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The historical study of fatherhood: theoretical and methodological considerations¹

The 2007 Bielefeld University conference, “Fatherhood in Late Modernity: Cultural Images, Social Practices, Structural Frames,” was based on four propositions. The first was that the modernization of fatherhood was “a central, though far from being the only, element of ‘modernization’ of masculinities”. The second was that the concept of fatherhood can be differentiated from the concept of masculinity and that the non-contemporaneities and contradictions between the two are “observable”. The third was that “large discrepancies” have been found “between men’s changed desires to live fatherhood more actively, and their factual practices”. The fourth was that cultural images and practices are “multiple”, and that the contradictions pertaining to fatherhood are not only between cultural representations and men’s practices, but also among different representations and practices (Müller and Oechsle 2007: 1).

Scholars often will talk about how fatherhood has or has not changed; about the discrepancies between fatherhood images and fatherhood practices; and about the fact that fatherhood, like masculinity, is plural. Frequently, they will do so without explicitly addressing how fatherhood should be studied.

Such was not the case at the conference. Not only was it assumed that fatherhood can be “empirically observed”, the very purpose behind inviting scholars to Bielefeld was to “scrutinize (...) articulations of relevant questions and problems (...), with special respect to open questions that need to be addressed in further research”. In other words, the theory and methodology on which important propositions about fatherhood can be based, and the theory and methodology for developing a research programme after the conference, were fundamental to the gathering.

¹ This chapter is based on a presentation given at the conference “Fatherhood in Late Modernity: Cultural Images, Social Practices, Structural Frames” held at Bielefeld University, Germany on April 19–21, 2007. I appreciate the assistance received from Alexis Bender, Maureen Mulligan LaRossa and Saori Yasumoto.

Building on these themes, I describe some (but by no means all) of the theoretical and methodological considerations that should be taken into account in the historical study of fatherhood. Since a social institution cannot be fully understood “without an understanding of the historical process in which it was produced” (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 54–55), a deep appreciation of the connection between modernity and fatherhood can only be achieved if a historical perspective is brought into the conversation. As a point of departure, I draw on Merton’s (1987) cognitive and social patterns in the practice of doing research, put forth in his essay on the nature of science. The three patterns he outlined are (1) establishing the phenomenon, (2) searching for strategic materials, and (3) specifying ignorance.

Establishing the phenomenon is the doctrine that, as scholars, we should ascertain that a phenomenon exists before we try to explain it. *Searching for strategic materials* is the principle that we should be aware of the range of materials that can be used to shed light on a phenomenon, and we must be aware, too, of the limitations of the materials as “data”. *Specifying ignorance* is the mandate that we have a responsibility to be precise about what is unknown so we can design research projects that will expand the boundaries of scientific understanding.

Twenty-some-odd years ago, I relied on Merton’s framework to write about the theoretical and methodological considerations in studying “the changing father hypothesis” – the hypothesis that asks about the degree to which “today’s” fathers are different from (or similar to) “yesterday’s” fathers (LaRossa 1989). When I wrote the essay, the historical study of fatherhood was a relatively new area of inquiry and much of what I had to say was based on speculation. Since then, however, a number of studies on fatherhood and social change have been carried out. These works, including some in which I have been involved, will allow me to move beyond conjecture.

Establishing the phenomenon

In considering the first of Merton’s (1987) axioms, scholars must keep in mind that prior to offering reasons for why something has occurred, it is imperative to demonstrate that “something” happened. Scholars, in other words, must establish that a phenomenon exists *before* they venture an explanation as to why it exists.

Take the “phenomenon” – regularly reported in popular magazines, trade books and newspapers – that fatherhood is markedly different nowadays than it was before. Journalists and others in the United States routinely have pro-

claimed that prior generations of men did not know how to be fathers or, for that matter, did not know even “how to hug” their kids, because their fathers never showed much, if any, affection toward them. It also has been said that men in the past thought that their only role was to provide economically for their families, and that they did not believe childcare was one of their duties.

The interesting thing about these proclamations is not only how prevalent they are, but also how repetitive they are. In poring over historical documents, I often have come across statements similar to these that were published not just recently but also many decades before. During the 1920s and 1930s, for example, it was not uncommon to find popular magazine articles stating that caring for children was no longer the mother’s job alone. Likewise, in the “Fifties” (1945–1960), various “experts” pronounced that, in contrast to what had been the case up to then, fathers were “now” becoming involved in the details of raising kids (LaRossa, 1997, 2011). One scholar, observing the appearance of similar kinds of statements even further back in time, jokingly asserted that “the view that men are starting to become involved in family life is as old and perhaps as prominent as the notion of patriarchy” (Lewis, 1986: 5).

What do these statements convey? What “phenomenon” is being established? The implication is that, over time, fatherhood has changed. But what exactly has changed? Have the norms for being a father changed? Have the behaviours of fathers changed?

First it is important to recognize that the statements themselves are more about desire than practice and, as such, have more to do with the culture of fatherhood than with the conduct of fatherhood (LaRossa 1988). The *culture of fatherhood*, as it is being defined here, includes the norms, values, beliefs and expressive symbols pertaining to fatherhood. The culture of fatherhood, in this sense, is not meant to denote everything having to do with fatherhood, but is limited to the webs of meaning and interpretive practices (i.e. symbolic interactions) pertaining to fatherhood. Essentially, it consists of the norms that men are expected to follow when they become fathers or are about to become fathers; the norms that children and other non-father actors are expected to follow when they pretend to be fathers; the attitudes and sentiments that people have toward fathers; the knowledge, valid or not, of what fathers have done in the past and what they are doing, and are capable of doing, in the present and future; and the ceremonies and rituals that honour fathers and, in some cases, marginalize them (e.g. Father’s Day and Mother’s Day). (For an interpretive view of culture, see Geertz 1973, Berger and Luckmann 1966.) In contrast, the *conduct of fatherhood* includes the routine activities of men when they are trying to act “fatherly”. Changing a diaper, feeding a

baby, monitoring a child, playing with a daughter or son, being accessible (e.g. being available to provide care), and mental engagement (e.g. thinking about a child's needs) all would fall under the heading of conduct, within this scheme (LaRossa 1997, 2011).

Although a case could be made that the distinction between culture and conduct is only an abstraction and that the two are so intertwined as to be empirically indistinguishable, the alternative argument is also compelling – that despite the complexity of the inter-relationship, the often-found difference between what people say and what they do is significant enough to warrant scholarly attention. It is worth noting also that although I am using the terms “culture” and “conduct” in the singular, both refer, in fact, to social worlds that are pluralistic and multifaceted. Thus, in any given society and certainly throughout the world, there are multiple cultures of fatherhood and multiple conducts of fatherhood. I will refer to culture and conduct in the singular (for English-language grammatical reasons) but a multiple-reality perspective is assumed throughout.

If we retain the distinction between culture and conduct and ask what phenomenon is being empirically established in the popular press reports, we would have to conclude that the historical statements cannot be taken as evidence that men's behaviours have changed or even that the norms for fatherhood have changed. Rather, what the statements indicate is that *stories about fathers changing are being told over and over again*. Thus, the phenomenon that needs to be explained is not why has fatherhood changed, but why does the popular press repeatedly tell the same stories?

One answer is that these stories resonate with people who read popular magazines, trade books and newspapers, and that authors and editors are simply catering to customer wants (LaRossa 1997, 2009b). As cynical as this explanation seems, it is not without foundation. The popular press is notorious for publishing all sorts of ideas – which may or may not have any basis in fact – just to increase its market share. (Authors and editors may not consciously strive to mislead, but may genuinely believe the stories they write and subsidize.)

It is important also to acknowledge how much the stories being told about fathers in the past are connected to the stories being told about fathers in the present. I am not talking about how the past influences the present. Rather, I am referring to the opposite – how the present can influence the past, or at least can influence stories about the past.

Stories about how today's fathers are radically different from yesterday's fathers are essentially collective memories and, by definition, central components in the culture of fatherhood. These memories are linked to the social construction of identity: Who I think I presently am influences who I think

others once were. They also are structurally based (LaRossa 1995). As one historian put it: “[W]e are constantly revising our memories to suit our current identities. Memories help us to make sense of the world we live in; and ‘memory work’ is, like any other kind of physical or mental labor, embedded in complex class, gender, and power relations that determine what is remembered (or forgotten), by whom, and for what end” (Gillis 1994: 3).

Thus, another reason why stories about fatherhood dramatically changing are so ubiquitous is that they serve the interest of their creators. The fathers who write these texts (and typically they are fathers) are writing them from the present looking backward rather than from the past looking forward; and who they imagine themselves to be today is influencing who they imagine fathers were yesterday. In their efforts to embrace an identity of being “better” (and hence “special”) they may go out of their way to devalue the fathers who have come before. For some authors, it is not enough to say that fathers today are more involved with their children (the suggestion being that fathers in the past were also involved, only not as much); rather they insist on claiming that yesterday’s fathers did absolutely nothing, which makes men’s current contributions to childcare appear to be not simply higher but heroic (LaRossa 2009a, 2011).

All of this is not to say that fatherhood has not changed over the past century, because it has. But *what* specifically has changed, and *how*, is a lot harder to pin down than is commonly realized. At the very least, the culture of fatherhood should be separated from the conduct of fatherhood. Once this is done, we would ask not how fatherhood in general has changed, but how the culture of fatherhood and conduct of fatherhood in particular groups (e.g. differentiated by race, class, age and nationality) have changed. We also would want to know what has *not* changed. Critical, too, is the recognition that the culture and conduct of fatherhood can be out of sync at any given moment. Finally, given that fatherhood and motherhood are complementary social institutions, we would look at changes and continuities in the culture and conduct of fatherhood, *compared to* changes and continuities in the culture and conduct of motherhood. If, in certain cases, changes in the culture of fatherhood are similar to changes in the culture of motherhood, we would theorize about how the culture of parenthood has changed rather than how the culture of fatherhood or culture of motherhood has changed.

Searching for strategic materials

What “strategic materials” (Merton 1987) may be used to shed light on the culture and conduct of fatherhood? If we think first about what culture is, we can

imagine a variety of cultural objects that can be examined. Historians of fatherhood often have studied popular magazines and newspapers, but they also have scrutinized child-rearing books, television shows, cartoons and comic strips. As for conduct, they have tended to rely on questionnaires and interviews, time diaries, and written correspondence. (This is not an exhaustive list of the kind of items that can be – and have been – used to study fatherhood. Though not covered here, additional cultural objects include: legal documents [e.g. Collier and Sheldon 2008]; advertisements [e.g. Coltrane and Allan 1994]; children's books; [e.g. Quinn 2006]; films [Bruzzi 2005]; and theatrical productions [e.g. Devlin 2005]. The behaviours of yesterday's fathers also can be – and have been – studied through direct observations [e.g. Lynd and Lynd 1929].)

Occasionally, historians have used cultural objects to infer how fathers behaved (e.g. relating a story that was told in a magazine article and deciphering it as a report of actual fact); and they also have used materials that were intended to capture behaviours to infer paternal norms, values and beliefs (e.g. paying attention to the kinds of questions that fathers and mothers were asked in a particular survey). Historians necessarily are forced to work with “remnants” that have been left behind, and these materials, for data purposes, may not be ideal. In addition, historians must be cautious as well as creative in interpreting the bits and pieces that they find. As in every scientific project, the onus is on the researcher to offer a convincing case for why certain materials are being brought to bear.

I sometimes have focused on cartoons and comic strips and have discovered, as others have, that a systematic analysis of these satirical materials can yield intriguing results. In one study, an examination of family-oriented cartoons published in the *Saturday Evening Post* between 1924 and 1944 pointed to a shift, beginning in the 1930s, to more “modern” ideas of what fatherhood should be – ideas that encouraged men's greater involvement in childcare (LaRossa, Gordon, Wilson, Bairan and Jaret 1991). This study, when placed alongside an earlier-completed study that was based on an analysis of cartoons in the same magazine, though with a focus on the period between 1922 and 1978 (Day and Mackey 1986), led to the proposition that the culture of fatherhood in the 20th century did not change in a linear fashion, but rather fluctuated. Thus, contrary to what sometimes has been suggested, the culture of fatherhood in the United States did not inexorably “evolve”. Instead, it moved “up” and “down” (modernizing at one point, traditionalizing at another) in response to economic, ideological and other influences (LaRossa 1997, 2011).

One might think that comedic materials could not possibly serve as barometers of social trends, but a number of studies have demonstrated their utility in research (Giarelli and Tulman 2003). Two follow-up investigations

that I participated in further convinced me of their methodological value. A study of family-oriented comic strips published on Father's Day and Mother's Day in the United States between 1945 and 1999 not only supported the fluctuating-culture-of-fatherhood thesis, but also pointed to the arrival in the United States of another version of "modern" fatherhood in the late 20th century. This version was similar (but not identical) to the version of "modern" fatherhood that was popular in the 1920s and 1930s (LaRossa, Jaret, Gadgil and Wynn 2000). A second study of family-oriented comic strips, also published on Father's Day and Mother's Day but in Japan, offered additional evidence of a changing culture of fatherhood. The movement to "modern" ideas about fatherhood in Japan, however, did not begin to take shape until the 1990s (Yasumoto and LaRossa 2010).

The key to relying on cartoon and comic strips, as with any materials, is to recognize what can be validly inferred and what cannot. At best, cartoon and comic strips reflect aspects of culture – and very narrow aspects at that. Moreover, satire does not necessarily tell us how the people behave (though there has to be some connection to conduct in order for the materials to be viewed as funny). Thus, the culture of fatherhood in the United States and Japan may have significantly changed in the late 20th century, but that does not mean that the conduct of fatherhood changed at the same level of magnitude. In the Japanese study, for example, the father characters in the 1990 to 2004 period were markedly more likely than the father characters in the 1950 to 1969 period to (a) verbally or physically express affection and/or comfort a child or (b) ask about a child's feelings or thoughts (28.6% of the characters did so in the later period, compared to 5.7% of the characters who did so in the earlier period) (Yasumoto and LaRossa 2010). Actual father involvement in Japan, however, increased only slightly in recent years (Ishii-Kuntz 1996, 2003).

A critical eye also must be applied when studying popular magazine articles. Whereas cartoons and comic strips are generally fictional narratives, popular magazine articles are often classified as non-fiction. It is important to remember, however, that popular magazine articles, upon submission, are not necessarily judged by how accurate they are. If an author claims that fatherhood has radically changed, it is unlikely that an editor will demand empirical evidence to substantiate the claim. (This, at least, seems to be the case for parenting and family magazine articles, given how inaccurate they frequently are.) Similarly, if an author talks about fathers being child nurturers more than he or she talks about fathers being family breadwinners, this cannot be taken as "proof" that fathers are nurturing their children more.

The fact that popular magazine articles may tell different stories at different times, however, can communicate whether and how the culture of father-

hood has changed. An analysis of popular magazine articles published in the United States found evidence of a substantial shift from the 1960s to the 1970s in the ratio of articles defining fathers primarily as nurturers versus those defining fathers as financial providers (1.4 to 3.3), which further substantiated the hypothesis that the 1970s were a major transitional point in the cultural history of fatherhood – at least in America. The study also found the ratio to be higher in the 1940s than in the 1950s (2.5 vs. 1.3), which lent additional credence to the proposition that the culture of fatherhood has shown signs of fluctuation (Atkinson and Blackwelder 1993).

Another reason to be careful about drawing inferences from an analysis of popular magazine articles is that, with the focus often being on how one article is similar to (or different from) the next, and with each article frequently being treated as a separate “case”, there can be a tendency, especially in a standardized content analysis, to assume that each article offers a uniform message. A close inspection of magazine articles reveals, however, quite a bit of variation within the texts. Not uncommonly, authors will say one thing on one page and contradict themselves on the next. Qualitative studies of articles published in the Fifties, in fact, reveal quite a bit of thematic inconsistency. Although the expectations for fathers were generally more traditional than not, the culture of fatherhood, as reflected in popular magazine articles, was basically a *mélange* of norms, values, beliefs and expressive symbols. Culture, in short, is pluralistic and multifaceted. (LaRossa 2004; see also Meyerowitz 1994).

Similar kinds of contradictions can be found in newspaper articles and child-rearing books. Newspaper articles – especially those that appear in “reputable” dailies – may be inspected by editors for accuracy and consistency, making them less prone than magazine articles to factual error, but “news” is not an “objective” report of what “really” happens in the world. Every newspaper account – even if it is thought to be “serious” – is a subjective rendering.

In a study of the effects of World War II on the lives of fathers and their families, I relied on newspapers, in part, to give me a sense of how Americans were experiencing the war on the home front. Stories of fathers being separated from their families, and of children grieving the loss of their dads, were covered in the dailies and I paid them heed (LaRossa 2011). The poignancy of the stories was abundantly manifest; it was hard to read them and not be overcome with emotion. But therein lay the evidence of the stories’ subjective nature. The expressive quality of the stories rested to some degree on their artistry; other journalists with different sensibilities very well might have reported the same events and activities in entirely different ways.

We should not forget, too, that the absence of a news story about an event or activity does not automatically signify that the event or activity did not oc-

cur. The lack of coverage may simply indicate that there was no journalist on the scene. Also, what a newspaper chooses to focus on, and what it chooses to ignore, reflect a newsroom's personal judgments and, in particular, its political leanings (Franzosi 1987).

The context of a newspaper article also must be considered. When I teach historical methods, I show my students a graph that displays the number of *New York Times* articles that were categorized in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* under Father's Day and/or Mother's Day from the early 1900s to the 1960s. In the graph, the number of articles categorized under Father's Day rises sharply in the 1930s. I ask the students why they believe this happened. Almost always they answer "Fathers must have increased their involvement with their children during the Great Depression, since so many were unemployed and thus around the house more"; or "With father involvement higher in the 1930s, the *New York Times* thought it should report what families were doing on Father's Day." The fact is, however, neither of these explanations is correct. First, various studies (discussed below) indicate that, during the Great Depression, the general level of father involvement in the United States declined. (This is interesting all by itself. Whereas the culture of fatherhood during the Depression exhibited a progressive slope, the conduct of fatherhood exhibited a regressive slope.) Second, most of the *New York Times* articles categorized under Father's Day in the 1930s were not reports about the level of father involvement, but were accounts of retailers marketing Father's Day gifts in dire economic times. A number of the articles, as it turns out, were printed in the business section of the newspaper – an important consideration.

As for child-rearing books, they offer insights into how members of the child-rearing intelligentsia attempt to socialize parents and thus are valuable in their own right. But, like cartoons and comic strips as well as popular magazines, they tell us more about culture than about conduct. Furthermore, the books do not necessarily reflect the attitudes of parents themselves. Just because a book is published, does not mean it is purchased. (The same is true for all commercial media accounts.) And just because it is purchased, does not mean it is read. And even if it is read, the reader may pay no attention to what the book prescribes. Or, given the fact that an author can say one thing on one page and say something else entirely on the next, a reader may pick and choose whatever book passages happen to be aligned with her or his own parenting inclinations (Mechling 1975, Strathman 1984).

Regardless of these caveats, much can be gained from a careful review of child-rearing books. Some basic methodological rules, however, must be followed. One is that it is important to keep track of when a book is published.

Periodically, historians of fatherhood have ignored this maxim and operated on the assumption that the second or third edition of a book is just like the first, or that later editions reflect what an author wrote only for the later editions. It is possible, however, that sentences, paragraphs, even whole chapters appearing in later editions also appeared in earlier editions, and that parts of work were thus formulated many years before.

Books that go through multiple revisions are especially informative, as historical sources, for this very reason. Observing when ideas in various editions first appeared (i.e. attending to the *vintage* of the ideas) allows us to link changes and continuities in the editions to historical time. An examination of the U.S. Children's Bureau manual, *Infant Care*, from 1914 to 1955, for example, showed that in the early 20th century the Bureau increasingly made the argument that fathers should be involved in caring for children. This particular pattern, however, held up only until the onset of World War II. The edition that came out after the war, published in 1951, vacillated between encouraging fathers and marginalizing them, while the edition that followed, published in 1955, displayed something of a turnaround, with fathers being more marginalized rhetorically than they were four years before. Thus, from the early 20th century to the beginning of World War II, the culture of fatherhood in the United States (as reflected in the pages of *Infant Care*) modernized. After the war, it traditionalized (LaRossa 2004, 2011).

With the invention of television, another set of written and visual texts became available for study. Here again, vintage is important. American television shows of the Fifties often have been written about as if they were consistently traditional in format and content. A close look at the shows, however, reveals subtle patterns of change. Shows that debuted in the early Fifties were certainly traditional, but those that debuted in the late Fifties were even more traditional. Thus, using television as an indicator, the culture of fatherhood after World War II was not only more traditional than the culture of fatherhood prior to World War II, but the culture of fatherhood in the late post-war era was more traditional than the culture of fatherhood in the early post-war era. The traditionalization of fatherhood, in other words, intensified *during* the Fifties (LaRossa 2004, 2011).

Fatherhood scholars also regularly use interviews to gather information on attitudes and behaviours. To the extent that interviews offer insights into thinking processes, they are indispensable to understanding what the culture of fatherhood may be at any given time. Since a key component to the culture of fatherhood is the knowledge, valid or not, of what fathers have done in the past, interviews can be especially helpful in determining how one generation of fathers thinks about previous generations of fathers.

In one interview-based study, for example, men's memories of how much their fathers had failed to care for them was central to understanding why the men wanted to be better dads. "One of the most striking findings was that these fathers perceived that they had no specific role models," said the researcher who directed the project. "Although respondents frequently talked about their own fathers in response to the question about models, their fathers served only as a negative role model or a reference point for what respondents wanted to change in their own lives.(...) The absence of influential father figures in their day-to-day lives made the social construction of the fatherhood identity extremely difficult" (Daly 1993: 517, 522). In another study, it also was found that the style of parenting that adult sons chose to adopt was often inversely related to the style of parenting that their fathers were perceived to have adopted toward them. "The number of times men mentioned their commitment to themselves, their partners, and their children not to be like their own fathers also caught my attention," the project director declared. "The prevalence and passion of the antimodel father stories men told suggest how unsatisfactory family-of-origin experiences can be a major impetus in men's lives" (Dienhart 1998: 57).

Note that, in introducing the first study, I said "men's *memories* of how much their fathers had not cared for them" was a factor, and that, for the second study, it was "the style of parenting that their fathers were *perceived* to have adopted toward them" that was influential. The "memories" and "perceptions" of the fathers who were interviewed offer evidence of how the culture of fatherhood was shaping them, and also how the culture of fatherhood simultaneously was being shaped by them. Whether these memories and perceptions can be said to offer evidence of the conduct of fatherhood when the men were growing up is another thing entirely. Can it be said, without qualification, that the fathers of the men in the first study were "absent" when the men were young? Can it be said, without qualification, that the men in the second study had "unsatisfactory family-of-origin experiences"? Both scenarios may very well be true. We, however, cannot lose sight of the fact that interviewees' retrospective accounts of what happened long ago can be biased. Fathers who want to portray themselves in a positive light may be disposed to portray their own fathers in a not-so-positive light. (The identities people embrace in the present can affect the memories they craft about the past.) For this reason, historians of fatherhood must exercise extreme caution in using interviewees' retrospective accounts to determine what the conduct of fatherhood was like in prior times.

What about interviews that were carried out long ago? Can a set of interviews that took place in the 1950s yield valid data on what the conduct of fa-

therhood was like in the 1950s? The answer depends, first, on how much stock we place in interviews in general. If we believe it is appropriate to interview men today to determine what their current level of involvement with their children is (i.e. if we value contemporaneous self-report data), then we would not automatically dismiss interviews with fathers in the 1950s to determine what their level of involvement was with their children. A second factor in whether a set of interviews *from the past* can yield valid data on the conduct of fatherhood *in that past* has to do with the quality of the interviews themselves. What questions were asked? How detailed were the answers? If we did not personally conduct the interviews but are relying on interviews carried out by another investigator, we must judge the interviews in the same way that we judge all secondary data and recognize that there is a very good chance that we will be disappointed in the breadth and depth of the information that was obtained. (“I wish the investigator had asked the interviewees to comment on A, B and C. Why did the investigator not probe for more information on X, Y and Z?”)

I ran into this problem when I was poring over interviews carried out in 1951–52 and in 1958. Trying to sort out what the conduct of fatherhood was like in the post-war era was a challenge because researchers in the Fifties did not always take seriously the answers that they received. For example, interviewers sometimes kidded with men who said that their contribution to childcare was minimal, and then moved on to the next question in the interview schedule. I would have liked the interviewers to take the men’s answers seriously and follow up by asking the fathers to specify how much they were contributing (or not contributing) and why.

Fortunately, there were instances where the interviewers did probe; and fortunately, too, the interviews, by design, covered a host of issues. (Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected; and, in the 1958 interviews, husbands as well as wives were included as subjects.) In the end, I was able to learn a great deal from the transcripts. Men’s and women’s responses revealed that the conduct of American fatherhood in the Fifties was not as stereotypically traditional as popular magazine articles, child-rearing books and television shows would lead us to think. In addition, it became apparent that, contrary to what a few have said, there were a number of men in the Fifties who were seriously engaged in infant care – though they often viewed their engagement as an effort to “help” their wives rather than as something they internalized because they felt they should be co-caregivers (LaRossa 2011).

In relying on interviews, it is important to recognize that mothers’ reports of men’s involvement may differ from fathers’ reports of their own involvement, and that both may differ from children’s reports. The direction of bias

also may not always be the same. Some research indicates that men and women tend to exhibit a credit-taking bias, when it comes to childcare – that is, men will overestimate their level of involvement while women will overestimate theirs (see Deutsch, Lozy, Saxon 1993; also LaRossa and Reitzes 1995). Other research shows that men's reports of their own involvement may be less accurate than women's reports of men's involvement (Lareau 2000). Studies of family members' conflicting reports frequently have focused on the United States. But what about reports of father involvement in other countries? Japanese children often describe their fathers in more positive terms than the fathers describe themselves; and Japanese mothers often speak of their husbands affirmatively, even though the husbands may be physically absent, to try to ensure that fathers are a psychological presence in their children's lives (Ishii-Kuntz 1992).

Interviews in which people are asked what fatherhood *means* to them, or what their *attitudes* toward fatherhood are, provide valuable insights into the culture of fatherhood. Questions about meanings and attitudes, however, are not the same as questions about conduct. Studies in which respondents are shown a list of activities (e.g. diaper changing, infant feeding) and asked to rate how much the father and mother in the household contributed to each (e.g. father performed activity more than mother did; father and mother equally performed activity; mother performed activity more than father did) are not the best way to capture conduct, because of the evaluative nature of the questions.

If we want to use interviews to measure what fathers in the past did with their children, we must look to studies that asked very direct questions about the range and level of men's involvement. Time diary studies, in which respondents are questioned specifically about "who did what and when" at various points of the day, are the kinds of studies that often yield the most accurate self-report data on father involvement. (Time diary studies, in principle, may be quantitative and/or qualitative.)

Time diary studies of fatherhood were not carried out in the 19th century or for most of the 20th century. (At least, I am not aware of any studies.) Researchers, however, did begin to employ time diaries to measure father involvement in the 1960s, and they continued to employ time diaries in the decades thereafter. In one longitudinal project, quantitative time diaries that were first administered in 1965 in the United States were re-administered (to different cohorts of parents) in 1975, 1985, 1995 and 2000 (Bianchi, Robinson and Milkie 2006). In 1965, according to the diaries, fathers devoted 3 hours per week, on average, to primary childcare activities, whereas mothers devoted 10 hours per week, on average. ("Primary childcare activities (...) [were] activities where parents report[ed] directly engaging in caregiving or

other activities thought to promote children's well being and where the main focus [was] the child.") In 1975 and 1985, fathers continued to devote 3 hours per week to primary childcare activities, whereas women's engagement in primary childcare activities declined first to 9 hours and then to 8 hours. In 1995, fathers' engagement in primary childcare activities increased to 4 hours; mothers' engagement in primary childcare time increased to 10 hours. In 2000, fathers' engagement in primary childcare activities increased to 7 hours; mothers' engagement in primary childcare activities increased to 13 hours (Bianchi et al. 2006: 63). Between 2003 and 2008, fathers' engagement hovered around 7 hours, while mothers' engagement hovered around 14 hours (Bianchi, personal communication, 21 September 2010).

Noteworthy is the fact that fathers' engagement in primary childcare activities did not change between 1965 and 1985. Other studies, based on other methodologies, have reported certifiable increases in father involvement during this period; but the increases were minimal and not wide ranging (Pleck 1997). The remarkable continuity in the conduct of fatherhood stands in sharp contrast to the progressive change in the culture of fatherhood between 1965 and 1985. While the culture of fatherhood became more "modern", with greater expectations for fathers to become more engaged, the conduct of fatherhood remained, for the most part, at the same "traditional" level it was in 1965 (LaRossa 1988; LaRossa et al. 2000). Because mothers' engagement in primary childcare activities declined from 1965 to 1985, the *proportion* of men's contribution to the total amount of primary childcare increased from 33% to 38%. This may have led some men to feel they were doing more. (And some, no doubt, were doing more; these are aggregate statistics.) Still, fathers' *absolute* engagement in primary childcare activities, on average, was fairly stable.

What also stands out among the findings is the increase in both fathers' and mothers' engagement in primary childcare activities in 2000. Fathers' absolute level of engagement went from 4 to 7 hours. Mothers' absolute level of engagement went from 10 to 13 hours. This trend may portend not only a certifiable but a substantive increase in fathers' engagement in primary childcare activities at the dawn of the 21st century. (Consider the consistency in the number of hours from 2003 to 2008.) Still, fathers' involvement in primary childcare activities is significantly below mothers' involvement.

What other kinds of materials, besides formal self-report data, may be used to measure the conduct of fatherhood in prior times, especially if we are interested not so much in what happened in recent decades but in what happened long ago? Up to now, historians of fatherhood generally have examined either family letters (e.g. between husbands and wives and between fathers and their children) or private diaries to capture the nature and level of

childcare work performed by fathers in the past. The information that can be gleaned from these sources is revealing. It turns out that American fathers in the 19th century were not the one-dimensional figures they sometimes have been made out to be. Said one historian: "The letters, diaries, and personal narratives (...) document a wide range of paternal behavior and beliefs. Fathers emerge from their pages who valued, and managed at times to maintain, relations with their wives and children that were both affectionate and harmonious. Other fathers were self-centered and aloof, and still others, stiflingly overbearing. Nor did one emotional posture preclude men from adopting other modes of parenting as circumstances changed or experience warranted. Beyond the idiosyncrasies of particular families and events, however, enough fathers occupied places toward the affectionate end of the emotional spectrum to refute stereotypes of the starched Victorian patriarch, self-contained and presiding remotely over his family" (Frank 1998: 2–3). And another: "The diaries and letters that I read revealed many different kinds of fathers and fathering behaviors. I was amazed at the poignancy of the emotions felt by fathers who grieved at the deaths of their children and wondered at the depth of tension between some fathers and sons. I was surprised at the variety of ways in which fathers manipulated children and the subtleties of children's responses" (Johansen 2001: x; see Wilson 1999 for a history of American fatherhood in the 18th century).

A disadvantage of using family letters and diaries is that these documents not only are often limited in number but tend also to represent mainly upper-middle-class and upper-class fathers. These are the men whose records are more likely to have been retained and archived. Racial and ethnic variation among the letters and diaries can be largely missing, too, though greater effort is being expended in recent years to find and preserve personal documents from diverse groups.

In my own research on the history of fatherhood, I also have relied on letters to capture men's behaviour, but I have not relied on family letters. Rather, I have focused on letters that fathers and mothers wrote to child-rearing "experts". The practice of parents seeking help from others who were strangers but considered "experts" on family matters was common between World War I and World War II – a period of time when there was heightened interest in Modernism (as a way of thought) and an infatuation with scientific approaches to parenting. Thousands of parents (but mostly mothers) wrote in the 1920s and 1930s to the U.S. Children's Bureau and to parent educator Angelo Patri. The parents' letters were filed away and are now stored, respectively, at the National Archives and Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. In the 1940s and 1950s, thousands of other parents wrote to paediatric-

cian Benjamin Spock and to psychologist Rose Franzblau for advice. Their letters can be found, respectively, at Syracuse University in upstate New York and Columbia University in New York City (LaRossa 1997, 2011). (The U.S. Children's Bureau, as well as Patri, Spock and Franzblau, were widely-known dispensers of advice.)

An advantage of using advice-seeking letters is that they are more likely to have been written by a broader spectrum of individuals. Still, most were penned by middle-class parents; and there is hardly any racial or ethnic variation. Also, each letter constitutes, at best, a "snapshot" of a family's life. Consider, too, that we do not know how much of what is described in the letters is actually true. Letter writers may have deliberately lied or been circumspect so as to present themselves and their families in the best possible light. The same methodological problem, of course, besets family letters and private diaries as well as interviews. (How do we know that an interviewee's answers are not completely fabricated?)

Similar to what historians of 19th century fatherhood found, I also came across more variety in fathers' behaviours than popular (and even some scholarly) accounts of the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s and 1950s would suggest. A quantitative coding of a sample of the letters written between World War I and World War II also pointed to how the Great Depression affected men's level of involvement with their children. With the length of each letter being used as a proxy for involvement (on average, the fathers' letters were significantly shorter than the mothers' letters) period effects were assessed, while controlling for, among other variables, the gender and age of the child and the social class of the letter writer (measured with a software program that calculated the extent to which the writer used multisyllabic words). It was found that the letters from fathers that were written in the 1930s were shorter than the letters from fathers that were written in the 1920s. The length of the letters that were written by mothers, however, was basically the same in both the 1920s and 1930s. This provided further evidence of the negative impact of the Depression on the conduct of fatherhood (LaRossa and Reitzes 1993). (Earlier studies – the most notable being Elder's [1974] classic – were the first to indicate that the Depression often reduced men's contact with children.)

Even if we take a narrow methodological approach to the letters and maintain that they convey more about culture than about conduct, in that they are *stories* of family life, their historical value is still significant. Additional quantitative analyses of the letters written in the 1920s and 1930s uncovered a shift in the mothers', but not the fathers', possessive and pronoun usage. Mothers were more likely in the 1930s than in the 1920s to refer to a child as "our" child (meaning the father's *and* mother's child), or to talk in terms of

what “we” (i.e. the father *and* mother) were doing with the child rather than what “I” (i.e. just the mother) was doing with the child. (The fathers’ possessive and pronoun usage basically did not change.) Combining this finding with the knowledge that popular magazine articles and child-rearing books in the 1930s were promoting “modern” ideas about fatherhood more than they had been before, it was hypothesized that the effect of the culture of fatherhood on fathers was often mediated through mothers. That is, mothers were more likely to read popular magazine articles and child-rearing books, which could change their attitudes about the role of fathers and, in turn, lead them to prod their husbands to increase their involvement with their children (LaRossa and Reitzes 1993).

The advice-seeking letters that were written in the 1940s and 1950s proved also to be valuable. Magazine articles and child-rearing books at the time often painted a monochromatic picture of fathers in the Fifties, one that was very traditional. Although fathers then tended to be traditional in their attitudes, if we look beyond the articles and books, we see that not all men spoke in traditional terms. Some, in fact, railed against tradition and took strong profeminist stands. Consider a letter, penned in 1949, from a man whose wife was employed. The man wrote to register his disagreement with a newspaper column that suggested that women should be subservient to their partners. “As the husband of a ‘working wife,’ I wish to speak out quite sharply against the concepts in yesterday’s column by Dr. Rose Franzblau,” he said. “In reply to a working wife’s letter which requested advice regarding differing attitudes toward the house budget between herself and her husband, Dr. Franzblau indicated that in such a situation the husband has a resentment of his ‘dependency’ on his wife, reminding him of his childhood-Mother relationship. He thus had a psychological requirement to ‘reject’ the situation, and to indicate his ‘mastery’ by ‘showing authority and being (...) master of the purse strings’”. The man then challenged Franzblau’s psychological explanation of gender inequality by countering with an explanation of his own – one that was sociologically articulate in that it gave more weight to structural variables: “Dr. Franzblau has written a psychological justification for Male Supremacy. She says that Man psychologically requires the dominant role in Society.(...) But my own feeling (...) is that almost all activity is largely determined by the economic relationship of the people and forces involved. Man’s alleged dominance and superiority over women is due not to psychological factors, but rather [to] the fact that she has become forced to be dependent on him as the breadwinner” (J.J.M to Rose Franzblau 1949; capitalizations used by letter writer).

The fervent views of the letter writer were not commonly expressed by fathers in the Fifties, but that does not mean that they were not expressed at

all. Popular magazines and child-rearing books, as well as cartoons and comic strips, offer – metaphorically speaking – “aerial photos” of the social terrain below. What is seen from the sky, however, does not always correspond to what is experienced on the ground. Letters and similar kinds of personal documents provide evidence of behaviours and attitudes that other kinds of materials may not detect.

Specifying ignorance

What do we know about the history of fatherhood and, equally important, what do we not know? We have a better understanding of the history of fatherhood than we did thirty-some-odd years ago, or even twenty-some-odd years ago, when historians initially expressed the need for researchers to study what fathers were like in the past (Demos 1982, Griswold 1993, Rotundo 1985). Still, there is more work that needs to be done.

First, most historical studies of fatherhood have focused on the United States. The findings from these studies are important, but they are not necessarily generalizable to other countries. Social and cultural patterns that developed in America may not have developed in other countries. If they did develop, they may not have developed in the same manner or at the same rate. We know that major events, such as the Great Depression and World War II, had a significant impact on the culture and conduct of fatherhood in the United States. These events and others, however, likely affected fatherhood differently in other parts of the world. Theoretical propositions based on research carried out in just one country also are limited (Nisbett 2003). In the 1960s, for example, family scholars discovered that theoretical propositions formulated to understand marital power in the United States were not translatable to certain other countries (Rodman 1967). Likewise, theoretical propositions about the history of fatherhood that are based exclusively on U.S. data sets may be applicable in America (or in countries very similar to America), but not be applicable elsewhere.

Second, most historical studies of fatherhood have ignored – or not given enough attention to – racial, ethnic and class variations. Generally, the focus has been on the white middle class or upper class. Part of this may be a function of the kinds of materials that are readily available for historical research. Materials that are easy to find, however, should not dictate who is studied and who is not. Scholars must commit themselves to expanding the historical study of fatherhood so as to include racial and ethnic minorities and lower socioeconomic groups. This will mean that they will have to search for mate-

rials that are stored outside the major archives, and they will have to be creative in their use of secondary sources. Local repositories may house materials very different from those that are housed in national repositories. Private collections (e.g. letters that family members have kept in their possession for generations and not donated to the public) can also be sought out. Secondary sources that are not expressly about fathers, per se, may contain bits of information that, taken together, allow important social patterns about fatherhood to be discerned. In writing about American fatherhood in the 1940s and 1950s, I wanted to be able to talk about how black fathers were discriminated against during World War II, to include their initially not being allowed to serve in combat roles, and how their pressing for the right to fully participate in the war was instrumental to the success of the post-war black civil rights movement. Books and articles about fatherhood in the 1940s and 1950s tended to ignore black fathers, so I turned to books and articles about the war and about the civil rights movement and found that quite often the books would include references to fathers' actions and thoughts. From these books, I culled whatever I could, and eventually was able to address how the war affected the culture and conduct of fatherhood in black families (LaRossa 2011).

Third, historians of fatherhood must strive to capture not just the panoramas but also the particulars. Sweeping historical surveys – those that span whole or half centuries – are enlightening for their breadth, but are short on depth. We must recognize that there is genuine value in encouraging and supporting historical research that looks closely at specific events. When we narrow our focus, we often find changes in the culture and conduct of fatherhood that broader studies have missed. Thus, we know that, in the United States, the culture of fatherhood was more “modern” at the end of the Great Depression than it was at the beginning; and that the culture of fatherhood was more “traditional” in the late Fifties than it was in the early Fifties (LaRossa 1997, 2011). But what might we discover if we studied the history of fatherhood, as well as the history of motherhood, immediately after women received the right to vote (1902 in Australia, 1917 in Russia, 1918 in Germany, 1920 in the United States, 1931 in Brazil, 1944 in France, 1945 in Japan, 1946 in Italy, 1948 in Israel, 1954 in Ghana, 1956 in Egypt, 1963 in Afghanistan etc.) or immediately after legal changes in fathers' custody rights? Or if we looked at the short-term effects of industrialization (the timing of which, of course, varies by country)? Or at the short-term effects of major political upheavals?

Fourth, the importance of distinguishing the culture and conduct of fatherhood has been empirically established. We know that culture and conduct may not be in concert and that each may exhibit different patterns of change.

We, however, do not know as much as we should about how the culture of fatherhood and conduct of fatherhood influence one other. Advice-seeking letters allow us to see how parents in the past interpreted cultural prescriptions, but what they did with the prescriptions, if anything, is less clear. Rarely, for one thing, did parents write back to a child-rearing expert to say whether they followed the expert's advice. It must be appreciated, too, that the influence of culture and conduct is a sequential process, with culture at time 1 influencing conduct at time 2, which in turn influences culture at time 3, and so on. These "times" or "moments" can be days, weeks, years or decades.

Finally, in a variety of countries, growing numbers of men and women are calling for fathers to become more involved in their children's lives and, in some instances, social policies are being put in place to bring about such a change. But, to repeat what was said at the start, a social institution cannot be fully understood – or consciously altered, if that is the goal – without a firm grasp of historical process (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 54–55). What happened in the past also cannot be implicitly derived. Taken-for-granted assumptions about the history of fatherhood, when checked against systematic studies, repeatedly have been shown to be incorrect. Policies based on historical guesswork thus are unlikely to succeed, and may, in fact, do more harm than good. Ultimately, the historical study of fatherhood (and motherhood) must be a priority for not just scholars but also society at large.

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