Fathers from Low-Income Backgrounds: Myths and Evidence

This chapter is focused on the experiences of low-income fathers who, like all fathers, experience the joys and responsibilities of fatherhood, yet do so within contexts of significant challenge and constraint. Because low-income fathers by definition live near or below poverty thresholds, they struggle to provide their children with necessary resources (such as housing, food, clothing, medical coverage). They typically reside in under-resourced neighborhoods with high rates of concentrated poverty and few education and employment opportunities. They are at best stably employed in low-wage work, or at worst unemployed, with many experiencing inconsistent employment without benefits. Many have not attained a high school diploma, and few have attended any college; thus, their prospects for future employment remain bleak. Over time, these challenges take a toll on both father-child and mother-father relationships: low-income fathers are less likely to be formally identified as a child’s father, less likely to be married to the mother of their children, and less likely to reside with their children than men from more resourced households.

Nonetheless, these broad-sweeping statistics tend to mask the true heterogeneity of men who are otherwise grouped together as “low income”. In the United States, low-income fathers live in both urban and rural communities; they are from Black, White,
Asian, Latino, Native American, and mixed ethnic and racial backgrounds; they are immigrant and native born; they are younger and older; some reside with their children and others do not; and they vary substantially in the extent to which they are involved in their children’s lives and how they express that involvement. In short, the diversity that characterizes low-income fathers mirrors that of U.S. fathers more generally.

However in contrast to these similarities, the majority of popular narratives surrounding low-income fathers rarely highlight this heterogeneity. A main reason for this limitation is due to the challenges of studying low-income fathers (especially non-resident fathers), who are difficult to recruit into large scale research studies and thus least likely to be represented in research findings (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; McAdoo, 1993). Thus, knowledge about low-income fathers lags behind research on fathers more generally, and has often led to “filling in the blanks” about the characteristics, behaviors, and influences of these men. Consequently, portrayals of low-income fathers in the popular press, media and public at large are often over simplified, and there exist long-lasting myths about these men that are remarkably resistant to contradictory evidence. Examples of such myths include views that low-income fathers are “deadbeat dads” who do not care about their children and are uninvolved or absent; that low-income fathers who have been raised by deadbeat dads will become deadbeat dads themselves; and that low-income fathers reject social institutions such as marriage and family.

Myths about low-income fathers, in many ways, can also be found in the research literature. Oftentimes, researchers get caught up in theoretical frameworks or politically correct positions about fatherhood, which may or may not be rooted in empirical
evidence. This is particularly true in the literature on low-income fathers. For example, some researchers have responded to the statistics of low marital rates, low father residency rates, and high rates of father absence in low-income families by advancing arguments that may actually undermine the importance of fathers in children’s development. These arguments include discourse on the benefits of blended families, the notion that “social fathers” can replace biological fathers, and the idea that absentee fathers have a benign effect on children as long as family members are supportive and household income is sufficient. These claims risk leading to double standards whereby low levels of father involvement and absenteeism are viewed as the accepted norm for some children (e.g., those living in poor communities) but not for others (e.g., those in more resourced communities).

The goals in this chapter are therefore to challenge certain myths that prevail about low-income fathers, both in the popular media and scholarly literature. We describe and refute four prominent characterizations of low-income fathers as: (1) non-essential, (2) deadbeat, (3) perpetuators of their own childhood histories; and (4) dissenters of marriage. In doing so, we highlight the heterogeneity that characterizes low-income fathers and stress the ways that low-income fathers are both unique and similar to fathers more broadly. We draw on our own research with low-income fathers (where relevant) to support these points, and end with a discussion of the various pathways through which low-income fathers are found to influence their children’s development.

The Non-Essential Father

Surprisingly, one of the most prominent myths about low-income fathers is that they are unnecessary. Although few researchers explicitly state that fathers don’t matter
for children, this idea implicitly underlies much discourse about low-income fathers. The argument goes something like this: children from low-income families will do just fine, whether or not their fathers are around, as long as they are in a supportive home environment, or receive the necessary resources from other sources, or have someone else who functions “like a father” to them. In short, such claims seem to suggest that children in father-absent households (as defined by fathers having little or no contact with their children) are at no more risk than children with present fathers. This perspective is advanced in Silverstein and Auerbach’s (1999) deconstruction of the essential father, whereby they note that children need “at least one responsible, caretaking adult” but this individual does not have to be male or female, does not have to live within a heterosexual family structure, and does have to be a biological parent of the child. Following the publication of this article, the popular media soon pounced on the idea that “fathers don’t matter” (see Chavez, 1999; Jaccoby, 1999), and presented an overly simplified version of the complex points laid forth by Silverstein and Auerbach. In particular, Silverstein and Auerbach stressed that the practical and emotional demands of parenthood make meeting children’s needs highly difficult for the vast majority of single parents, and that although positive child outcomes are possible in single parent families, under most circumstances they are not probable. These observations highlight the statistical distinction between “main effects” versus interactions or “moderation”. That is, although there exist factors that may moderate or buffer the risks associated with absent fathers, the risks that accompany father absence persist for the majority of children (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).
Father Don’t Matter in Certain Cultural Contexts

A part of the non-essential father argument is the idea that fathers do not matter as much in certain cultural contexts, such as in communities where father absence is prevalent (which often tends to be low-income communities). However, research on the fertility patterns of Caribbean men suggests otherwise (Roopnarine, 2002). Both ethnographic and quantitative research in various cultural groups of the Caribbean indicates that many Caribbean men procreate in a series of transitory unions before permanently settling in to family and marriage. Thus, many children in the Caribbean reside in households where their fathers are minimally involved, whereas others reap the psychological, emotional, and financial benefits of present fathers. Comparisons of children fathered with initial partners versus those fathered in later unions (when fathers settle down and remain with their children and partners) indicate that children of transitory unions face elevated risks in social, emotional and cognitive development compared to children born into the later, father-stable households (Evans & Davies, 1997; Leo-Rhynie, 1997; Roopnarine, 2002). For example, many children born into early transitory unions experience less sensitive and nurturing engagements with their fathers. In studies of young, low-income Caribbean parents, fathers’ interactions with their children were characterized by low levels of the types of behaviors that support cognitive development, such as encouraging exploratory play or offering positive emotional support and praise (Leo-Rhynie, 1997; Payne & Furnham, 1992; Wint & Brown, 1988).

Furthermore in the case of early union Caribbean children, their interactions with non-biological fathers are typically more agonistic than those between children and their biological fathers (Flinn, 1992; Roopnarine, 2002). Finally, in low-income Caribbean
societies, children born into later more permanent unions are simply more likely to have a biological father in the home, which often results in better household resources and thereby increases the likelihood of positive health and behavioral outcomes in children (Roopnarine, 2002). Thus, despite relatively high levels of father absence in Caribbean communities, children are by no means “buffered” from the adverse effects of absent or uninvolved fathers just because others around them are living in comparable circumstances.

Similar cultural arguments have been applied to Black communities in the U.S. When fathers are absent or don’t provide for children, grandparents and other family members often “pick up the slack” and substitute for a lack of father involvement by providing resources or engaging in the caretaking of children (Dornbusch, Carlsmith, Bushwall, Ritter, Leiderman, Hastorf & Gross, 1985; Stack, 1974). Again, however, this research tends to emphasize statistical moderation, by describing the conditions under which low-income children without involved fathers fare as well as those with involved fathers. While some children in low-income, father-absent homes are bolstered by extra family support, many children in low-income, single parent households do not receive substantial monetary or in-kind familial contributions. Furthermore, lower rates of negative outcomes such as school drop-out and teenage pregnancy are found in households where adolescents live with a step-father in comparison to teens who live in single-parent or mother-grandmother homes (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). As such, arguments founded on statistical moderation virtually ignore the generalized benefits of positive father involvement that cut across racial and ethnic lines.
In our work on father involvement during children’s first years of life we have investigated father involvement in low-income White, Black and Latino households (e.g., Shannon, Tamis-LeMonda, London, & Cabrera, 2002; Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera, & Lamb, 2004; Tamis-LeMonda, Yoshikawa, & Kahana-Kalman, in press). Across all studies, positive father involvement, reflected in the frequencies and quality of father engagements with their children, uniformly predicts the language and cognitive development of children from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. Others also find that positive father involvement relates to children’s outcomes similarly when ethnic and racial groups are compared (Black, Dubowitz, & Starr, 1999; Dubowitz, Black, Cox, Kerr, Litrownik, Radhakrishna, English, Schneider, & Runyan, 2001; Evans & Davies, 1997; Leo-Rhynie, 1997).

*Family Resources, not Fathers Per Se, are what Matters*

Another argument that reflects the position of the non-essential father is that “economic disadvantage” not “father absence per se” accounts for the adverse outcomes of children with absent fathers. The modus operandi of proponents of this idea is to “control for” the economic conditions of households with and without involved and/or resident fathers, and ask whether father effects diminish when these financial indicators are co-varied. If associations between father absence and children’s outcomes attenuate after these controls, it is regarded as evidence that children are fine without fathers, as long as the family is compensated for the economic loss associated with father absence. For instance, longitudinal studies of teenage parenthood find that situations in which fathers remain in the household over time, financial stability is more probable and as such children are less likely be subjected to the pervasive effects of poverty (Apfel & Seitz,
Findings from such studies have at times been interpreted as evidence that after controlling for increases in household income, father presence is not uniquely associated with additional benefits to child outcomes.

Such conclusions are problematic on two levels. First, father presence is confounded with increases in household income such that although the variables may be statistically separated, due to their co-occurrence they cannot be theoretically decoupled. A major contribution of fathers is often the financial investments they make in their families. In other words, claims that fathers do not matter above and beyond their financial provisioning is akin to assertions that it was not the actual players on the 1999 U.S. Women’s soccer team who were responsible for winning the World Cup, but rather their goal scoring and defensive tactics that explained the outcome. If possible to control for goals scored and goals defended the U.S team no longer would have won. The same erroneous logic is evident when researchers consider a father’s economic assistance to the household as falling outside the purview of a father’s influence on children’s development. In low-income households, financial resources are especially important to children’s well-being and development, and the lack thereof can exert a major toll on the family. Thus, to the extent that involved fathers are more likely to contribute to household resources, and resources in low-income households are already low, a core pathway through which low-income fathers matter is their financial contributions.

Secondly, claims that fathers do not make a difference in children’s outcomes above and beyond economic provisioning are based on studies that leave other dimensions of father involvement unmeasured. Father presence or absence is a static and
often uninformative measure of fathers’ actual involvement with children, and in the event that some present fathers may have a positive influence on children (e.g. through cognitively stimulating play) while other present fathers may have a negative influence on children (e.g. through the effects of domestic violence), the benefits of positive father involvement would wash out when dichotomous measures of father absence/presence are examined. That may be one reason that studies using father presence as a measure of paternal influence in multivariate models have not predicted children’s developmental outcomes (e.g., Crockett, Eggebeen, & Hawkins, 1993; Mott, 1993; Furstenberg & Harris, 1993). Yet other studies of low-income families that examine the quality of the father-child interactions have demonstrated strong associations with children’s cognitive and language outcomes while similarly finding a lack of association between fathers’ sheer presence and these same outcomes (e.g., Black, Dubowitz, & Starr, 1999; Shannon, Tamis-LeMonda, London, & Cabrera, 2002; Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera, & Lamb, 2004).

**Summary**

Scholarship seeking to “deconstruct the essential father theory” (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999) has often been dangerously co-opted by the popular media to support claims that fathers don’t matter and that children who grow up in single parent households fare equally well as children who grow up with positively involved fathers. Such claims are refuted by countless empirical studies that show that children who experience absent fathers are more likely to confront an array of risks that compromise their well-being. Moreover, the ideas that fathers only matter in certain cultural contexts and that economic context rather than fathers per se matter are equally flawed. Rather,
there are numerous benefits associated with positive father involvement, including financial support, and these benefits cut across socioeconomic, ethnic and racial lines.

**Deadbeat Dads**

A second and related myth that has often been used in the characterization of low-income fathers is that of the “deadbeat dad”. The term “deadbeat dad” originated as a colloquial rendering of the official status of non-custodial parents who were non-compliant with, or behind on, court ordered child support payments (Bartfeld & Meyer, 1994; Garfinkel, McLanahan, Meyer, & Selzer, 1998). This term soon came to encompass a father’s lack of other human or social capital investments in their children; thus, “deadbeat dads” were also fathers who did not spend time with or “weren’t there” for their children (e.g., Argys, Peters, & Waldman, 2001; Bartfeld & Meyer, 1994; Cherlin & Griffin, 1998). Over time, the term “deadbeat dad” was further generalized to men who did not reside with their children, based on the assumption that non-residency reflected a lack of involvement. Consequently, because low-income fathers are disproportionately non-resident, they were more likely to be referred to as “deadbeat dads” (Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Morgan, 1987; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

Researchers have since challenged this narrow characterization of low-income fathers as deadbeat (Argys, Peters, & Waldman, 2001; Bartfeld & Meyer, 1994; Cherlin & Griffin, 1998; Mincy & Sorensen, 1998), and have sought to more accurately document the levels and forms of father involvement in these men. Such work confirmed that the vast majority of low-income fathers, both resident and non-resident, are involved with children in numerous ways (Cabrera, Ryan, Shannon, Brooks-Gunn, Vogel, Raikes, Tamis-LeMonda & Cohen, 2004).
Large-scale studies, for example, indicate that of the 20% of American children who live in mother-headed households, the majority (about 87%) have regular contact with their fathers (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2005; Flanagan & West, 2004; McLanahan, Garfinkel, Reichman, & Teitler, 2001). Statistics such as these suggest that although many low-income fathers may not reside with their children, they are present in their children’s lives in ways that remain understudied. Little is known about non-resident fathers’ involvement because it is often difficult for researchers to locate or contact these men, although what is known suggests that the majority of children from low-income families do see their non-resident biological fathers (Mincy & Oliver, 2003; Phares, 1996). While many of these men may have trouble making pre-determined child support payments, they can not be assumed to be absent from their children’s lives. In fact, many are very involved.

In our own research in the Early Head Start evaluation study, we found that both resident and non-resident low-income fathers are highly accessible to their children as well as involved in all aspects of raising them. According to maternal reports, nearly 90% of fathers were present at the birth of their infants, and voiced a commitment to remain involved in their children’s lives (Shannon, Cabrera, Bradley, Tamis-LeMonda, & Lamb, in press). Over 80% of these low-income dads remained involved in children’s lives by two years of age, and while these dads may not have always been able to provide financially for their children, they expressed the goal of “being there” for their children physically and emotionally (Cabrera et al., 2004; Summers, Raikes, Butler, Spicer, Pan, Shaw, et al., 1999). Although marriage and residency both ensure that children are consistently in contact with their fathers, over 90% of non-resident fathers managed to
see their children a few times a week if they were in romantic relationships with the
mothers of their children (Cabrera, et al., 2004). Even 90% of non-resident fathers who
considered themselves just friends with children’s mothers had contact with their children
at least once over the prior three-month period.

Moreover, the majority of fathers reported engaging in a variety of activities with
their infants and young children, such as feeding, bathing, and play, and also displayed
responsibility through taking children to the doctor, caring for them when they were sick,
and so forth (Cabrera et al., 2004). Most fathers reported engaging in these behaviors on a
regular basis (i.e., daily or weekly), and mothers’ reports of fathers’ activities confirmed
these estimates. Further, when fathers were observed at play with their children, they
were rated as frequently engaging in supportive behaviors, and rarely displayed
controlling or harsh behaviors (Shannon, Tamis-LeMonda, & Cabrera, 2006; Tamis-
LeMonda, et al., 2004). When the outcomes of these positive father behaviors were
examined, fathers’ supportive behaviors (based on a summary score of cognitive regard,
sensitivity, and warmth) predicted children’s cognitive and language outcomes (Shannon
et al., 2002; Tamis-LeMonda, et al., 2004), and did so after controlling for the quality of
mother-child interactions and a range of demographics (e.g., father work status, education)
(Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2004). Moreover, in low-income families, fathers’ involvement,
parenting satisfaction, and employment predicted lower rates of child behavior problems
above and beyond mothers’ age, education and parenting satisfaction, further
demonstrating that father involvement plays a unique role in positive child development
(Black, Dubowitz, & Starr, 1999).

Methodological Challenges to Reaching Non-Involved Fathers
Of course, research findings on the involvement of low-income fathers are not without limitations. Most centrally, data are based on descriptions of father involvement in a select group of fathers -- those who were nominated for study participation by the mothers of their children (who are typically asked to provide contact information for fathers) and who themselves agreed to participate. Many studies on fathers rely on mothers for contact information on fathers. Many mothers are hesitant to provide such information to researchers, particularly when mother-father relationships are conflicted or complicated; in other situations mothers may be unaware of fathers’ whereabouts.

One example of the selection bias in studies with low-income men is seen in the Early Head Start national evaluation father study. Researchers asked mothers for permission to contact the fathers of the target children. This was done to respect mothers’ parental rights, particularly in light of the fact that many men were non-custodial fathers and did not reside with their children. This request resulted in approximately 80% of fathers being identified for study participation. Of this pool of fathers, approximately 70% agreed to study participation, but even fewer ended up actually being seen due to scheduling and other difficulties. Thus, of the group of all potential biological fathers, only about half were actually studied at any given assessment. This selection bias means that findings are likely skewed to reflect positive father involvement since the accounts of fathers who are no longer in children’s lives are not represented. While this research shows that, nonetheless, overwhelming numbers of low-income fathers remain involved in their children’s lives over time, it is highly likely that non-participating fathers may be less involved with their children and may be more likely to resemble the “deadbeat dads” portrayed in the popular press.
A major challenge therefore, is to move beyond studies of low-income fathers that omit the voices of fathers who no longer see their children. Even exploratory studies on small numbers of presumed “deadbeat dads” promise to lend new insights into the experiences of fathers who are no longer involved with their children and the reasons for their lack of involvement. Although studying such fathers poses a significant challenge, and large-scale work with hard to reach low-income fathers is lacking, a handful of qualitative studies have yielded information on the experiences and perceptions of low-income fathers who no longer see their children and/or no longer provide for them. As one example, Nelson, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin (2002) interviewed 40 noncustodial, low-income African American fathers in the Philadelphia area and found that although most of these men “welcomed the opportunity to become fathers” and “were determined to embrace the responsibilities [of fathering]”, they also found it difficult to live up to their intentions for a variety of reasons. A number of obstacles associated with economic disadvantage contributed to men’s inability to fulfill their fathering responsibilities, including substance abuse, incarceration, and difficulties finding and sustaining stable employment. The lack of job opportunities many of these men faced led some to pursue alternative forms of income, which often resulted in incarceration and other barriers to continued involvement with their children (Jarret, Roy, & Burton, 2002).

Reflections of Presumed “Deadbeat”, Non-Involved Fathers

In our own qualitative research, we also interviewed a small group of fathers who no longer saw their children in efforts to learn more about the circumstances leading to their “absenteeism”. This work is based on in-depth two-to-three hour interviews with a handful of fathers of pre-school aged children who had been in our studies at earlier
waves and yet had not had any contact with their children for at least a year (Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera, McFadden, Jolley, & Tarkow, 2006). Although these fathers were not necessarily representative of “no longer involved low-income fathers” at large, their personal reflections provided valuable information about the experiences of these rarely studied men.

Two overarching themes were common to the stories of the low-income men who no longer saw their children: (1) Perceptions of maternal “gatekeeping” (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Fagan & Barnett, 2003); and (2) Intentions for future reunification with their children. Moreover, underlying both these themes was evidence of the obstacles posed by men’s low-income status, in terms of why they felt that the mothers of their children were gate-keeping and why they felt unable to yet unite with their children.

Regarding the first theme, virtually all fathers spoke of the barriers created by the mothers of their children, who were viewed as preventing fathers from having access to their children. This finding accords with the observations of others (e.g., Nelson, Clampt-Lundquist & Edin, 2002): that one of the greatest barriers to fathers remaining involved with their children after their romantic relationships with children’s mothers had ended was negotiating with their former partners about seeing their children. For the most part, their relationships with the mothers of their children were both complex and contentious, and fathers expressed a sense of futility in their ability to negotiate co-parentship with their children’s mothers. They uniformly perceived themselves as being excluded from making important decisions in their children’s lives. Moreover, fathers described mothers’ gate-keeping as an abrupt and sudden change that was either
unexpected or else deemed to be unfair. These perceptions are illustrated in the following statements made by two fathers in our qualitative study:

*She was really mad, she was like I never wanna see you ever again, you know what I mean? Your daughter, you can just forget about your daughter. Then she just hung up on me, and then that’s it, that’s when everything started. Boom, I haven’t seen my daughter since then.*

*She sent both of her daughters to Jamaica. They don’t even live in the country... I didn’t even know she had already planned to do this in advance. She didn’t tell me and umm, she had already got her passports, but she didn’t tell me she was about to do this situation. So I like found out the day that they was leaving.*

Regarding the second theme, all fathers spoke passionately about their hopes and plans to someday reunite with their children. These plans were expressed as deeply rooted needs to be part of their children’s lives, although in most cases the conflicted relationships with their ex-partners had engendered obstacles to consistent father-child relationships. According to fathers, mothers simply did not facilitate father-child visitation or else actively sought to keep fathers and children apart. At least in their minds, fathers remained fervently attached to a desire to one day be there for their children, as reflected in the following statements:

*I wanna see my kid and if I knew where my kid was I would go pick her up. You know what I mean? I would not leave her and never go see her...I would never just forget about my daughter and just and just disappear.*

*I feel that on my heart and my life, I need them here with me…I want to do everything for my kids. I don’t ...I’m focused on a future, you know? I really want them.*

Nonetheless, despite fathers’ firm desires to reunite with their children, they did not have a well formulated plan as to how to move forward, and they were not typically making special efforts to regain their parental rights through the legal system. In light of their enormous commitment to their children (at least as expressed to us), why were these
men not actively pursuing seeing their children? Here it seems that their low-income status was a fundamental obstacle to moving forward. For example, many fathers noted that they first had to achieve certain goals before they could reunite with their children. These fathers felt they would resume their involvement with their children “as soon as” their housing or employment conditions became more stable, at which point their children would be able to stay with them.

*The master plan is I’m in the process of buying a home right now. It’s the first step to a much greater goal I’ve set for myself, which is to have him just, just have him with me. Raise him up. You know, in the meantime I’m missing like the many you know precious time right now with him and, and it hurts.*

Although this father dreamt of one day being a consistent figure in his child’s life, and recognized the material requirements that would accompany such a responsibility, he had not yet come close to working out the complicated negotiations with his child’s mother (and custodial parent) that would be necessary to make such a situation happen (though the child now lives with his mother in New York, this father lives in Florida, and would have to bargain for an out-of-state co-parenting arrangement). Fathers ardently held on to admirable intentions that were not always coupled with plausible ways to navigate the co-parenting relationship or their economic circumstances so as to achieve their dreams of someday being there for their children.

These interviews reveal the dynamic trajectories that father involvement can take by illustrating the reality of low-income fathers moving in and out of their children’s lives in response to challenges in their own lives (Jarret, Roy, & Burton, 2002). Men remain fathers for a lifetime, and although they may often be unable to fulfill their responsibilities as fathers at certain point in developmental time, it is still possible that
they will later become involved under more stable life conditions, and it appears that many such men hold on to such dreams of the future.

**Summary**

In summary, although the term “deadbeat dad” originally referred to fathers who were not meeting their full financial obligations to their children, the term has also been applied fathers who are not involved with their children in other ways (e.g., time). However, regardless of definition, the pervasive characterization of low-income fathers as deadbeat has been invalidated by studies that find the majority of low-income fathers to be highly accessible to their children and involved in a range of activities with them, ranging from bathing and feeding to play and reading. Moreover, relatively high rates of father involvement are also displayed by fathers who do not reside with their children, although the quality of the mother-father relationship can alter these patterns. Non-resident fathers who are in a romantic relationship with the mothers of their children are more likely to see their children and remain involved than those who are not. When fathers do not maintain at least a friendly relationship with mothers, rates of contact with children can decline rapidly.

Finally, more research is needed on fathers who no longer see their children, so as to understand their perceptions of the barriers to sustained involvement. Recent qualitative research indicates that fathers who are not involved with their children hope to be reunited with them in the future and, at least in part, blame the mothers of their children for their current circumstances. Nonetheless, their goals of reunification do not include clear steps about to how to move forward, and without such a plan their absence continues to the possible detriment of themselves and their children.
Dads Stuck in their Histories

A third myth that permeates the popular and scholarly literatures is the idea that low-income fathers will follow in the footsteps of their own fathers. This idea is largely grounded in attachment theory, which posits that an individual’s history of attachment-related experiences plays a major part in later childrearing behaviors (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). Bowlby and his followers hypothesized that early attachment relationships are translated into later social functioning through an individual’s development of a fairly stable mental model of the self in relationships (termed an “internal working model”; Bowlby, 1969/1982; 1973; Benoit & Parker, 1994; Main et al., 1985; Sagi et al., 1994). The hypothesized links between an individual’s childhood experiences and current parenting are referred to as “the intergenerational transmission of parenting” (Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Main et al., 1985; Ricks, 1985; van Ijzendoorn, 1992).

In many ways, the assumption that early attachment histories are linearly linked to current parenting styles may create unspoken expectations for low-income men who may be more likely to have experienced inconsistent fathering in their own childhoods than men from more resourced backgrounds. In contrast, research that emphasizes possibilities for flexibility and adaptation in internal working models speaks to the potential of fathers to both overcome and even benefit from their past negative relationships (Carlson, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2004; Paley, Cox, Burchinal, & Payne, 1999; Pearson, Cohn, Cowan & Cowan, 1994; Phelps, Belsky, & Crnic, 1998; Rohner, 1986). Indeed, links between fathers’ childhood histories to current fathering are not straightforward. Many times, men obtain strength from their own adverse experiences, and seek to rectify these through
positive relationships with their own children (Baruch & Barnett, 1986; Velling & Belsky, 1992).

Our own research on father involvement indicates that although low-income fathers’ childhood relationships with their fathers predict patterns of father engagement with their infants (Shannon, Tamis-LeMonda, & Margolin, 2006), these associations are modest in size, and moderated by a host of other factors, including the quality of the mother-father relationship, fathers’ mental health, income, education, and age (Shannon et al., 2006; McFadden, Tamis-LeMonda, Howard, Shannon, & Cabrera, 2009).

For example, in a recent study of 501 low-income fathers of 2-year olds, various associations between childhood histories and current father involvement emerged. Men with positive recollections of their early relationships with their fathers were not by default “highly involved” with their own children, just as men with negative recollections of their early relationships with their fathers were not automatically low on father involvement. Rather, men’s current involvement with their children reflected the interplay between past and current experiences. For example, men who reported positive relationships with their fathers, positive current relationships, relatively higher incomes (within an otherwise low-income range), higher education, etc., were highly involved with their children, whereas fathers with positive histories but low scores on these same measures displayed low involvement with their children on measures of financial provisioning, time with child, social involvement, and caregiving. Similarly, men who had poor childhood relationships with their fathers and difficult current circumstances were low on involvement with their children, whereas negative histories coupled with
positive current circumstances resulted in men being highly involved with their children (McFadden, Tamis-LeMonda, Howard, Shannon, & Cabrera, 2009).

The positive side of this work indicates that low-income fathers who perceive rejection from their fathers in their own childhoods are not doomed to reject their own children. Rather, many men who perceive their fathers as uninvolved or rejecting during childhood express high motivation to remain involved in their children's lives, and are able to follow through on these aspirations, as measured by the time they spend with children as well as their involvement in the everyday care of and play with their children.

Of special interest in our work is the group of low-income men who were able to overcome the risks associated with having a poor relationship with their own fathers. Through in-depth interviews with a subset of these men we learned about their unwavering commitment to reverse the negative patterns of their own childhoods. These men were dedicated to remaining invested in their children’s lives, and actively avoided becoming the types of fathers their fathers had been. They did not want their own children to think of them as they thought of their fathers, as evidenced in the following quotes by Latino and African American fathers:

I don’t wanna have my son growin’ up how I think of my father.... Don’t like him, can’t stand him, I hate him, he can just die, I use to jus’ think that, n’like he could die I won’t even go to his funeral. I won’t even cry. I won’t even care. They don’ even got to tell me...That’s how I use to think. You know what I mean? I don’t want my son growin’ up thinkin’ that way about me. I want RJ to be proud of me.

My father was never there for me. You know, umm, I’m just doing the opposite of what my father did- was be there for my children. Especially for my boys, ‘cause I never had a male figure around in my life.
Additionally, these men were well aware of the challenges associated with being low-income, and they expressed desires to shelter their own children from those risks and experiences. Broken homes, street-life, and sporadic visitation rights were viewed as experiences to avoid at all costs:

*I didn’t wanna have kids like he had in the street ‘cause me going through what I went through I don’t want none of my kids to go through anything, anything like that. You know the emotional drama and you know the broken home...It’s nothing better than having two parents together. You know raising one child. You know, it’s the greatest.*

‘Cause like you know I wouldn’t wanna be the type that’s livin’ somewhere else and come and get my kids, like you know every now and then or you know every weekend or every other week. You know things like that and not being there on a daily basis cause, you know, I’m really not getting’ to know them. You know not being there so it’s like I’d rather be there for them every single day. You know me you know I’m always there for them. It’s not like they have to call me and say “okay come by you know come by on the weekend”.

In general, the expressed sentiments of these fathers align with findings obtained with middle-income fathers. Specifically, many low-income men with rejecting histories appear to have learned from their own experiences and are attempting to compensate for their own fathers’ lack of involvement by being more engaged with their own children (Baruch & Barnett, 1986; Volling & Belsky, 1992).

**Summary**

Although men from low-income families are more likely to have experienced “absent” fathers than men from middle-income backgrounds, it is simplistic to assume that these patterns of engagement will be replayed in their current fathering. Low-income men are aware of the barriers of poverty, and many are also acutely sensitive to their own
feelings of rejection from their fathers when they were children. These feelings often translate to a great desire to be better role models for their own children than their fathers had been to them. A shared goal of many of these men is to protect their children from the dangers of the streets and the experiences of single-parenthood by being there for their children both emotionally and financially.

Dissenters of Marriage

A final myth surrounding low-income fathers is the idea that these men do not value marriage. Proponents of marriage promotion initiatives describe a “crisis of the family” and cite declining marriage rates as evidence that low-income parents no longer value the traditional family form (e.g. Haskins, McLanahan, & Donahue, 2005). Indeed, this logic is based on the exponential increase in out-of-wedlock births over the past 50 years (4% to 33%) (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Ventura & Bachrach, 2000), which tend to be highest among poor minority parents, especially those from African American backgrounds (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005; Ventura & Bachrach, 2000). Even when these births occur within cohabiting relationships, the likelihood that low-income parents will establish a household together or get married appears to vary by race/ethnicity and economic factors, as for example low-income African-American mothers are less likely to marry than low-income White mothers (Edin, 2000; Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005; Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, & Landry, 1992; Manning & Smock, 1995).

These statistics have left the impression that low-income parents, and particularly the fathers who have seemingly abandoned these unions, do not value marriage and customary family formation. Some of this work is based on interviews with mothers
about their views and choices regarding family formation. For example, one study of low-income Black and White mothers demonstrated that single White mothers tended to have more positive views of marriage than Black mothers (Edin, 2000).

In contrast, little information on low-income fathers’ views about marriage has been generated (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005). Some research suggests that difficulties finding and sustaining employment and the risks and realities of incarceration make many low-income men “unmarriageable” (Lichter, LeClere, & McLaughlin, 1991; Lichter et al., 1992; Manning & Smock, 1995; Wilson, 1996; Edin, 2000; DeParle, 2004), yet most conclude that this explanation does not come close to accounting for the variance in parent’s transition into marriage by socio-economic status and race (Lichter, et al., 1991; Lichter et al., 1992; Manning & Smock, 1995). Consequently, the lack of data on the views of low-income men regarding marriage stands the risk of leading to erroneous conclusions about the relatively low rates of marriage in low-income families.

The Value of Marriage

In our own qualitative work with low-income fathers in the New York City area, we sought to gain insight into what these men actually think about marriage and family formation. We interviewed 22 low-income Latino and Black fathers of preschoolers using in-depth, open-ended probes that asked men about their relationships to their children, partners, life circumstances, and views on marriage (Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera, McFadden, Jolley, & Tarkow, 2006). These men had been in our studies of fathering since their infants’ births, and were therefore particularly forthcoming about their views on marriage and families given their history of study participation. Somewhat unexpectedly, nearly all men (88%) expressed positive views toward marriage and
discussed the benefits afforded by marriage, even though only 27% of the men in the study were actually married. Thus, men’s marital status was not associated with their expressed evaluations of the institution of marriage.

The overwhelming majority of fathers talked about the comfort and benefits that marriage offers in facing life issues with a partner or as a team. They talked of the “beauty” of marriage, shared responsibilities within marriage, the lifelong commitment of marriage, and a general sense that marriage is the “right thing to do”. These sentiments are exemplified in the quotes below, each by a different father, yet each sharing common themes around teamwork, intimacy, and the beauty and rightness of marriage:

*It’s a team that you always have somebody by your side that understands how you feel and that’s going to feel the pain that you feel. And that when you go through something, your significant other is going to go through it with you.*

*It’s like working as a team really, that’s your team. Any problems any hurdles that you have in life you work on it together. I mean a husband and wife would combine, like we’re one person. Marriage is a beautiful thing and things are usually good in marriages unless you wasn’t ready or unless you really not compatible with that person.*

*Not being alone, you know, coming home, if you had a bad day talking to someone, you know? Having somebody there. You don’t want to open your door and it’s an empty house. You know what I mean? You got no one to talk to so, you know, I believe just having somebody there for you that you could talk to at any time. And helping out and sharing the responsibilities bills or whatever. So that’s a good thing.*

*The growin’ together, you know. Experiencing certain things with that particular person. Someone that you’re gonna spend the rest of your life with.*

*We’re not married but if it were up to me, we would be because that’s a way a family should be. It’s the right thing to do.*

*It shows you know it’s just the way of life. I mean you get with someone, you marry, you have a family. Plus it keeps you more committed. If you’re not married, ain’t know what’s gonna happen. But when you married it’s*
more like a commitment. You know what I mean? Something’s still there. It keeps the tradition that’s one. Second of all that was again they [children] start learning by marriage. They know that their parents were married, and it was like real love. And it’s, it’s the right way. It’s the family way.

I think that’s the right thing to do. It’s good to grow old with somebody.

Additionally, these men expressed an unequivocal reverence regarding the integrity of marriage. In contrast to cohabitation, the decision to marry was viewed to be permanent. Thus, counter to common myth, these men did not view cohabitation as a replacement for marriage; instead, living together and getting married were described as very different forms of commitment:

It’s supposed to be a more serious commitment. You know meaning that you gotta try to give more, you know. You know in my point of view right now, anybody could just decide to say “listen, I don’t want to be here.” You know, they could just take their stuff and leave.

You’re living together, but, when you get married, it’s more responsible. Just living together you could walk out any day. When you’re married you try to work things out more. If you get married by the church they are very strict about divorce and none of that. It’s different. I think it is different.

The commitment and high value placed on the institution of marriage was paralleled by an equally strong distaste for divorce, and disdain toward people who took marriage and divorce lightly. Many men explained that marriage means “forever”, and that there was no point in getting married if there was a possibility that they might someday get divorced. For these men, divorce was worst than never marrying, and divorce was viewed as especially harmful to children:

I don’t believe like in, how they call it umm, divorces, I don’t think that you suppose to do that. Once you get married, to somebody, somebody that you really love and that you care about, it should always remain like that, no matter what. It should be no divorce, if you have to go to counseling or classes or anything, you should try to work it out, once you get married.
There are so many divorces. You see people meeting in the club and next week they married. You know, “I met this person and we got married”. They don’t even know the person and then they’re in divorce court two months later you know I want a divorce and that’s not the way it rolls for me because umm I believe that. I believe in about till death do you part. When you get married make sure that you—just be sure that that’s the person you want to be with. Don’t make the mistake.

That’s what my mother always used to tell me. Don’t marry just to get married just ‘cause you have a kid or you feel you have to. ‘Cause marriage is a big step. You get married and say it don’t work out. What’s the process to get out of the marriage? To put a child through a divorce to me is one of the meanest things you can do, because that gets very ugly. That’s when you start fighting over the child, fighting over custody, fighting over this. It’s no longer a household it becomes mine, mine, mine, and the child gets stuck in the middle.

Once you married and something like that you build that bond…but if you break that bond and get divorced it’s even harder on the child.

That’s one thing that it is today that just get married and get divorced you know? There’s so much divorce right now. Sometimes I think that hurts more.

As a part of this high regard for marriage and disapproval of divorce, men were very adamant about the requisites to marriage. Men expressed the need to have stability and to acquire certain material things before marrying – an engagement ring, a home of their own, a steady job – and felt they should not marry before these necessities were in place. Without these fundamentals, there was no reason to marry.

Why should we get married? We ain’t got nothing to show for it. I figure when you get married with a person, you’re supposed to have everything already like an apartment or at least everything heading somewhere. You know what I mean? You have a plan you know what I mean? Alright I get married. Boom, I have an apartment we could stay in. You know what I mean? We have enough money to support each other you know what I mean, and um I see for five years from now we probably have enough money to buy a house or something like that. You know what I mean? You just save up and do what you have to do. We didn’t have none of that.
I mean I was just like you know how am I really going to support a family? Like I mean I was doing like a full time job but it was like you know not really nothin’ that could be translated to like a career or nothin’ like that.

Not till I Not till I have what I need...I have to get my GED. I know I have to do all of that. I’m gonna get my own apartment, I’m gonna do what I have to do.

Until the point of financial stability, many low-income men felt it was not right to marry. Other men focused on the importance of first obtaining what might otherwise appear to be minor material things. To these men, the proper steps to marriage included being able to afford an engagement ring, a car, etc. When talking about marriage, men invariably noted “first of all I didn’t have money for a ring”; “You know gotta go buy a ring. I can’t just go buy a regular ring”; “I wasn’t ready, I didn’t have a car, money”. This expressed need for rings, cars, homes, and stability suggest that low-income men view marriage as an entry into middle-income American values and lifestyle. Thus, they do not de-value marriage, but ironically, value marriage in ways they view to be currently unattainable; consequently they may perceive insurmountable barriers to the lifelong commitments they hope to one day achieve with someone they truly love.

Summary

The relatively low rates of marriage in men and women from low-income households have resulted in myths regarding men’s perceptions of marriage. Our qualitative research with low-income men indicates that despite many of these men not being married to the mothers of their children, they hold the institution of marriage in high regard and view the commitment and permanency of marriage as much greater than that of cohabitation. At the same time, they feel that marriage carries with it a set of requirements, including money and a stable job, and that
the dissolution of a marriage, or divorce, is something to be avoided at all costs. Together, this constellation of views might partly explain why many of these low-income men choose not to marry, even if marriage is something they someday aspire to experience.

Conclusions: Countering Myths

The findings from our research, as well as the work of leading scholars in the area of fatherhood, counter several prominent myths in the literature – that low-income fathers are non-essential or deadbeat; that they are destined to perpetuate cycles of poor parenting; and that they reject the institution of marriage. As we have shown, despite the challenges that low-income fathers confront on a daily basis, most are highly involved in the lives of their children, and even those men who no longer see their children express a strong commitment to one day reunite with them.

In terms of low-income fathers’ influence in children’s development, studies over the past two decades highlight the importance of positive father involvement for virtually all aspects of children’s development (Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 2002; authors this volume). Children who grow up without a father in the home are at risk for low-school achievement, school drop-out, delinquency, and other problem behaviors (Furstenberg & Harris, 1993; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Perloff & Buckner, 1996). Reciprocally, the most optimal child outcomes are found in households in which children are reared by two biological parents (for a review, see McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Moreover, fathers influence their children’s development through multiple pathways, including their direct engagements, economic provisioning, and effects on the larger family context in which children develop (Cabrera et al., 2000; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008), and these pathways
of influence are common to fathers from both low-income and middle-income backgrounds.

In terms of direct effects, fathers are as equipped as mothers to respond to and provide for children’s emotional needs (Lamb, 1997; Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999), and children are as likely to be securely attached to their fathers as their mothers (Belsky, 1996; Lamb, 1981; Volling & Belsky, 1992). Father involvement has been shown to increase children’s regulation of emotions (MacDonald & Parke, 1984; Parke, 1996), and fathers are core socializing agents in children’s friendships and peer relations (e.g., Parke, 2002). In language and cognitive domains, fathers’ supportiveness predicts children’s emerging skills in early development (Shannon, Tamis-LeMonda, London, & Cabrera, 2002; Tamis-LeMonda, et al., 2004; Cristofaro et al., in progress), and father involvement is associated with children’s academic achievement in middle-childhood and adolescence (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Barth & Parke, 1996; King & Sobolewski, 2006; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2008).

Beyond these influences, fathers are central to the financial well being of the family. In low-income households in particular, even small investments by fathers (including in-kind contributions) can make enormous differences in the stable functioning of the family. Fathers may provide critical economic resources for children or may supplement household incomes, thereby figuratively “lifting” children above the poverty line (Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1999). Longitudinal studies of teen parenthood indicate that when fathers remain in the household, families are more financially stable (Apfel & Seitz, 1996; Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Morgan, 1987) and households without fathers
are more likely to be economically disadvantaged (McLoyd, 1998). Furthermore there are strong links between fathers’ financial provisioning and positive child outcomes for both resident fathers and non-resident fathers who contribute resources through child support dollars (Argys, Peters, Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998; Yeung, Duncan, & Hill, 2000).

Finally, fathers influence children’s development through their effects on family climate and other members of the family, most notably mothers. Close, supportive relationships between mothers and fathers promote positive child outcomes (Gable, Crnic, & Belsky, 1994), whereas unstable, conflicted, and hostile mother-father relationships are associated with negative father-child involvement and low levels of child well being (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998; Cummings, Davies, & Campbell, 2000; Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Raymond, 2004; Lamb, 1997). Low-income fathers are less likely to remain involved with their children over time if they do not maintain at least a friendly relationship with the mothers of their children (Cabrera, et al., 2004), and fathers’ sensitive interactions with children predict mothers’ sensitivity within and over developmental time (Tamis-LeMonda, Cabrera, Shannon & Lamb, 2004). Moreover, the quality of the father-mother relationship already begins to shape the course of father involvement from the prenatal period (Tamis-LeMonda, Yoshikawa, & Kahana-Kalman, in press; Shannon, Cabrera, Lamb, & Tamis-LeMonda, in press).

In light of these findings, it is time to dismantle myths about low income fathers, and instead consider the multiple pathways through which these men affect their children’s development, both directly and indirectly. Future research and policies on fathering should be grounded in the evidence-based findings that fathers matter for all
children, in all cultural and socio-economic communities, and in families where fathers do and do not reside with their children.

Finally, even when the behaviors of low-income men appear to “fit” with negative portrayals, for example when fathers are seemingly “absent” from their children’s lives, caution should be heeded in drawing conclusions about men’s underlying motivations (or lack thereof). Many absentee fathers may harbor a strong desire to “be there” for their children, but may not have the skills to enact the small steps that are necessary to realize those goals. They may not be able to effectively negotiate complicated legal and interpersonal co-parenting arrangements, and/or might feel that their lack of stability in housing, employment, and so forth, are barriers to continued involvement with their children. Thus, initiatives aimed at promoting positive and sustained father involvement should acknowledge the high levels of commitment and involvement that is already demonstrated by the majority of low-income men, but at the same time recognize the unique challenges that other low-income men face in establishing the conditions necessary for maintaining a healthy and continuous presence in their children’s lives.
References


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