difficult environment for young children, the street does not provide a supportive environment in which to care for children, although some fathers did tell us that they interact with their children like peers, according to the “code of the street.” As mentioned earlier, some fathers attempt to make a domestic space in their lives and places of residence to accommodate their children. However, these arrangements are often difficult for economic reasons, either because such a caregiver role does not fit with their identities as men or because they have not learned the necessary skills to care for children on their own.

In describing the home, all of the fathers situated themselves within their mother’s home, and often their children’s primary home (i.e., with the children’s mothers), describing these places as protected and nurturing. They highlighted the domestic realm as an environment characterized by togetherness, that is, families spending quality time during meals and outings. They note that a large portion of time in the domestic realm is dedicated to child care, with parents cooking, cleaning, feeding, and playing with their children. Moreover, they characterize the home as starkly different than the streets. For example, whereas the street life involves circumventing responsibility (and the law), in the home fathers accept and fulfill their responsibilities toward their children. In the street, young men focus exclusively on their wants and needs with little incentive to forego enjoyable activities. In the home, fathers relinquish selfish ways in favor of sacrificing for their children. Fathers spoke of putting their children first, as their “number one priority” at home. The domestic realm also offers stability. Many fathers described morning or weekend routines that they engaged in with their children. This was borne out in the focus groups and interviews when the research team saw fathers rush off to protect the routines with their children. They juxtapose this sort of grounded, settled behavior to that associated with the street. One father, called EG, compares the two realms in the following way:

Responsibility . . . that’s the number one thing to me. Responsibility because, it’s like I watch some of these fathers out there that just hang on the street all day, they’ll be *wishing* they could

see their child, but me, on the other hand, that's my number one priority, you know, so. That's my responsibility is to deal with him and make sure *he's* all right before I go have *my* fun. That's the number one thing.

EG's response describes three key aspects associated with the home: responsibility, selflessness, and sacrifice. Finally, whereas the street life is unbounded by external controls, the home life entails subordination to rules of discipline. Young fathers spoke of following "the rules of the house" in their own childhood homes, as well as in their interactions with their own children.

Many of the young fathers represented the system as biased and heartless. One of the fathers remarked,

Dealing with the court systems is like being public enemy number one. You know, it's like sometimes they don't care to know the situation; it's just automatically. Sometimes I just think fathers get a bad rap in court. I know I been to court one time . . . my child support was in arrears. I was working. Instead of just having me maybe pay five more dollars a week, they wanted me to do community service. Which, I was working at the time so I didn't do the community service. They locked me up and charged me \$1,000 for that. . . . My son's mother was trying to tell them, even she was trying to be on my side and say hey, he's paying his support, he's been. . . . But they didn't want to hear it. Just locked me up, you know.

CJ voices the court system here as heartless and unproductive. Those in the court system, he stated, stereotype him, despite the fact that he has started to pay child support, as "public enemy number one." They also act in capricious and unproductive ways. He argued that although the system should want him to work and provide child support, those in it impose community service and lock him up, such that they jeopardize his ability to do both. Hence, the system is both unjust and ultimately self-defeating.

In addition to characterizing the three realms of street, home, and system consistently in these ways, many of the urban fathers also told a consistent story about how their lives had moved between different realms and back to the original realm. In more than half of the cases, the young fathers' own fathers were absent from the home. Those young fathers who did speak extensively of their fathers (represented by two thirds of our sample) most often voiced their fathers as part of the street realm. These fathers did not care for the young fathers in our study as children, instead living in a more dangerous, self-oriented world. The young fathers typically were raised by their mothers, in a safer domestic realm. All of these young fathers represent their mothers positively, as caring and hard-working women, who assumed both parenting roles to compensate for the absentee father.

After reaching adolescence, most of the fathers (73%) appeared to follow in the footsteps of their own fathers by engaging in street life (11 of 15, or 73%). Most sold drugs or engaged in other illegal activity at some point. Almost all fathered their children while still living a street life, although some did have legal jobs. Many of them (about 50% of those who were on the streets before) continued to live a street life even after their children were born.

In almost all cases, however, the urban fathers report some sort of transformative event that led them to leave the street life and establish a deeper relationship with their children. Sometimes this transformation was triggered by the death of a friend or relative on the street. Sometimes it involved the absence of the child for an extended period, during which they realized that they wanted to be more involved as a father. Three fathers reported that incarceration was the event that transformed their behavior as fathers. After this transformative event,

all reported that they established some sort of domestic relationship with their children, mostly with visitation rights and weekend overnights, together with financial support.

In sum, the pattern of responses described by most of the men center on five elements: focus on biological father's street life, mother's caregiving, narrator's street life, transformative event, and transition to the domestic realm.

CJ AS CASE STUDY: TRANSFORMING IDENTITY AND A NEW POSSIBLE SELF

To illustrate this pattern, we will describe one narrative in greater detail. CJ describes how the more general predicament of low-income, African American fathers has played out in his life. He maps the domains of street and home onto his own father and mother, respectively. He also describes how he moved from being a child in his mother's home to becoming an adolescent on the street, and then how transformative events have motivated him to break the intergenerational pattern of father absence.

When the interviewer asked CJ where he obtained his image of what a father should do, he answered,

All the years of not having one, wishing that I did. . . . The pain in my life is what made me want to be a father to my child, because I *wanted* my father, you know. I prayed at night that my father would come. Just knowing the loneliness of not having a father. . . . you don't want your child to go through that same thing.

While CJ was home as a child praying for his father to come, his father was living on the street. One of the first times he saw his father,

I happened to run into my father one day. I knew who he was before he knew who I was. . . . I called him Nate, you know. I never, up until I was like 18, I probably seen him three times. . . . He acknowledged me as his son, but I also have other brothers and sisters that I don't know, so it's not like it's just me. It's like a pack of us out there.

In addition to the clear and painful lack of interest on his father's part, note also CJ's use of the term *pack* to describe his father's children, denoting the uncontrolled nature of his father's behavior and fathering children as an animal would. The extreme case of the problem is most evident, perhaps, in CJ's realization that he is one of many children, among whom there was little clear distinction. For example, CJ says that "I actually have another brother with the same name as me, another brother named CJ, so how that worked [laughs]. So we was all secrets is how I see it." CJ presents his father as fathering children in secret, as if it is an illicit activity, and even giving some of his children the same name.

Despite his father's absence, CJ "had a pretty good childhood. . . . My mother always did everything she could for me, and my sisters once they came along." His relationship with his mother was and is "still very good. We're very close. A lot of people say we're like brothers and sisters." Unlike many of the other young fathers, CJ was fortunate to have a stepfather who moved into his home when he was 17. Although there was some conflict over discipline, his stepfather helped by "showing me actually how to be a father. . . . and just spending time with me, you know, whether it be showing me different things like fishing and hunting. Just showing me a whole other world than the streets, because at that time I was pretty wild and

rowdy. So just knowing there's something out there, not just being on the streets all the time." Although CJ is unusual in having a stepfather who moved into his home and stayed married to his mother, his description of the domestic sphere as a sheltered, "slower" alternative to the "wild and rowdy" streets occurs in most of the narratives.

As CJ says in the last quote, he lived a street life before his child was born, and even for several years after. He sold drugs, and he was incarcerated for a few months. "I was kinda in the attitude where anything didn't matter, so I was doing things on the street what wasn't, you know, productive and things like that, just hanging out, hustling, trying to make a dollar any way I could." This description captures the carefree, self-centered, "fast" life that most of the young fathers describe on the street.

After CJ's son was born, he slowed down a bit. But he maintained his connections to the street life, and then he went back to the street completely when his son moved out of state. "He had moved to Arizona when he got like five years old, and was gone for a year, and that's when my life actually started to speed up. And when he came back from Arizona, which was a year later, my life slowed back down." This absence from his son, plus being incarcerated at the same time, made CJ decide to get involved as a father.

I did like 45 days one time in the lock-up and then I thought about, you know, me. It's actually a little of both. I thought about, you know, me being locked up, which I didn't like, and I never knew my father, and I thought if I spent all my time locked up, then my son would never know his father. So it's actually, I did it half for him and half for myself.

When his son returned from Arizona, CJ acted on the decision he had made in prison. He got a job, established a regular schedule for visitation and overnights, and became involved in his son's life.

At the time of our interview, CJ and his son had a good relationship, one that is almost peer-like in some respects. He described how his son "hangs out with me," and how they "do a variety of things. It just depends on what we wanna do that day." CJ describes their relationship as "pretty open. I could just about talk to him about anything that I want to and I feel like he could do the same with me: 'Cause some things he's shared with me that he doesn't share with his mother so I would say it's pretty open." There are some echoes of the street here, because "hanging out" and "talking to him about anything" could also describe relationships among young men on the street as well as the mutable generational boundaries between father and child. But, CJ also describes himself as taking responsibility and acting more like a parent. "Sometimes I feel like he kinda keeps things back. Like, well I know, I feel like sometimes he just flat out lies to keep himself from getting in trouble. So that bothers us sometimes." Here CJ voices himself, together with his son's mother, as being concerned in a parental way about his son's lying. He also talks about wanting to earn more money, so that he could get his son "the things that I would like him to have, which is not actually the things that he has." Here CJ adopts a more parental voice, as a father able to distinguish what a child actually needs to have from what he wants to have.

According to CJ, his father was on the streets, acting more like a self-centered animal than like a father. CJ's mother created a safe home for him, however, and his stepfather later provided a good role model. Nonetheless, as an adolescent and young man, CJ ended up on the streets like his father, appearing to relive a situated self. He lived a fast life there for several years, even after his son was born. But his son's move to Arizona, while he was in jail, inspired CJ to slow back down and become a responsible parent and served as an incentive to seek a new possible self.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: CONSTRUCTING A POSSIBLE SELF

In this article, our attention has been drawn to the contexts and experiences of young African American, low-income fathers and the formation of their identities as fathers. We believe that their perceptions of familial, peer, and legal systems as barriers and resources in their lives influence how they construct identities, make the transition to fatherhood, and create a present- and future-oriented view of self. The study on which much of our discussion has been predicated set out to understand what factors motivated and enabled young fathers in urban settings to become engaged and sustain positive involvement with their children.

The conclusions often reached in public discussions of responsible fathering are that young, urban, low-income fathers are not involved with their children and that these fathers are often not motivated to assume the responsibilities of parenting. As the literature and findings from the study suggest, the path to fatherhood for many of these fathers is not a seamless transition. Indeed, the transition to what has been called responsible fathering follows a winding path for these young men, with several potential threats to their own development and their ability to oversee and facilitate the development of their children. However, several of the messages from our interviews and the more focused case study of CJ suggest that, despite potential and real distractions of father absence, poverty, and poor schooling, these fathers, like other fathers, form significant and nurturing bonds with their children and work to negotiate the roles and expectations of parenting with the mothers of their children. They construct possible selves that are based on sometimes limited understanding of their chosen strategies and are constrained in part by the paucity of economic, educational, and societal supports. They seek to nurture and support their children in the ways that are presented visually on television and other media and in teachings from their families and the programs in which many participate. In particular, noncustodial, nonresidential African American fathers are similar to their peers from other ethnic groups and other social classes who are testing the boundaries of engaged fatherhood and often negotiating these boundaries legally, socially, and familially.

These findings are consistent with Miller (1994), who also found that African American fathers, contrary to societal stereotypes, are involved with their children and are attempting to take on responsible roles. In a study which examined a small sample of noncustodial African American fathers, Hammer (1996) found that these fathers placed a greater emphasis on nurturing and caregiving activities than on the role of provider or breadwinner, not unlike fathers in the Ray and Hans (2001) and Waller (1999) studies. An unexpected but encouraging finding in this study was that many fathers sustained their involvement with their children beyond early childhood. The children ranged in age from 1 to 13 years old, suggesting this involvement was rooted in a commitment to the child's growth and development rather than an infatuation with an adorable infant or toddler. The few fathers that did fit the societal stereotype of an absent dad or uninvolved father ($n = 4$) were the exception rather than the rule. In these cases, fathers pointed to the mother of their child(ren) as their obstacle to involvement, an explanation often given by fathers across different groups. A number of other studies on fathers have pointed to maternal resistance, or maternal gatekeeping, as a barrier to father involvement as well (Allen & Doherty, 1996; Fagan, 2000; Miller, 1994; NCOFF Fathers and Families Roundtable Series, 1995-1997; Rhein, 1997). However, few studies uncouple the different dimensions and complexities that denote maternal gatekeeping or the range of factors that contribute to it. None of these studies, including this one, has examined the extent to which the behavior of the father is related to maternal resistance and

gatekeeping. Research that explores how fathers' behavior influences maternal resistance to father involvement also is needed.

Markus and Nurius (1986) note that possible selves are representations of the self in the past and also include representations of self in the future. For some, it is an ongoing struggle of real and imagined selves (Gadsden, in press). The pool of possible selves derives from the frames of possibility that emerge from the individual's sociocultural and historical contexts and from "models, images, and symbols provided by the media and by the individual's immediate social experiences" (Gadsden, in press, p. 954). Three findings from the focus groups that relate to the fathers' notions of a possible self are worth revisiting here. First, fathers stated emphatically that they "wanted to be there" always for the child(ren). To them, the images of an engaged, responsible man in the lives of his children is a self-portrait that they embrace and with which they struggle. The dilemma begs the questions: What constitutes responsible fathering, and how does a young father achieve it? In looking toward the future, these fathers hoped that their child(ren), on reaching adulthood, would have fond memories of a loving and supportive father. The understanding that their child(ren) will mature into adults and reflect on their upbringing served as a powerful motivating factor for fathers to sustain their involvement.

The second notion of a possible self challenges the first; it seeks to resolve the past as well as limit the degree to which the past complicates opportunities to construct a positive self as an engaged father. Most fathers who participated in the focus groups spoke of their uninvolved or absent fathers as another motivation for their own parental involvement. Allen and Connor (1997), Johnson (1998), and others have cited similar findings. Because a majority of the fathers in this study reported a relationship with their father that was not loving or close, it appears that fathers' lack of involvement is a strong motivational factor for this generation of fathers to be involved with their children.

The third makes the possibility problematic. Many fathers asserted that fathers themselves were the only barriers that stood in the way of involvement with their children. Because these fathers tended to be the more outspoken fathers, it was not evident whether the same views of self-imposed barriers to father involvement might hold for other fathers, nor was it clear whether these outspoken fathers' statements were representative of their internalization of public stereotypes or their own analyses.

Most of the fathers we interviewed, like CJ, are trying to break out of the intergenerational pattern of father absence. They are constructing a possible self, the characteristics of which are still undefined, in large part, because of the complexity of their life experiences. To accomplish this, they must overcome the biological, psychological, social, and community-specific factors that tend to separate low-income, urban, African American fathers from the domestic realm. In thinking about how society might help facilitate urban fathers' involvement, we must take into account the fathers' own perceptions of the obstacles. We have found that fathers represent a regular male developmental progression from the mother's home to the street. Because the street is in many ways opposed to the home, fathers are ill-prepared to help in childrearing. The system sometimes intervenes and forces fathers to pay child support. Although this measure is important, these fathers view and characterize the system as being hostile, racist, and irrational—such that the system as it is presently structured will not likely inspire intrinsically motivated child care on the part of the fathers.

We also found that—in their narratives, at least—most of these fathers were motivated to break the intergenerational cycle of father absence. They report that it took a transformative event—like the absence of the child, incarceration, or the death of a relative—to inspire their involvement with their children. Although one would not want to engineer some of these

events, it is worth further study to see whether such events do in fact sometimes inspire fathering and whether interventions might somehow encourage constructive versions of such events.

These data are, of course, insufficient grounds on which to base policy recommendations, but they offer a lens with which to view the multiple lived experiences of these fathers and a context for research, practice, and policy considerations. Our accounts are fathers' accounts, and their narratives may or may not match their actual behavior. One important research question that persists is whether and the degree to which narrative and behavior do in fact match. Even if they do not, however, it is important to know the fathers' own perspectives on their situations. As we argued above, intrinsic change—and when we are talking about caring for children, intrinsic change is the only kind likely to make a substantial difference—must be situated in people's own habits and perspectives on the matter. By reaching these fathers and documenting their attitudes and perceptions of fatherhood, we can begin to understand the breadth and scope of motivating factors and impediments to father involvement, and whether the glowing portrait of young, urban fathers presented in this study is as accurate for other groups of their peers as well.

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