A Life Course Perspective on Fatherhood and Family Policies in the United States and South Africa

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In this theoretical paper, I develop a framework to analyze and to understand men’s work and family roles in multicultural societies with histories of inequality. I draw upon a life course perspective—including the concepts of reciprocal continuity, linked lives, and timing of lives (Elder, 1995)—for the basic components of the framework. For each concept, I examine lived experiences of and effect of social structure on poor fathers in South Africa and the United States. In both societies, nonresidential fatherhood emerges from a complex interplay of subordination by race and class, dynamic political economies, and family dynamics. Paternal absence is shaped by migrant labor and coping with un/underemployment, imprisonment, military service, desertion, and divorce. Finally, I offer a set of questions for future comparative research on men’s work and family roles in low-income communities.

Keywords: fatherhood, life course, comparative policies, South Africa

Traditional notions of masculinity are under dramatic reconstruction in local, regional, and global communities. In recent decades, we have witnessed and taken part in a profound reevaluation of men’s roles in the lives of children and families around the world (Morrell & Richter, 2005). With regard to the potential for enhancing and diversifying commitment of men toward the well-being of children, the debate at the turn of the 21st century is marked by the emergence of the ideal “new father” (LaRossa, 1997) who is both provider and caregiver for his children. The mirror trend of father absence from children’s lives is also increasingly evident. In many societies today, poverty goes hand in hand with the almost permanent absence of biological fathers from home. Father absence is of particular concern for poor families, for whom men’s contributions could make a real difference in pulling children out of poverty.
In the United States, the rate of non-residential fatherhood continues to climb, with 23% of children under the age of 18 who do not live with their biological fathers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). The widespread incidence of men’s absence from families is evident across societies around the world. In South Africa, for example, 52% of children under the age of 18 do not live with their biological fathers (Desmond & Desmond, 2005). Recent studies have provided early looks into the factors leading to and consequences of non-residential fathering (Amato & Sobolewski, 2004; Graham & Beller, 2002; Lamb, 2002; Letamo & Rakgoasi, 2000).

With the study of changing fatherhood in different contexts, researchers also have recognized increasingly complex family configurations in which fathers are embedded. For example, multi-partner fertility is a prevalent status among low-income fathers (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2006), but the role of fathers in the subsequent process of multi-partner parenting is relatively understudied (Roy, Fitzgerald, & Kaye, 2006). Similarly, non-biological “social” fathers may be common and influential (Jarrett, Roy, & Burton, 2002), but few household surveys collect information on these fathers (Posel & Devey, 2005).

Although the reevaluation of men’s work and family roles unfolds in intimate interactions between parents and children during everyday family life, these roles are also products of race and class dynamics, political economy, and economic restructuring, and state social policy regimes (Brewer, 1998; Marsiglio, Roy, & Fox, 2005). Such regimes include policies such as welfare reform, child support/maintenance, social grants to limit poverty, and efforts to eradicate histories of discrimination and racism (Orloff & Monson, 2002). State intervention has directly shaped the rights and duties of fathers, although at times social policies have run counter to gender equity and moreover have discriminated against Black and poor men (Curran & Adams, 2000, in Morrell, 2005, p. 21).

When societies assume the challenge of promoting “responsible” fatherhood, they accept “a moral challenge and a national building initiative … to promote men’s involvement in the care and protection of children” (Lesejane, 2005, p. 174). These initiatives may be critical in multicultural societies with extensive histories of inequality between racial and class groups. By situating families in larger social contexts, we may see the interconnectedness of histories of White and Black fathers in both the Republic of South Africa and the United States and how those contexts directly shape men’s work and family roles over time. In effect, the field of research on men’s roles in families may benefit from comparative studies that demonstrate the uniqueness or similarity of men’s experiences as parents.

Theoretical Framework

In this paper, I return to a framework based on an explicit life course perspective (Burton & Snyder, 1998), which makes social change central to the interpretation of men’s place on the margins of work and family. Dilworth Anderson, Burton, and Boulin Johnson (1993) note that a life course framework is particularly well-suited to consid-
eration of historical experiences for minority families. The tools that Burton and Snyder offer provide a foundation from which we can explore changes between work/family interfaces over historical time, and in different multicultural and unequal societies, such as the United States and South Africa. These tools also address intersectionality of race/ethnicity, class and gender. Although this article is primarily focused on race and class relations among men in both societies, this should not suggest that gender relations are less important.

Burton and Snyder (1998) draw on the sociological concepts of the timing of lives, linked lives, and reciprocal continuity (Elder, 1995) to compare men’s experiences as fathers. Recognition of the timing of lives focuses on “the multiple temporal contexts in which an individual acquires work and family roles” (Burton & Snyder, 1998, p. 36). Researchers recognize historical time as the temporal periods which mark events that unfold in broader social contexts—and that can shape the roles and values of individuals and families.

Men from different racial or income groups may have unique or shared histories, but these experiences do not occur in isolation from each other. Linked lives result in a degree of social interdependence, such that these diverse groups of men, women, and families’ histories are interconnected in complex and dynamic ways. As Burton and Snyder (1998) assert, “Social changes, role transitions, personal choices regarding work/family roles in one group are related to and have implications for social changes, role transitions, and personal choices around work/family roles for another group” (p. 35).

Finally, individuals and families are not passive recipients of social change. They resist and respond to events in broad social contexts, such as war, economic change, migration, or social policies. This level of reciprocal continuity means that they are agents and mediators of social change. In this case, fathers actively negotiate social-historical events, taking charge—or attempting to take charge—of their own destinies and lives.

In the following sections, I will develop a framework to analyze and to understand men’s work and family roles in multicultural societies. I will use these three concepts from the life course perspective as the basic components of the framework. For each concept, I frame lived experiences of and the effect of social structures on poor fathers in South Africa and the United States. Finally, I will use the framework to offer a set of questions for future comparative research on men’s work and family roles in low-income communities. I will address possibilities and limitations of this approach—in particular, the challenges of linking macro-level social events in two societies with micro-level family interactions.

Timing of Lives

In both South Africa and the United States, men’s work and family roles have been shaped by complex histories of social oppression, economic subordination, and racial conflict. A period analysis of these histories reveals patterns of important similarities and differences between the two societies.
In the pre-industrial period of American history, men’s work and family roles were typically integrated in agrarian communities. However, sharp distinctions existed between privileged fathers with resources and fathers who struggled to obtain resources for their families (Griswold, 1993). The colonialization of the continent, and the messianic tone of Manifest Destiny, supported the efforts of European men of wealth to physically relocate Native American communities. Throughout this period, the legal standing of fathers and the rights to marriage and family unification were routinely reshaped by men of privilege, most explicitly under the institution of slavery. As Griswold asserts, African American fathers have “experienced a profound historical tragedy … [going] from being heads in their households to being either permanently absent from or itinerant guests within their own homes” (pp. 54-55).

With the turn from the 19th to the 20th century, industrialization and urbanization again reshaped men’s work and family roles in the United States (LaRossa, 1997). The migration of multiple cohorts of African American men from Southern agrarian communities to Northern industrialized cities throughout the first half of the century resulted in dramatically different employment opportunities and family experiences (Drake & Clayton, 1945/1993). Along with a large influx of immigrant men and families from Europe, these men filled the need for labor in growing American cities in the North and Midwest. Many men strived for and believed in an American Dream of achievement that promised “middle class status.” However, as pre-industrial society dissolved, new systems emerged to reshuffle segregation by race, ethnicity and class. Jim Crow laws throughout the South codified the “separate but equal” social institutions—schools, employment, housing—promised by the *Plessy v Ferguson* ruling. The Great Depression during this period was a shock shared by families across race and class; however, it had quite different impacts on work and family roles for diverse groups of men (Griswold, 1993).

In the post-World War II period, many working class and minority men and their families gained resources to secure stability in work and family life (Griswold, 1993). For example, many Black families found good jobs and entry into middle class lifestyles by mid-century, although most were restricted to blue collar or unskilled positions in the secondary workforce (Pattillo McCoy, 1999). Landmark changes in social policy, such as the G.I. Bill and *Brown vs. Board of Education*, promised access to opportunities that would transform men’s roles in their families. In particular, marginalized young men and future fathers took part in resistance to systems of subordination during the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. This resistance at times set intergenerational conflict into motion, regarding how to best work for change in a system of racial discrimination. These changes in men’s lives also occurred in concert with, and often in reaction to, dramatic political and practical changes in women’s living conditions as workers and parents.

In South Africa. The period of contact between Zulu, Xhosa, Khoi, and Sotho peoples and European settlers offered distinct visions of fatherhood. Men’s work and family roles were again integrated in primarily agrarian communities (Thompson, 1990). Tra-
ditional Zulu fathers, for example, valued *amandla* (or power) and the importance of building a home for one’s family. Fathering was closely linked to the ability to pay *lobola* (bridewealth) in cattle, prior to creation of a family. Afrikaner fathers and families were also tied closely to the land as farmers (*Boers*). The colonialization of South Africa involved multiple conflicts, such as the Zulu War in the late 1800s, and the forced migration of African communities and families (Saunders, 1988).

With the Anglo-Boer War at the turn of the century, the worlds of privilege were unsettled. Afrikaner families began to shape a unique and powerful cultural identity, which was distinct from English or African visions of fatherhood (Du Pisani, 2001). However, perhaps the most significant factor that was to reshape men’s work and family roles was the emergence of gold and diamond mining industries (Breckenridge, 1998; Frederickson, 1981). The South African state imposed taxes on Black African families in rural areas, in large part to force African men to seek work in urban centers (Smit, 2001). This forced migration of African fathers led to generations of disrupted households, as well as a shift of family life toward urban areas and away from cattle to cash payment of *lobola* (Hunter, 2005). African fatherhood was diminished and transformed, and men’s absence from children’s lives in rural communities affected child outcomes, such as school performance (Mboya & Nesengani, 1999).

Immediately after World War II, the Afrikaner-led government codified a system of segregation and racial/economic subordination known as *apartheid*. Separate but unequal institutions— including schools, medical care, transportation, employment, and housing—explicitly divided men and families by privilege based on race. Laborers continued to migrate from rural areas to urban mining industries, but Group Areas laws in the 1960s and 1970s caused more destruction to family life than migrant labor (Wilson, 2005). Whole African communities were razed, removed, and resettled, and township homes were created to channel families into Western-type nuclear models (Hunter, 2005). Other state laws, such as strict influx control, job reservation, restricted hiring practices, and pass laws, allowed monitoring of Black African and colored populations— and limited opportunities for men to live with children and partners (Clowes, 2005; Wilson, 2005). The ensuing “struggle masculinity” for men who resisted the apartheid system set up intergenerational conflict between comrades and their own fathers (Ramphele & Richter, 2005). We must note the intimate linkages between young men—who gave up on older generations and took law into their own hands—and the men who crafted and maintained these systems of repression (Carton, 2001a). Finally, women played central roles in resistance struggles against apartheid, which resulted in improved political and social circumstances for themselves and other family members—including men. The complex interdependence of South African men and women is evident as well in men’s active support of, and reaction to, women’s expanding role in employment, family life, and politics.

In summary, historical events have shaped men’s work and family roles, with distinct impacts across race and class divisions—perhaps more variation within multicultural societies like South Africa and the United States than between them. Both societies were founded on colonialization of indigenous communities by European communities.
(Lamar & Thompson, 1981). They are both driven by powerful market-force engines and capitalist economies. Furthermore, both societies continue to cope with legacies of slavery and apartheid, legalized systems of racial separation and oppression. Such legacies include the consequences of forced movement and relocation of marginalized families, state-supported violence, and planned limitation of life opportunities, as well as persisting inequalities in each society.

Linked Lives

As Burton and Snyder (1998) assert, a focus on “linked lives” or social interdependence encourages fatherhood researchers to examine men’s relationships at multiple levels, including personal decisions, role transitions, and even major social changes. In this section, I explore the interwoven lives of privileged and marginalized fathers; transitions and shifting role expectations in both men’s and women’s lives; and flexible father roles in extended families.

Social interdependence of privileged and marginalized fathers. The initial point of Burton and Snyder’s essay (1998) was to critique a history of fatherhood specific to White middle class American men, with limited recognition of the work and family lives of ethnic minority and low-income males. Few studies of fatherhood in the United States explicitly note social interdependence of men across race and class boundaries (Gerson, 1997), and it may be a productive direction for critical research on the diversity and interconnectedness of men’s experiences as parents. For example, Burton and Snyder (1998) identify the sexual victimization of African American females by White men during slavery and reconstruction. This perspective could be extended to explore the decisions of a primarily White middle-class electorate to create prisons for primarily young men of color in the United States, or to oppose immigration reforms that would grant immigrant working class men and their families resources and rights through American citizenship.

Morrell (1998) also acknowledges men’s linked lives in the study of Black and White masculinity, colonialism, and privilege in South Africa. Under a system of apartheid in which adult African men were denied rights enjoyed by White men (such as voting, citizenship, physical mobility), apartheid became “the context for the adolescent transition to adulthood” (Morrell, 2005, p. 16). This relationship extends into the post-struggle era, even with the passage of the Family Responsibility Leave Act in 1997, which provided a modest paid paternal leave from employment for childbirth or adoption. Morrell considers how middle class men seldom encounter material constraints on their choices to be providers, protectors, or caregivers, but poor men “must mobilize ethnic identities to create a level of social cohesion and repel disintegrative effects of globalization that associate fatherhood with providing and protecting” (p. 22). This analysis echoes the situation of marginalized men in the United States, in which privileged men control economic decisions and influence employment opportunities and related family roles of poor and minority men (Burton & Snyder, 1998).
Transitory fathering and contested relationships. Shifts in men’s lives are linked intimately to even more dramatic shifts in women’s lives, particularly with regard to new conceptualizations of motherhood (Walker, 1995) and access to resources through increased participation in the labor market (Posel & Casale, 2002). Maternal employment can lead to new opportunities for father involvement. However, many low-income women may also depend less on men’s wages and realize the limitations of potential partners and fathers of their children (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). Researchers have traced declining rates of marriage to the plight of marginalized men in both societies. Wilson’s theory of the marriageability pool (1987) suggests that there are fewer men with family-supportive jobs in many urban low-income communities. In South Africa, Hunter (2005) also notes the relation of declining marriage rates with rising unemployment, as well as the inability of men to fulfill more traditional social contracts, such as lobola or inhlawulo (impregnation damages to women’s families).

Potential partnerships between low-income and working class fathers and mothers can become stressful in the face of poverty. Throughout the 1990s, high rates of child and partner abuse may reflect consequences for men who have been deprived of traditional roles and power in relationships (Mkhize, 2005; Peacock & Botha, 2005; Wilson, 2005). In an era of high unemployment, the rapid emergence of HIV/AIDS has transformed traditional norms about men’s sexuality (such as involvement with multiple partners) as well as women’s sexuality, including implications for fertility (Hunter, 2004). Morrell and Richter summarize the current crisis of fatherhood as “high rates of child sexual abuse; absence of men from household and low levels of child support; increased needs for care of children with AIDS [and] AIDS orphans” (2005, p. 6).

Conflicted relationships between mothers and fathers, alongside larger social changes, have made couples and family formation more fragile. Rates of nonresidential fatherhood are high in both the United States and South Africa. For the first time, in 2002, more children lived apart from their fathers than lived with their fathers in South Africa (Posel & Devey, 2005). Racial differences are evident in both societies as well. In South Africa in 2002, less than 40% of Black African children lived with their fathers, but 90% of White children did so (Posel & Devey, 2005). In the United States in 2005, 72% of children (81% of White children compared to 40% of Black children) lived with their fathers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

However, father residence, and involvement more so, may be best characterized as “in flux” and not “absent,” particularly among low-income men of color in both countries (Mott, 1990). The transitory nature of father involvement may be related, for example, to the prevalence of incarceration among low-income men in the United States and to migrant labor in South Africa (Posel & Devey, 2005). Fathers and families adapt to different role expectations in different contexts (such as inkazana, or children born to men’s marital partners in rural areas, compared to inshweshwe, or children born to men’s non-marital partners in urban areas; in Wilson, 2005). Nonresidential fathering is more prevalent in urban areas than rural areas, and the return of fathers from urban areas is destabilizing for many families.
Communal fathering in extended kin networks. As many researchers suggest (Hunter, 2005; Jarrett, Roy, & Burton, 2002; Mkhize, 2005; Morrell, 2005), men’s changing work and family roles favor a conception of an individual actor in a nuclear family—a perspective that may run counter to the reality of social interdependence for many marginalized men in both societies. For example, in many African communities, whole families—not individuals—were married. Within such cultural values systems, the spirit of communalism (botho/ubuntu) is characterized by the connectedness of men and their commitment to the common good, including one’s descendents and one’s ancestors (Lesejane, 2005, p. 174). Extended families have been able to respond strategically to ongoing disruptions in fathers’ lives, offering support systems for young, poor men of color (Allen & Connor, 1997). Researchers in both countries have noted flexibility in paternal roles and the importance of extended families for alternatives to primary caregiving by both fathers and mothers (Jarrett, Roy, & Burton, 2002; Ramphele & Richter, 2005).

Even if traditional cultural systems value fathers as men of wisdom, good judgment, care, and consideration, contemporary fathers can be “objects of suspicion” (Lesejane, 2005, p. 173), particularly with the displacement of extended family networks and undermining of social fatherhood by regional mining economies, the spread of urban townships, and land and economic dispossession under apartheid in South Africa (Carton, 2001b; Smit, 2001). Economically stretched households are unable to pool incomes and are not productive in raising children when fathers live away from their children and work in distant urban communities (Campbell, 2001; Rabe, 2005). Madhavan (2006) notes that older cohorts of men are much more likely to have coresident fathers who work in mines, but younger men are more likely to have nonresident fathers who are unemployed. Roy (2006) also notes that, in some urban areas in the United States, older men were more likely to have stable father presence in their lives, and that younger cohorts of men often had few father figures to guide them in the transition to fatherhood.

The extended family approach is significant for poor families in that there is an increasing need for men’s care of “orphan” children in South Africa, given rates of mothers’ absence due to HIV/AIDS, or in the United States, given rates of maternal incarceration. During extended periods of vulnerability, children need additional care and support, especially where marriage and even cohabitation is uncommon (Denis & Ntsimane, 2005). The reality of extended family life is that grandparents and other female relatives are most likely to assume primary caregiving roles in both societies (Desmond & Desmond, 2005). Barbarin and Richter (2001) suggest that, in the face of postponement of marriage, single motherhood, and cohabitation, fathers’ long absences limit their ability to influence household relationships. They become “shadowy figures” who are symbolically important but may have little actual importance in children’s daily lives.

In summary, both the United States and South Africa are witnessing a reshaping of men’s roles, with an emphasis on how and why men are embedded in the lives of their children, partners, and extended kin members. Researchers should also note how
men’s lives are linked to each others’ and to women’s work and family roles, with regard to differences in power, resources, and fathering norms in poor and non-White families.

Reciprocal Continuity

The concept of reciprocal continuity emphasizes that fathers are not passive recipients of historical events. How fathers and families resist and respond to social change is a critical piece of the puzzle in making sense of men’s work and family roles. In this section, I focus on how men actively reshape father roles in the face of ongoing economic restructuring and barriers to success, and how social policy responds to non-residential fathering and life challenges of poor fathers in South Africa and the United States.

Providers in restructured global economies. Limited economic opportunities “[have shaped] the lives of poor African American fathers at every juncture” (Jarrett, Roy, & Burton, 2002). The same statement could apply to many other marginalized fathers in the United States (working class men, Latino fathers) and in South Africa (African and colored fathers). Limited job opportunities are increasingly commonplace in the shift from industrial to post-industrial labor markets under globalization (Edelman, Holzer, & Offner, 2006). In both countries, low-income and working class men– and non-European men–served as primary workers in manufacturing industries. With economic restructuring and the shift to service sector jobs, many of these men have lost stable jobs and find few options for employment (Johnson, 2000). Educational attainment has become more relevant, but young men across both societies have historically had little access to quality education and pathways to good jobs (Duster, 1995).

Generations of young men have come of age in societies that have experienced growing gaps in inequality. In the United States, men’s real wages have continued to decline since the mid-1970s, and gaps between rich and poor families are among the largest in the Western world (Rank, 2004). In South Africa, class inequality is greater ten years after apartheid than at the end of the apartheid era (Seekings & Nattrass, 2005). Shrinking options in a global economy have left young marginalized men in both societies searching for respect and positive engagement (Bourgois, 1996). The question of “where is my homeland?” has taken on new resonance: South African men continue to migrate to urban areas, and even back to rural communities; African American men and Latino men in the United States move back and forth between family households in urban areas, in Southern communities, or in Mexico and the Caribbean.

The search for respect and resources had led many young, low-income fathers to pursue illegal or underground activity in place of mainstream employment (Edin & Nelson, 2001; Furstenberg, Sherwood, & Sullivan, 1992). Relatedly, in the United States, one of the most significant population migrations involves African American men moving from urban areas to rural areas due to incarceration (Hallinan, 2001). The United States has the highest incarceration rate of any society in the world, accounted for by the rapid increase of men of color who are incarcerated through mandatory min-
imum sentences under the War on Drugs. The rate of 714 offenders per 100,000 people in the United States is almost double that of South Africa, at 432 offenders per 100,000 people (Walmsley, 2006).

Correctional facilities, as social institutions, may have emerged to hold displaced or excess laborers, as a consequence of economic restructuring. In South Africa, with migrant contracts, annual visits home from distant residence, and Black unemployment rates at 43% (Wilson, 2005), such emergent social institutions may still emerge. What is clear, however, is that differential access to good jobs has resulted in explicit differences in men’s fathering and what is possible for White or Black fathers in both societies (Morrell & Richter, 2005).

Responsible fatherhood is rooted in the ability to provide material resources for families in both societies. Townsend’s (2000) notion of the package deal holds for both countries: successful men achieve good wages at work first and foremost, with home ownership, marriage, and fatherhood following suit. The ability to fulfill this role under current economic conditions is perhaps the one deciding factor that distinguishes privilege among men and their families. Low-income minority men in the United States have increasingly moved from jobs in the formal economy into informal, irregular, or unregulated employment in highly racialized low-wage labor markets (Edelman, Holzer, & Offner, 2006). Failure as providers has harmed fulfillment of other roles in the lives of African American men, such as the regular involvement of men with their children (Cazenave, 1979; McLoyd, 1989). In South Africa, family life is similarly impacted:

Desertion by fathers is often prompted by their inability to bear the burden of being primary providers. The burden of failure becomes intolerable for those who lack the capacity to generate enough income as uneducated and unskilled laborers. Desertion is not always physical, it can also be emotional. Many men “die” as parents and husbands by indulging in alcohol, drugs, or becoming unresponsive to their families. (Ramphele, 2002, p. 158)

Health, violence, social isolation, and masculinities. For low-income Black men in the United States and South Africa, lingering structural effects of social policies, such as the Group Areas removals in the 1960s/1970s, incarceration, and global restructuring, have planted seeds of violence within and outside of households (Wilson, 2005). Even decades later, fathers are confronted with significant barriers to health and well-being. African American men have coped with high rates of homicide and suicide, unwed teenage fatherhood, substance abuse, delinquency and crime, unemployment, and termination of education (Mincy, 2006). Rates of mortality and violence are high in many poor communities across both societies, with one of the consequences being men’s withdrawal from social interaction, depression, and isolation (Roy, 2004). With ambiguous expectations for men who bring few resources, nonresidential fathers may introduce risks to both children and mothers themselves (Roy & Burton, 2007).
Research with recent cohorts of young marginalized fathers suggests that more and more young people grow up with little knowledge or interaction with their fathers as important figures in their lives (Ramphele, 2002; Roy, 2006). Another critical point of comparison between these two societies, then, is how men construct effective masculinities for themselves, given few role models. Normative social expectations for White, middle class American fathers (Townsend, 2000) echo many of the hegemonic expectations for traditional Afrikaner masculinity. However, Du Pisani (2001) notes that these rigid religious values and racial beliefs have given way to a more progressive notion of Afrikaner masculinity (see also Smit, 2002). Black Africans as well may hold to traditional norms of masculinity (see Waetjen & Mare, 2001, for case study of Zulu nationalism), even in the face of dramatic social change and at the cost of violence. In the United States, men on the margins of work and family have turned increasingly to a recommitment to “responsibility” and a “change of heart” through social movements such as the Promise Keepers and the Million Man March.

However, perhaps more importantly, we should pay attention to men who resist hegemonic notions of men’s roles, particularly in families. In the post-struggle society of South Africa, subordinated masculinities have emerged as more coherent and critical (Morrell, 1998). Indlavini, indicating a young man who identifies with violent behavior, recklessness, and disrespect for elders, or tsotsi, characterized by a street-wise criminal who also resorts to violence, each reflect the experiences of poor men alienated from traditional norms of masculinity and fatherhood just as they are alienated from the resources needed to achieve such normative success (Beinart, 1991; Lesejane, 2006). Oppositional thinking to mainstream masculinity is common for many marginalized American fathers as well, who have crafted roles within hip hop culture and even gang affiliations to find measures of respect and worth (Anderson, 2000). Subordinated masculinities in both societies are dynamic and thriving through cultural expression in music, film, spoken word, dress, and language.

Social policies to promote responsible fatherhood in the United States and South Africa. The past decade has been characterized by the creation of innovative social policies, aimed at the promotion of responsible fatherhood. With insight into the complications of work and family life, women in both countries have been at the forefront of designing policies to secure and to recognize men’s involvement (Griswold, 1993; LaRossa, 1997). In this article, I have also emphasized how such policies are constructed by privileged men on behalf of marginalized men, and often are implemented with a focus on nuclear families and biological parenthood. They can be characterized by both punitive and supportive policies, and different approaches may be some of the most pronounced differences in fathering experiences between the two societies.

Over the past three decades, social policies for low-income families in the United States have tended towards a retraction of resources and minimization of social contracts. The jobs programs and general assistance funding for young men and fathers in the 1960s and 1970s have been terminated. Father involvement is still defined by state policies as financial provision in the “good provider” role (Bernard, 1981; also Carlson & McClanahan, 2004; Jarrett, Roy, & Burton, 2002; Roy, 1999). The flip side of
“ending welfare as we know it” has been the establishment of paternity establishment and child support systems. With an emphasis on the responsibilities of nonresidential parents, many poor fathers are required to pay the state for child support, if their children are recipients of welfare. Few states “pass through” financial support to poor children; most garnish the payments as reimbursement of welfare benefits. These “deadbeat” fathers are actually “deadbroke” (Mincy, 2006), and few federal or state programs have proven successful in securing jobs with good wages for poor minority fathers. In effect, most policies that encourage responsible fatherhood in the US are coercive and punitive.

In contrast, after decades of legal segregation and denial of access to resources under apartheid, South African state programs are extending resources and social contracts to poor families. Such policies seem to balance punitive and supportive measures for men in families. For example, fathers are responsible for child support, but Maintenance Act 99 of 1998 is an international model for the recognition of the rights of non-residential fathers (Gallinetti, 2005; Khunou, 2005). Ziehl (2005) suggests that the Act is an indicator that “South Africa is on its way to recognizing a variety of family situations: heterosexual and homosexual, legal and nonlegal, monogamous and polygamous” (p. 61). The state has also established child support grants for children under the age of seven (Case, Hosegood, & Lund, 2004). Fathers and grandfathers (i.e., social parents) have rights to claim maintenance as well, but there is little evidence that state programs “seek” poor father or extend eligibility requirements for such grants to poor men (Madhavan, 2006). Over 70% of social grants go toward single parent households (Wilson, 2005). Paternal leave policies created in South Africa were ostensibly created not to increase involvement but to reflect equity generated by the country’s human rights culture (Morrell & Richter, 2005, p. 3). With few jobs programs in existence, there is still little support—such as housing subsidies or targeted social grants—that could benefit poor fathers who struggle to become involved with their children.

Finally, both societies have witnessed the creation of a range of fatherhood programs at the local level. The National Fatherhood Initiative in the United States and the South African Men’s Forum and the Moral Regeneration Movement in South Africa represent both a new perspective on men’s involvement with children, but also movement by primarily privileged fathers to secure rights and create new images for responsible male parenting. In the United States, local, state, and federal funding has also supported fatherhood programs that offer a range of educational, parenting, and job-related services (Curran & Abrams, 2000). Although the goals of these programs may be marriage promotion or enhanced child support awards, they do offer resources to marginalized men. The impact of these programs may be limited, however, to peer support—and not job training or housing subsidies (Johnson & Doolittle, 1996).

In summary, the concept of reciprocal continuity emphasizes how men on the margins of work and families are not just passive recipients of social change. They resist, respond to, and create conditions that favor new expectations for men’s fathering. Across both societies, men have reworked the good provider role in the face of stark challenges to finding good jobs. They have also struggled to find meaning even in nonresidential fatherhood. Ultimately, there are very serious consequences to their strug-
gles to retain respect and worth, through threats to men’s health, as well as those of their children and partners.

**Directions for Comparative Fatherhood Research**

The three life course concepts from the theoretical framework–timing of lives, linked lives, and reciprocal continuity–help to frame the experiences of men in very different social contexts. They also provide us with tools to build conceptual bridges between these contexts, to find common patterns, and to examine subtle differences with a focus on process, time, and structure. In this section, I offer three questions for future comparative research on men’s work and family roles in low-income communities. These questions are relevant to comparisons between fathering in the United States and South Africa, but they could be adapted to address any number of comparative studies of fathering in different social contexts.

**What is the impact of globalization and economic restructuring on fatherhood?** Kimmel (2001) points out that men’s parenting behavior and beliefs are shaped by local and global processes. Increasingly, fatherhood researchers are moving in the direction of comparative studies. Townsend uses interpretive and particularistic orientations–through ethnographic methods–to explore “different cultural models embedded in strikingly different political, economic, and demographic regimes” (2002, p. 273). Clarke and colleagues (2005) compare challenges to incarcerated fathers in the United States and the United Kingdom. Other researchers explore how “transnational” men move with or apart from their families across international borders and cultural traditions (see Cabrera & Garcia Coll, 2004, for Latino fathers; Roopnarine, 2004, for Caribbean fathers; Kwon & Roy, 2007, for Korean fathers).

Can we interpret the similarities between African American fathers and Black South African fathers as the consequences of linked processes of globalization? Both populations of men have been displaced by shifts away from jobs in traditional industries and into service sectors. The mobility of capital in both countries has left workers ill-equipped to respond to rapidly changing labor markets, particularly in low-income urban areas. These fathers appear to be “excess workers” without a place in a global economy.

Do these economic patterns spill over and negatively impact family life in poor communities and communities of color in the United States and South Africa? Ziehl (2003) argues that the impact of globalization cannot be oversimplified or overestimated. But on the margins of work, poor and minority men increasingly find themselves to be nonresidential fathers, unable to fulfill social expectations, and their own desires, to be responsible parents. If globalization is not directly shaping family patterns, perhaps it is reshaping these men’s life opportunities and their involvement in family life indirectly.

**How do marginalized fathers and families develop cultural strategies to secure men’s involvement with children?** Barbarin and Richter (2001) note that their compar-
isons between African American and Black South African fathers “reveal a great deal about the ways that cultures mediate development of behavioral and emotional problems on one hand, and may illuminate how they serve as a basis for resilience and coping on the other hand” (p. 229). These strategies include ways that fathers and families may define what is expected of a nonresidential biological father, or how family systems can craft flexible fathering roles to supplement men’s sporadic involvement with children. As evidenced in South Africa and the United States, cultural strategies also include the fading of lobola, increased rates of cohabitation, and delay in marriage. All of these cultural strategies represent efforts to deal with the powerful expectations for men to be self-sufficient individuals as they negotiate their involvement with partners, children, and families. Researchers could explore how strategies used by fathers in low-income families of color may be models for strategies to suit middle-class and/or White men in families (Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis, 1999).

The concept of father absence is unlikely to capture the experiences of marginalized men in either society. As an alternative, life course tools help to frame dynamic patterns in fathering research. In the face of dramatic social change and increasing inequality, transitory fathers move in and out of jobs, residences, and family or intimate relationships (Roy & Kaye, 2005). Are there differences in how men in either country move across first, second, or third families? Do they move between physical contexts, as is the case for miners in rural and urban areas of South Africa? At which age are marginalized men more likely to transition among multiple families or to commit to involvement with a primary family?

How do race and class shape responsible fatherhood programs and policies? Which policy tools lead to positive changes for poor and nonresidential fathers? These questions go to the heart of commitment to integrating marginalized families in multicultural and often quite unequal societies. Historically in the United States, it has been acceptable to label men as either “good dads” or “bad dads,” distinguished in rhetoric and behavior by reference to race and class differences (Pleck, 2004). Policy efforts to promote men’s breadwinning have been aimed at poor and minority men, with a relative lack of policy (except for paternal leave) to promote caregiving activities among men with more resources. As a result, the United States and South Africa use combinations of child support, paternity establishment, and social grants to encourage and even to require men’s involvement and children’s well-being.

After dramatic social change and efforts to correct histories of racial oppression, both societies appear obligated to recognize increasing inequality. In the United States, almost four decades have passed since the Civil Rights movement; in South Africa, it has been only a decade since the emergence of majority rule. However, the two societies may be moving in divergent directions with regard to extension or retraction of resources for poor families. Do these versions of policy tools make any difference in preventing father absence and promoting involvement?

As Madhavan (2004) argues, policies and programs should support families as they actually exist, not as societies expect them to exist. Should the state support men’s
roles in extended families, even extending social grants to marginalized men, with the understanding that it would benefit men’s children as well? What is the state’s role in developing employment and other life opportunities to aid men who are displaced by competitive global economic forces? With insights from life course research, resources from policy initiatives could be tailored to diverse cohorts or developmental needs, particularly in societies with histories of inequality (Madhavan, 2006; Roy, 2006).

Conclusion

This theoretical framework for the comparative study of fatherhood leads to important methodological considerations. To explore the relation between social history and life history, Elder and Giele (1998) encourage researchers to use models that prioritize events and not outcomes. By giving priority to a historical event or process, such as apartheid laws or deindustrialization, comparative studies of fatherhood may capture a range of consequences of historical events. The life course concepts used in this framework may be best suited for micro sociological data, found in qualitative or mixed methods designs. For example, although fatherhood programs may be designed by White middle class men to impact the lives of low-income, minority fathers, data are required to discern how this is relevant to social norms for fathering, through the lens of each low-income father’s interpretations and role negotiations. These life course tools will likely not result in causal models of the impact of social policies or historical events. They may, however, provide insight into how fathers negotiate macro-level processes across different but related contexts.

A life course framework for the comparative study of fatherhood offers unique contributions as well. Cross-cultural thematic studies of father involvement suggest new ways to envision the range of men’s experiences as parents (Beardshaw, 2005). By drawing on international, regional, and local data, researchers can move beyond limited notions of race and class diversity and develop a deeper understanding of processes of marginalization that intimately shape family dynamics around the world. The framework also pushes researchers to study fathering with a “long view” of history and biography. From a life course perspective, linking support for poor fathers to their residential or marital or biological statuses is short-sighted. Men’s relationships with children are long-term propositions; they likely require consistent social investments over time, to overcome ecological challenges and to provide support for contributions to children’s well-being.

References


A LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE


