

The Culture and Conduct of Fatherhood in America, 1800 to 1960

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Abstract

A firm understanding of fatherhood in the present requires a deep appreciation of fatherhood in the past. To demonstrate what this proposition means, and to illustrate how complex fatherhood can be, I provide an overview of the social reconstruction of fatherhood in America between 1800 and 1960. It was during these 160 years that we see significant transformations in U.S. society and in the social institution of fatherhood—transformations that continue to reverberate today. The history of fatherhood in America also serves as a case study of sorts that brings to the fore the intricate ways that economic and ideological forces shape people's thoughts and behaviors, and helps to convey the difficulties associated with trying to grasp what happened in days gone by.

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In recent years, there has been an explosion of scholarly interest in the subject of fatherhood. This can be traced to several trends, among them being the increased number of mothers who are working outside the home, the decline in birth rates, the rise in divorce rates, and the late twentieth century feminist movement. Much of the research focuses on fatherhood today, with often only a passing nod to what fatherhood may have been like in the past. Not uncommonly, scholars will say, "Fathers are more/less involved today or have more/less authority," and not acknowledge the challenges of doing historical research or the nuances and fluctuations of fatherhood in prior times.

Over the past twenty years, I have conducted a variety of studies on the history of fatherhood and am currently investigating the history of fatherhood during and after the Second World War (e.g., see LaRossa, 1988, 1989, 1997, 2004, 2005; LaRossa and Reitzes, 1993,

1995; LaRossa, Gordon, Wilson, Bairan, and Jaret, 1991; LaRossa, Jaret, Gadgil, and Wynn, 2000, 2001). These projects have reinforced for me the validity of the proposition that a firm understanding of fatherhood in the present requires a deep appreciation of fatherhood in the past.

To demonstrate what this proposition means, and to illustrate how complex fatherhood can be, I will provide an overview of the social reconstruction of fatherhood in America between 1800 and 1960. It was during these 160 years that we see significant transformations in U.S. society and in the social institution of fatherhood—transformations that continue to reverberate today. The history of fatherhood in America also serves as a case study of sorts that brings to the fore the intricate ways that economic and ideological forces shape people's thoughts and behaviors, and helps to convey the difficulties associated with trying to grasp what happened in days gone



by.

The more research I do, the more I come to feel that historical sociology is akin to paleontology. Those of us who study the past must be satisfied with examining mere fragments, from which we are expected to imagine entire (social) animals. With this limitation in mind, I endeavor to flesh out the relevant contours of fatherhood in a particular country over a momentous century and a half.⁽¹⁾

My presentation is divided into two parts. First, I outline pertinent theoretical and methodological issues relating to the study of fatherhood. Second, I apply these theoretical and methodological issues to understanding fatherhood history.

THE CULTURE AND CONDUCT OF FATHERHOOD

When I began to study fatherhood I was struck by the discrepancy between *what fathers said they did and what fathers actually did*. In an early project on the transition to parenthood, which was based on in-depth interviews with couples having their first or second child, men initially talked about being highly committed to caring for their newborns, and then they reneged on those commitments (LaRossa and LaRossa, 1981). That people's words do not necessarily coincide with their deeds is recognized widely within the social sciences; indeed, social psychologists repeatedly have warned that attitudes and behaviors are not identical. What I found particularly interesting, however, was not just that fathers (and mothers) conflated talk and action, but that they often did so without knowing or admitting it.

Later on, when I embarked on my first historical study of fatherhood, I again could see the value of separating words and deeds, but I also came to recognize, more so than before, how much the rule applied at both the macro- (societal) and micro- (group) level. In trying to sort through various fragments, I found myself frequently asking, do the data before me tell me what fathers did, or do they tell me what people think fathers did? It was this question and others like it that prompted me to draw a conceptual line between the *culture*

of fatherhood and the conduct of fatherhood (LaRossa, 1988, 1997).

By the culture of fatherhood I mean, at a minimum, the norms (including roles), values, beliefs, and expressive symbols pertaining to fatherhood. The conduct of fatherhood, on the other hand, refers to what fathers do—or, more specifically, the routine activities of men when they are trying to act “fatherly.”⁽²⁾

Fatherhood norms include the norms that men are expected to follow when they become fathers or are about to become fathers. Fatherhood norms also include the norms that non-father actors are expected to follow when they pretend to be fathers (e.g., children playing at being fathers).

Three sets of fatherhood norms historically have come to define fatherhood in America: the “father as the economic provider for the family,” the “father as male role model for both daughters and sons,” and the “father as children’s playmate and companion.” When men visualize themselves as fathers, they often think of themselves in terms of these norms.

Fatherhood values have to do with the salience levels that are attached to fatherhood or to specific aspects of fatherhood. To assess fatherhood values we would ask: How important are fathers in a particular situation and at a particular time? Are fathers held in high or low esteem? Are fathers viewed as competent or incompetent caregivers? Are some fatherhood norms valued more than others?

Fatherhood beliefs also constitute the culture of fatherhood. These beliefs include stories about what fathers did in the past and what they are capable of doing in the future. These stories may or may not be accurate. However, valid or not, their impact is significant. People can erroneously believe, for example, that men in the past did not change diapers, despite the fact that there is evidence to indicate that some men did. Thinking that they are the first generation to engage in infant care, today’s fathers may congratulate themselves for how much they do, regardless of how negligible their level of care is. “I admit that I don’t do a lot,” a father can say, “but I do a lot more than previous cohorts of men did.” Fictional narra-



tives about fatherhood also help to explain why women often express gratitude to men for doing the bare minimum: “What a great father. He changed a diaper! No man up to now would have done that” (LaRossa, 1995, 1997).

Fatherhood symbols are potent elements in the culture of fatherhood. Ceremonies intended to honor fathers (e.g., Father’s Day) are expressive symbols, as are the words used to talk about fatherhood. Does it make a difference, for example, that in America people are more likely to say “mother” and “dad” than “mom” and “father”? Since “dad” is an informal form of address, what does the use of “dad,” in the absence of the use of “mom,” signify? In the early twentieth century, a *culture of daddyhood* valorized the norm that fathers should be playmates and companions to their children, but also culturally located men on the periphery of parenthood (LaRossa, 1997).

The conduct of fatherhood is about paternal behaviors. A well-known typology for classifying what fathers do distinguishes engagement, accessibility, and responsibility (see Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, and Levine, 1985). *Engagement* refers to direct interaction with a person and can entail feeding a child or playing with a child, among other activities. *Accessibility* is being available to interact with another person; being ready if needed. A father who is close enough to assist his daughter, but who at that moment is not directly interacting with her, can be said to be accessible. *Responsibility* means being the one “in charge” of a person’s care and well-being. Examples include deciding when an infant should go to the doctor or thinking about and closely monitoring a child’s educational progress.

Considering the notion that the conduct of fatherhood can be divided into engagement, accessibility, and responsibility, we may treat each as a separate variable. If we dimensionalize the three on separate scales of 1 to 10 (with 1 being “low” and 10 being “high”), we may score fathers differently, depending on the variable in question (e.g., 6 for engagement, 7 for accessibility, and 4 for responsibility). If

we are interested in plotting continuity and change over time and are interested as well in aggregate scores for groups of fathers, we may ask, what was the level of paternal engagement, accessibility, and responsibility in prior decades, and has the level of paternal engagement, accessibility, and responsibility changed?

These are no simple answers to these questions. For one thing, if we are going to talk about changes in conduct, we should have identical measures of conduct at various points in time. Researchers have been able to draw on studies going back to the 1960s to chart the conduct of fatherhood over the past 40 years (see Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie, 2006; Pleck, 1997), but equivalent data prior to then (with the same questions being asked from one decade to the next) are simply not available. What evidence should we use to estimate how engaged or accessible fathers were with their children in the nineteenth and early twentieth century? And how do we consider social class and other variables when there were so few studies that focused on fathers then?

Taking both culture and conduct into account reframes the questions that we pose. It is insufficient to ask how fatherhood has changed or remained the same, while ignoring several empirical possibilities. First, the culture and conduct of fatherhood can be different in different groups (with variations by age, by education, by occupation, etc.). Thus, there are multiple norms, values, beliefs, and expressive symbols pertaining to fatherhood and multiple combinations of how fathers can be engaged, accessible, and responsible. (Technically, we should be speaking about *cultures* of fatherhood and *conducts* of fatherhood.) Second, the culture and conduct of fatherhood at any given point in time may not be aligned (i.e., the culture may say that fathers should be more involved, whereas the conduct of fatherhood may show few signs of greater actual involvement). Third, the culture of fatherhood may exhibit one pattern of change, while the conduct of fatherhood may exhibit another pattern of change (e.g., changes in culture may



exhibit a positive slope, while changes in conduct may exhibit a negative slope). Fourth, the relationship between culture and conduct is sequential. Thus, changes in culture at one moment may influence changes in conduct at a subsequent moment, and (extending the analysis) changes in conduct at that subsequent moment may influence changes in culture at a later moment, and so on.

There is an additional caveat to consider. The fragments of evidence that are available to historically-minded scholars generally communicate more about the culture of fatherhood than the conduct of fatherhood, because the materials that typically are “left behind” are better indicators of norms, values, beliefs, and expressive symbols than they are of behaviors. Legal documents, magazine and newspaper articles, cartoons and comic strips, radio and television shows frequently are used to plot continuity and change, but these items do not necessarily tell us what fathers actually did. Just because a popular magazine article touted the arrival, on a societal level, of a “New Father,” one who not only cared about but also cared for his children, we should not assume that fathers in general were, in fact, doing more (LaRossa, 1997).

AN OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORY OF FATHERHOOD IN AMERICA, 1800 TO 1960

Prior to the 1800s, the culture of fatherhood in America was based largely on a mosaic of ideas that the American colonists had brought with them from Western Europe. Among these ideas was the notion that men were the heads of their families with considerable power over women and children. Religion also influenced early American concepts of fatherhood, because many believed that a father was God’s representative on earth. America was an agricultural-based society then, and fathers and children spent considerable time working together in the fields. Fathers who were artisans and shopkeepers also had their families close by during the day. Mothers in colonial America were primarily responsible for caring for infants and toddlers, but fathers generally

oversaw the moral development of school-age and older children (e.g., by being responsible for their daughters’ and sons’ religious training) (Demos, 1982; Rotundo, 1985).

1. 1800 to 1899: Industrialization and Urbanization

In the 1800s, the Industrial Revolution took hold in America and led to sweeping societal changes. One effect it had is that, in communities where factories were built, men often left home to financially support their families. A father’s “work place” and “family place” thus were no longer in the same location and, as the century wore on, commuting back and forth between “the job” and “the home” became more common. This increasingly was true as the country grew more urbanized.

Within these structural circumstances, the “good provider role” for men emerged in popular culture (Bernard, 1981). This role meant that the father should be viewed as the principal economic figure in the family. (Before the Industrial Revolution, women and children, as well as men, were thought to be major contributors to a family’s finances.) As a corollary to the “good provider role,” a “cult of True Womanhood” also came into being (Welter, 1966). This “cult”—or culture—promoted the virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity for mothers and other female family members. Hence, in the wake of the Industrial Revolution and urbanization, there appears to have been an attempt to draw a sharper line between the culture of fatherhood, on the one hand, and the culture of motherhood, on the other. This pattern will reverse itself in the early twentieth century, when the line between the culture of fatherhood and the culture of motherhood will become less clear.

It is important to emphasize that the societal transformations did not affect everyone equally. People in large towns and cities, and middle- and upper-class families, were influenced more than others. Racial and ethnic minorities—especially African Americans who were legally enslaved until 1863 (when the Emancipation Proclamation was issued) and



discriminated against for many years after—were not given the choice to adopt either the “good provider role” or the “cult of True Womanhood.”

Noteworthy as well were the counter-currents to the emerging ideologies. At various historical moments, opposing *cultures* of fatherhood existed side by side. For example, a late nineteenth century book decried the extent to which the “good provider role” had become so strong that men were being pulled away from their families.

It is one of the misfortunes of our American way of living that the head of the house, the father—he who is the support, the mainstay, the highest central figure—should be scarcely able to live with his family at all. If he is a busy man, earning their daily bread, he must leave them after a hasty breakfast, to meet them again at a late dinner with a chance of seeing them in the evening; but, if a club man, or anxious for the opportunity of going out in the evening for improvement or change, he does not see much of his family even then (“The Good Father,” 1881).

What about the conduct of fatherhood during the 1800s? It is hard to pin down what fathers did exactly, because of the scarcity of materials that would shed light on men’s actions. There is, however, evidence to suggest that men “helped” more with child care than is generally thought. A study of middle-class fathers found that “it was common for men to tend children to give the wife time for rest or other work.” One father reportedly “rocked his child to sleep and sat up with infants at night when they could not sleep” (Johansen, 2001: 75; see also Frank, 1998).

2. 1900 to 1939: Parent Education and Feminist Movements, “Roaring ‘20s,” and Great Depression

Between 1900 and 1939, American fatherhood was caught in a sea of change that would lead to a variety of twists and turns. High rates of infant mortality prompted the U.S. government to establish a federal agency, known as the Children’s Bureau, dedicated to advancing “scientific” approaches to child

rearing. The Bureau’s manual, *Infant Care*, first published in 1914 and revised periodically thereafter, would find its way into thousands of American homes and would help to convince the public that being a good father and mother was based more on nurture than on nature (i.e., dependent more on learning than on instinct). Although the parent education movement, which the Children’s Bureau was instrumental in launching, was largely orchestrated by women, men increasingly were brought into the fold and, over the next three decades, *Infant Care* as well as other child rearing books increasingly directed their teachings to both mothers and fathers.

The early 1900s also witnessed the first wave of the twentieth century feminist movement. The movement’s efforts led eventually to the passage in 1920 of the nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, giving women the right to vote. Feminists also collaborated with other interest groups to establish Mother’s Day to honor women. Around the same time, an equivalent celebration for men was also proposed, but the concept of a Father’s Day did not gain the same level of endorsement. Father’s Day eventually grew in popularity when store owners, in the midst of the Great Depression of the 1930s, vigorously promoted the holiday. Noteworthy is the fact that the business community probably would not have been successful in making Father’s Day a nationwide celebration, were it not for the progressive shifts in the culture of fatherhood that had begun at the turn of the century and that continued throughout the 1920s and 1930s. In the 1920s (also known as the “Roaring ‘20s” in America, because it ushered in a variety of cultural innovations), there was a dramatic increase in the number of childrearing books written expressly for men, with *The Father’s First Two Years* (Downey, 1925) and *On Being a Father* (Walker and Walker, 1929) being just two. Popular magazines also emphasized the value of men in children’s lives. *Parents’ Magazine*, which began publication in 1926, was at the forefront in this regard, especially in the 1930s when it ran a column under the heading “For Father’s Only.” Wrote the



publisher, “So many fathers read this magazine that we believe they deserve a special department edited by a father” (*Parents’ Magazine*, 1932: 6: LaRossa, 1997).

An array of fragments may be used to discern the culture of fatherhood. In my research, I have found cartoons and comic strips to be especially valuable. Though not always easy to interpret, humor and satire can reveal subtle patterns and often are a barometer of social trends. A content analysis of *Saturday Evening Post* family-oriented cartoons, for example, pointed to a shift in the culture of fatherhood between the 1920s and 1930s. In the 1920s, father characters were more likely than mother characters to be shown as incompetent. In the 1930s, however, there was no statistically significant difference in the extent to which father and mother characters were so depicted (LaRossa et al., 1991). One reason for the turnaround may be that, during the Great Depression, when thousands of men lost their jobs or had their salaries reduced, cartoonists were less inclined to poke fun at fathers. It is also possible—indeed, likely—that the cartoonists of the 1930s were affected by the same pro-father fervor that had prompted others to increasingly encourage men to become involved in their children’s lives. A third explanation is that, because so many fathers were not able to fulfill the “good provider role” in their families (or at least were not able to fulfill it as well as they had before), the cartoonists wanted to elevate the value of the “father as male role model for both daughters and sons” and “the father as children’s playmate and companion.”

Whatever the explanation—and chances are all three are correct to a degree—the shift in the cartoons offers an illustration of how and why the culture and conduct of fatherhood should be conceptually separated, for while the culture of fatherhood became more progressive in the 1930s, the conduct of fatherhood followed a regressive path. In contrast to what was happening in fatherhood culture, surveys indicated that, during the Great Depression, men were less involved in their children’s lives than they were before. Two re-

searchers suggested that fathers “may have been . . . leaving child rearing more and more to [their wives]” (Lynd and Lynd, 1937: 177). Another spoke of men’s social and emotional “withdrawal” (Elder, 1974: 105).

Contrary to what is often said to be the case, scholars in the early twentieth century sometimes included fathers in their studies—or at least asked wives and children about fathers. Thus, while it may be valid to claim that the study of fatherhood has exponentially increased in recent years, it is incorrect to state, as some have, that the study of fatherhood is entirely new. Still, the problem that we face, when we try to piece together a picture of fatherhood in the past, is that the research projects carried out long ago either did not include men as subjects (in only 5% of the cases in one U.S. government study of 3,000 families was a father asked a single question [White House Conference on Child Health and Protection, 1936]), or did not ask women and children, in-depth, about men’s involvement (in other words, the questions and answers were perfunctory). The upshot is that, if we want to get a handle on the conduct of fatherhood in years gone by, we are forced to rely on materials that may not fit the standard mode (LaRossa, 1997; LaRossa and Reitzes, 1993, 1995).

One set of materials—a staple of historians—is family correspondence. Typically, historically-minded scholars rely on letters that family members penned to each other. In my work, however, I have found it fruitful to examine advice-seeking letters that family members wrote to outside experts (e.g., parent educators and counselors). These letters tend to be more representative of a wider population, though they still exhibit a class bias. Also, depending on the outsider to whom the letter is addressed and her or his expertise, advice-seeking letters can contain a wealth of information about a family’s private world. Letter writers, to be sure, “filter” events, but they also offer graphic descriptions of everyday life.

In letters addressed to Angelo Patri, a leading parent educator in the 1920s and 1930s, fathers and mothers often poured their hearts



out. Although over 90% of the letters came from mothers, a number of fathers demonstrated that they, too, were concerned enough about their children's welfare to take pen in hand. Especially telling was the information that the men provided about themselves. "I am the father of a thirty-month old boy who finished learning his alphabet both capital and small letters one month ago," a father wrote. "He also knows his figures from one to nine. I taught him his letters at the rate of three or four a week in the form of a game and it was great fun for him. I am afraid to proceed further without expert advice" (D. J. O. to Angelo Patri, 1925). Another man asked about the value of a "daily duties chart" to schedule his children's activities during the summer school break (A. R. to Angelo Patri, 1937). A third, who was separated from his wife, talked about defending his young. "I have raised four children from a woman that hated children . . . and if I failed to give the children the necessary attention and care there would be no children to write about" (J. H. R. to Angelo Patri, 1928).

Parents also wrote to the Children's Bureau. In 1916, a father sought counsel on the best feeding plan for a daughter and son. "I have two children, girl three years and boy ten months. I have been trying to find the proper foods of the different kinds suitable for my growing girl and also to begin feeding my baby as his mother cannot supply him much longer" (C. H. to Children's Bureau, 1916). Over twenty years later, a man requested information about the nutritional value of canned milk. "Kindly advise whether or not you would advise the feeding of canned milk to our baby which is now 2 months and 6 days old. Would you deem it advisable to feed canned milk in place of cows whole milk?" (R. E. B. to Children's Bureau, 1939) (LaRossa, 1997).

In a study to determine whether letters written during the Great Depression might be different than letters written in the decade before, it was discovered that the average length of the fathers' letters declined while the average length of the mothers' letters did not. This was true, even when the gender and age

of the child and the problem being written about were statistically controlled. If we consider letter length as a proxy for parental involvement (on the whole, the women's letters were longer than the men's letters), the analysis provides further evidence of the Great Depression's deleterious impact on the conduct of fatherhood (LaRossa and Reitzes, 1993).

Needless to say, however much we may feel we are able to register the level of involvement that men had with their children in the 1920s and 1930s, if we consider again the fact that, at a minimum, the conduct of fatherhood is tri-dimensional, comprising not only levels of paternal engagement but also levels of paternal accessibility and paternal responsibility, we can appreciate just how difficult it is to evaluate the quantity and quality of men's involvement in the past. Keep in mind, too, that the surveys and letters, though they may have tapped a wide range of people, were more exclusive than not, with little representation from the lower class and hardly any data on racial and ethnic minorities.

3. 1940 to 1960: World War II and "Fifties"

With the beginning of the Second World War, an ideology of fear blanketed America.⁽³⁾ This ideology elevated a role for fathers that, in peacetime, had been under the surface—the "father as protector of his family." Advertisements in popular magazines as well as government posters began to portray men with more muscular physiques—embodiments of male power (Jarvis, 2004). When the war started, men with dependent children were exempt from being drafted into the military, but many fathers, along with their sons, volunteered. In 1943, the U.S. Congress voted to lift the paternal exemption, resulting in thousands of fathers being drafted and sent overseas (Griswold, 1993).

The opportunity to serve was not given to all. African Americans eventually were allowed to join the armed forces, but initially they were excluded from combat units. After the war, African-American veterans, demanding that they be afforded the very freedoms for which they fought, would help spark the



civil rights movement of the 1950s (Moore, 2005).

Other racial and ethnic minorities were discriminated against as well. Asian-American, Hispanic-American, and Native-American soldiers all were relegated to subordinate positions, and were sometimes barred from the front lines. It was only later in the war, when the need for more soldiers became acute, that the military opened its combat ranks to these groups. As for those who were too old to serve or too disabled to fight, they could still become “protectors” of the home by working for the defense industry. However, factories systematically shut out minorities, too. If the “father as protector of his family” was a valued role, the fact that a number of men were prevented from publicly fulfilling this role (at least in a wartime sense) created a gap between what fathers *wanted to be* and what they were *permitted to be*.

The ideology of fear was perhaps no more evident than in how the U.S. government treated Japanese Americans. On the evening of December 7, 1941, only hours after news of the attack on Pearl Harbor, agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) descended upon the Japanese-American community and locked up men suspected of having too strong an allegiance to Japan. More often than not, these were fathers who were born in Japan and who had immigrated to the United States (*Issei*). Some, however, were second generation Japanese Americans (*Nisei*). In a number of cases, American citizens of Japanese descent were branded “the enemy.” One Japanese-American man, whose family worked on a ranch, recalled: “[W]hile we were eating, a car pulled up and people got out and identified themselves as being from the FBI. They started talking to us and my father. Then we went into the house. And that’s when one of the most amazing things happened: a person who had never been in our house before knew just where to go to look for things. He pulled out correspondence that my father had from Japan. Some old papers from way back, twenty, thirty years before. So, he gathered some things and he said, ‘You come with

me,’ and he took my father. My father never had a chance to pack his clothing or his suitcase, or anything” (cited in Tateishi, 1984: 251).

In the spring of 1942, the President of the United States issued an executive order that restricted where Japanese-Americans could live (not near the coast) and authorized the incarceration of over 110,000 Japanese-American men, women, and children in what were euphemistically called “relocation centers” (Daniels, 2002). The social world of fatherhood in these prisons was, to put it mildly, bleak. When, years later, those who were incarcerated were allowed to return to where they once lived, many of them discovered that their property and belongings had been lost or stolen. Although the postwar economy in America was vibrant, Japanese-American fathers had a very difficult time finding jobs that were commensurate with their education and experience (Fugita and Fernandez, 2004).

The “fifties” in America (which generally have come to mean the period between 1945 and 1960) were characterized by not only an economic boom but a baby boom as well. The years also are often viewed, in retrospect, as a time when family life was paramount and marital harmony was high. It is true that the divorce rate in America declined in the fifties, but we should not assume that what went on inside the home was universally glorious. There is little reason to believe that family disagreements subsided in the postwar era. There certainly is no reason to believe that family violence had disappeared; it just was not openly talked about. (Family violence had yet to be defined as a public issue [Pagelow, 1984].)

The perception that people today have of American fathers in the fifties often is based on domestic comedies that were broadcast on television and that, in later years, have been memorialized (because of reruns on TV). Among these probably the best known today are *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It to Beaver*, both of which were about a married couple and their young children living in an affluent suburb. The plotlines in the shows often cen-



tered on how wise the parents were, especially the fathers, and they conveyed the idea that whatever problems the family encountered were not only slight but also solvable in the span of a half hour. The fact is, however, the television realities of the 1950s and the everyday realities of the 1950s were distinct. As one historian sardonically put it, “*Leave It to Beaver* was not a documentary” (Coontz, 1992: 29).

Although television shows may not tell us much about the conduct of fatherhood at the time, they are central fragments in the culture of fatherhood. A close analysis of the shows broadcast throughout the fifties suggests a cultural shift toward a more traditional form of fatherhood (LaRossa, 2004). That is, if the shows are any indication, the progressive movement that characterized the culture of fatherhood in America before the war was either stopped in its tracks or turned around. Other fragments point to a similar conclusion. Child rearing books published in the late fifties, more so than child rearing books published in the early fifties, tended to emphasize dissimilarities between fathers and mothers. Comic strips from the era exhibited a similar pattern, with the late fifties’ strips showing more “patriarchal gender disparities” (LaRossa et al., 2001).

Why the culture of fatherhood in the post-war era became more regressive is not yet fully understood. The war and the concept of “the father as protector of his family” may have been at the root of the change. The burgeoning economy in the fifties may also have been a cause. During the Great Depression, when men were hard pressed to find work, the “father as male role model for both daughters and sons” and the “father as playmate and companion to his children” were aggressively promoted. Perhaps just the opposite happened in the fifties. With jobs being plentiful, the “good provider role” was easier to enact, and other norms pertaining to fatherhood, while still prevalent, were emphasized less.

The conduct of fatherhood in the fifties is harder to pin down. Certain evidence indicates that fathers “helped” with child care, but

did not generally do much more than that. Other evidence suggests that men were more involved in child care than has been commonly assumed (e.g., see Grant, 1998; Weiss, 2000). It is difficult to sort out who did what, because of the mixed messages that fathers and mothers sometimes gave. In one study from the early 1950s, an interviewer asked a mother of young boy whether her husband cared for her infant son. “Who took care of him mostly then?” was how the question was phrased. “Both of us,” the mother said. “I think at night [my husband] sometimes got up and I got up sometimes, and sometimes we both got up.” The mother’s answer suggested that she and her husband had a fairly egalitarian arrangement. At this point in the study, interviewers generally moved to another question, but this particular interviewer wanted to know more. “Did [your husband] do a lot in conjunction with taking care of [your son] when he was a baby?” To which the mother replied: “Well, he wouldn’t change diapers or anything like that, but if he had to he’d do it. He wouldn’t object. If I asked him to change him he would probably do it, but I don’t think I ever asked him.” The interviewer probed further: “Well, on his own, did he ever feed him or give him a bath?” The mother answered, “I think he did once, but he didn’t do it regularly” (Sears, et al., 1951–52, Mother 45: 2). Given the paradoxical answers to the interviewer’s questions, it is hard to determine precisely what the division of infant care in the family was. Just as there are *contradictory cultures* of fatherhood, so also there are *contradictory conducts* of fatherhood.

CONCLUSION

In their classic work on the social construction of reality, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966: 54–55) say, “It is impossible to understand an institution adequately without an understanding of the historical process by which it was produced.” This axiom certainly applies to understanding the social institution of fatherhood.

Like many other researchers, when I first became interested in fatherhood, I focused on



the present. My Ph.D. dissertation was a study of couples expecting their first child (LaRossa, 1977). Being a sociologist trained in a critical tradition, I had internalized C. Wright Mills's precept that a *sociological imagination* "enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society" (Mills, 1959: 6); and I frequently paid homage to Mills in my classes and in my writings. However, it was only when I began to do historical work myself that I came to fully appreciate how valuable a historical perspective is.

Without a doubt, it is important that scholars continue to study contemporary fatherhood. There is so much that we still do not know. But it is important as well not to lose sight of how intricately connected the present is to the past. I would underscore, too, the need to document the history (or *histories*) of fatherhood across the globe. While some of the general principles outlined here may be relevant to a variety of situations—the propositions about the culture and conduct of fatherhood, for example—the specific structure of continuity and change is contingent on localized sets of circumstances. In Japan, for example, the medicalization of child rearing may have ultimately excluded fathers from parenting, whereas in the United States it may have helped to bring fathers into the parenting curriculum (Fuess, 1997). The Second World War affected the culture and conduct of fatherhood differently in Japan than it did in the United States (Wagatsuma, 1977). The early stages of postindustrialization did not identically impact Japanese and American men (Ishii-Kuntz, 1996).

In the end, the study of fatherhood is a collective enterprise, not only in the sense that it depends on scholars in different disciplines and from different regions of the world putting their minds together, but also in the sense that comparing and contrasting (looking at things collectively) is at the heart of all rigorous science. Carefully examining *various cultures* and *various conducts* of fatherhood *over time* may be an individual scholar's option, but it is a scholarly community's mandate.

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【NOTES】

- (1) A historical perspective illuminates not just fatherhood but a host of family issues. Two recent works that do an excellent job of showing how careful historical research can shed light on marriage and childhood, respectively, are Coontz (2005) and Mintz (2004). The Apple and Golden (1997) edited collection includes informative chapters on the history of motherhood.
- (2) A strong argument could be made that the distinction between attitudes and behavior, or between culture and conduct, is only an abstraction and that the two are so intertwined as to be empirically indistinguishable. An alternative argument is that the often-found difference between what people say and what they do is large enough to warrant attention. A number of scholars have pointed to the importance of the difference, though they have not always used the same terminology. Lewis (1986: 5) contrasted the "view that men are starting to become involved in family life" with whether they are, in fact, becoming involved. Coontz (1992: 1, 30) distinguished idealized family images and "real life." Gillis (1996: xv) noted the difference between the imagined families we "live *by*" and the actual families we "live *with*."
- (3) This section is based, in part, on my current research on the history of fatherhood during and after the Second World War.

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