



The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 25
Issue 4 December

Article 6

December 1998

The Definition of Fatherhood: In the Words of Never-Married African American Custodial Mothers and the Noncustodial Fathers of Their Children

Jennifer F. Hamer
Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#), and the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hamer, Jennifer F. (1998) "The Definition of Fatherhood: In the Words of Never-Married African American Custodial Mothers and the Noncustodial Fathers of Their Children," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 4 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol25/iss4/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.



The Definition of Fatherhood: In the Words of Never-Married African American Custodial Mothers and the Noncustodial Fathers of Their Children

JENNIFER F. HAMER

Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville
Department of Sociology

This qualitative study explores the meaning of fatherhood from the perspective of never-married parents. Specifically, the study describes: how African American custodial mothers perceive the roles and responsibilities of their children's fathers; the extent to which these mothers' perceptions and definitions of noncustodial fatherhood are consistent with those of noncustodial fathers and the dominant cultural "ideal"; and what mothers do to enhance men's paternal participation. A convenience sample of 25 never-married, former couples was drawn from the predominantly African American population of a mid-sized Midwestern city. Data was collected via in-depth interviews with each individual respondent. The findings suggest that African American custodial mothers' expressed definition of "ideal" fatherhood tends to reflect traditional Western standards, which emphasize the paternal economic role. However, in practice, mothers, like fathers, emphasize the social and emotional aspects of paternal responsibilities. Overall, it appears that while these mothers really want financial support, they are willing to forego economic support in lieu of the social and emotional support fathers provide.

Introduction

How do African American single-parenting mothers define fatherhood? What role do these women want noncustodial fathers to play in their children's daily lives? These questions are timely given recent dramatic changes in family welfare policy that demand fathers be more accountable and responsible for their children's care. In our society, paternal accountability and

responsibility have traditionally been defined financially (Tripp-Reismann and Wilson 1990; Blankhorn 1995). State mandates and family policies continue to define the noncustodial paternal role in primarily economic terms. Consequently, states have developed stringent policies to diligently pursue noncustodial fathers for formal payment of child support. Yet, policies developed in this regard are destined to fail until they reflect the reality of life for African American families. As Geiger (1995) points out, not all custodial mothers benefit equally from current policies. African American single mothers are less likely than other demographic groups to formally identify their children's father, which subsequently impedes the state's ability to acquire paternal economic support. Furthermore, the life circumstances of many African American men make securing child support from noncustodial fathers an arduous if not almost impossible task. Indeed, approximately 60 percent of all 16- to 24-year-old African American men have no work experience at all (U.S. Department of Labor 1990). The jobless rate for African American men is more than double that of whites. Approximately 16 percent of African American men are unemployed—not including those who have essentially given up searching for work (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992a). High levels of unemployment, underemployment and low wages, coupled with relatively low levels of education and high rates of incarceration, mean that these fathers are often unable to fulfill the traditional Western paternal economic provider role.

Specifically, we need an improved understanding of how African American men and women define and perceive paternal parenting roles for themselves. Similar to men, African American women have historically had social, cultural and economic experiences that differ markedly from other demographic population groups. African American mothers are more likely than other demographic groups to give birth out of wedlock and to have never married (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992b). Those that do marry are more likely to divorce and less likely to remarry following divorce (Glick 1997). Additionally, these mothers are more likely to be employed outside the home and make substantial, if not the sole, contributions to household earnings (Glick 1997). Thus, they are less likely than other women to be economically dependent on

men. Since slavery, African American women and men have had to adapt to the reality that for many African American fathers, the means to provide a consistent level of economic support for their children's basic needs has often been tenuous. As a result, state-defined and -mandated roles and responsibilities may not correspond to African American women's or men's "ideal" of fatherhood. Policies based on state assumptions may not adequately address the experiences of African American fatherless families.

Purpose of This Study

This study intends to explore how adult African American never-married fatherless families define and perceive noncustodial fatherhood for themselves, given the historical and contemporary social and economic contexts of their lives. Specifically, this study will do the following:

- 1) describe how African American parents perceive the roles and responsibilities of noncustodial fathers;
- 2) describe the extent to which custodial mothers' perceptions and definitions of noncustodial fatherhood are consistent with those of noncustodial fathers and the dominant cultural "ideal" of fatherhood and;
- 3) describe what mothers do to enhance men's paternal responsibilities as they define them.

Limitations of Past Research on African American Fatherless Families

Past research provides valuable insight into the role of the father, and the general attitudes and behaviors of single-parenting mothers and noncustodial fathers. It is, nevertheless, limited. Social, political and legal efforts to improve the social and economic well-being of African American fatherless children are confounded by a lack of sensitivity to the reality of African American family life for "fatherless" families. Past studies tend to focus on either custodial mothers *or* divorced noncustodial fathers. Furthermore, studies on the attitudes of single mothers tend to focus primarily on divorced white women. In addition, past studies of noncustodial fathers have generally focused on the experiences of mostly white divorced fathers. Still other studies tended to focus on African American teenage mothers and/or fathers whose

parenting experiences and perceptions were subject to stressors and conditions unique to adolescence (Allen and Doherty 1996).

Overall, past findings do not adequately address the attitudes and experiences specific to African American never-married custodial mothers *and* the noncustodial adult fathers of their children. Current evidence provides little insight into how adult African American mothers perceive the roles and responsibilities of noncustodial fathers. We know even less about how African American *never-married* parents perceive the role of the father as it relates to providing socially, emotionally and economically for their shared offspring.

The broad, long-term aim of the study is to provide the knowledge and comprehension necessary to enable policy makers to create social policies that reflect the social and economic experiences of African American fatherless families. Additionally, the study will provide a foundation to help researchers and practitioners develop and institute social programs that effectively improve the health and well-being of African American children.

What We Know About the Definition, Roles, and Responsibilities of African American Noncustodial Fatherhood

There does not appear to exist a clear, concise definition of the roles and responsibilities of African American noncustodial fatherhood. In general, what African American single-parenting mothers expect from noncustodial fathers, as yet, is ambiguous and ill-defined. We know that social policies attempt to combat the negative conditions of single-parenting families primarily by pursuing noncustodial fathers for formal payment of child support, and by implementing various changes in welfare policy. Yet, many African American single mothers have found that social policies attempting to address the economic well-being of their children have, to date, been largely ineffective. As Geiger (1995) argues, all mothers and children do not benefit equally from legislated child support. Only one-third of all African American mothers and their children are granted child support payments compared to two-thirds of whites and 41 percent of Hispanics (Geiger 1995). The probability of obtaining child support also varies with marital status. According to Hill (1997), in 1989 77 percent of divorced mothers were granted child support compared

to just 24 percent of those who had never married. Moreover, many noncustodial fathers tend to pay inconsistently or not at all (Arendell 1986; Furstenberg and Cherlin 1986). In addition, while most African American births are to unwed parents, many African American unwed mothers do not officially name the father of their child. Thus, there is no named father to pursue for any form of child support. Moreover, high levels of unemployment, underemployment, and low wages make securing sufficient child support from African American fathers through legislated means largely ineffective (Geiger 1995).

In general, the concerns of many single-parenting mothers seem to be consistent with some of the elements social policy attempts to address. A study focusing on divorced white mothers found many were dissatisfied primarily with fathers' participation in the lives of their children, particularly in terms of the economic support noncustodial fathers appear to provide (Arendell 1986). Additionally, many white divorced mothers and adolescent mothers say that noncustodial fathers do not spend enough time with their children and that they would like for their children's fathers to participate more in the lives of their offspring (Arendell 1986). Still, we know very little about the attitudes and perceptions never-married adult African American single mothers have of the fathers of their children, or how they expect for them to behave in their paternal role.

Stack's (1974) study of a Midwestern African American community provides some insight into how African American fatherless families perceive and define the fatherhood role. Her findings suggested that a single-parenting African American mother generally regards her children's father as a friend of the family whom she relies upon for assistance of varying forms. In a more recent study Stack (1986) found that 70% of fathers of 1000 children on welfare acknowledged their children and provided them with kinship affiliation. However, only 12% of those acknowledging paternity provided their children with economic support.

Overall, it seems noncustodial fathers and custodial mothers, in general, may not always agree on noncustodial fatherhood roles and functions. An earlier part of this study found that African American fathers placed emphasis on the socio-emotional elements of fatherhood (Hamer 1997). Additionally,

the findings of other researchers (Allen and Doherty 1996) indicate that African American noncustodial fathers tend to place emphasis on both their economic and social roles. Nonetheless, it seems that when noncustodial fathers do play a role it tends to be recreational and social rather than instrumental (Furstenberg and Nord 1985).

Efforts to secure adequate social, emotional, and economic support for children from African American fathers is impeded not only by a continued lack of understanding and information on how fathers perceive these aspects of parenting, but also by an inadequate knowledge of how African American single mothers interpret these fathers' attitudes, roles, functions, behaviors, and how they interact with fathers in regards to the care of their children.

Methods

This study used personal in-depth interviews as the primary means of data collection. The interview consisted of several close-ended questions to obtain basic demographic information about respondents, their children, and custodial mothers' and noncustodial fathers' respective relationships with one another. The majority of the interview consisted of open-ended questions designed to explore the attitudes and ideals custodial African American women and the fathers of their children have with regard to roles and responsibilities of these fathers.

The open-ended format permitted women and men to explain, in their own words, their attitudes, definitions, and parenting experiences. Collecting data via personal open-ended interviews is consistent with the descriptive nature of this study. Personal interviews are also necessary because respondents will be asked for personal information that they may not provide unless the researcher develops trust through personal contact. This methodology is appropriate for this project because of the nature of the research. African American single mothers have rarely been the focus of qualitative research studies that attempt to comprehend the relationship between single mothers and noncustodial fathers. Additionally, it is rare that such studies are conducted by a researcher indigenous to the population.

This exploratory qualitative research will enable the discovery of in-depth meanings, understandings, subjective experiences, and qualitative attributes of fatherless families (Leininger 1994). While qualitative methodology does not claim predictive value, it can furnish the dimensions of time, history, and cultural context to the study of social life and lifeworld patterns (Orum et al. 1991). Overall, this research will obtain respondents' interpretations of fatherhood in their own words, and position these accounts in their broader ecological social context.

Sample

The respondents were a convenience sample of 25 never married, former couples drawn from the population of a Midwestern city. The city's population is approximately 66,000. Forty-four percent of the population live at or below the poverty line. Sixty-six percent of the households are headed by single-parenting African American women. The primary criteria used in selecting participants were race/ethnicity. African American adult single-parenting females and the adult fathers of their children were the only respondents selected for participation. Additionally, only those who had children (aged 2 to 18 years of age) at the time they were contacted for possible study participation were selected for interview. Each respondent was interviewed separately.

The Findings

The Definition of Fatherhood

These couples were asked to discuss noncustodial fatherhood. Specifically, they were asked to define their conception of the "ideal" father. Mothers' definitions tended to reflect the ideals often espoused in Western society, and tended to emphasize fathers' economic role. This seemed to be the emphasis regardless of the amount of economic support mothers received from fathers. Fathers, on the other hand, tended to emphasize the importance of social and emotional roles. And, in fact, they rarely mentioned child support or economic provisions unless prompted by the interviewer. These couples express attitudes similar to most study respondents:

Mother

A father is first biological. He takes care of the child he helped bring into this world . . . By that I mean he sees to it that his children have what they need to stay healthy. For example, enough food to eat and a roof over their heads. He provides for their everyday needs.

Father

A good father is one who understands when don't nobody understand. One to be the backbone for them to lean on . . . A guide they can call on.

Mother

He makes sure that his kids are well fed, have decent clothes and a good way of life . . . The father should be someone that the mother can count on to help with the children's medical, food, school, discipline and everything.

Father

A good father puts his family first, above all else. He's a role model to his daughters and his sons. He's the strong shoulder for them to cry on. Now, he loves them unconditionally but he disciplines them when the mother ain't strong enough to do it.

Mother

He should love his children. Take care of them by seeing to it that they want for little or nothing. He should see to their financial needs and help the mother with raising them, especially if he has sons. Then he should spend a lot of time with his sons.

Father

The father is the one who provides provisions but more importantly he shows them the way . . . He's somewhat or should be somewhat the leader. He handles situations and keeps the family safe and together . . .

Mother

The ideal father makes enough money to take care of his child and himself and is educationally prepared to handle that . . . He spends time with the child, too.

Father

He provides security for his children. They can count on him when there's trouble or if they're going through something. He's a source of strength. Like my kids know they can always turn to me when they're having difficulties with their mother. I'm here for them.

Mothers defined fathers as those whose primary responsibility was to meet the economic needs of their children. This included payment of medical bills, providing for shelter, food, clothing, and other essentials. Fathers, on the other hand, defined fatherhood in terms of providing protection and security, and serving as a role model to offspring. While the two definitions are not contradictory, they do suggest that mothers and fathers have different expectations of what men are supposed to do as fathers.

Initial Expectations

Prior to the birth of their child, mothers generally expected that noncustodial fathers would provide economic, social and emotional support to them and to their children. Yet, more often than not the paternal behavior mothers initially expected was not fully realized after the birth of the child. Three couples shared their experiences:

Mother

Before the baby was even born, we sat down and had long talks about what *we* were going to do for our child. I felt good about our talks but I also had a feeling that it was just talk. Especially, because during the later part of my pregnancy he started messin' with another woman. At that point, I did *not* want anything to do with him. All I wanted was for him to pay child support, which to this day, has not happened. However, that is all I wanted and expected from him.

Father

She wants me to help take care of my son. Before Damien was born we made plans, partially fantasy but partially I wanted things to

work out between us . . . for the baby . . . How things turned out the way they did is she decided to kick me to the curb. So then there wasn't much I could do. I did wrong. I admit that. And when I did wrong we just stopped communicating like we had been . . . I expected that she would eventually let me see my boy and she did. How that happened was I just kept calling to check on her and our son, broke her down. So that's what I do. I spend time with him when I can, send things over. That's somewhat different from what she really wants from me.

Mother

We never really talked about what he was supposed to do. In a way, I told him. See, I would tell him I need diapers; I need for you to take her to the doctor; I need for you to watch her, I need money, that sort of thing. Because I expected him to be part of her life even though he didn't live in the house. I expected him to be a mother and a father to her just like I was . . . I expected financial help.

Father

She expected me to be a father and help her out as much as possible. I go above and beyond the call of duty when it comes to my daughter. I know I do more for her than many men out here. The only thing I knew about being a parent was from watching my mother and my uncle a little. The result was that, basically, I learned one day at a time once my daughter was born. I didn't know nothing about getting the milk warm, burping, changing diapers. But her mother expected me to help her with all that. So that's what I did at first and I continue today to do help take care of her.

Mother

I expected him to be there for me and the baby. To love us unconditionally. To help with the finances, the doctor bills, the diapers, the formula, everything. I expected him to be a good father. In my last trimester I told him no more sex. Well, of course, that did it. Things cooled off real quick like and he went and found him some somewhere else. That devastated me when I found out, because he always told me he loved me and that he wanted us to be a family . . . Even then though, I still thought he'd be there for the baby. But he never has been really.

Father

We had a falling out about this and that otherwise I think we would have eventually got married. She's the marrying type. When she told me she was pregnant I was real angry and upset. I tried to talk her into having an abortion because I knew I wasn't ready to be a father. I couldn't afford to take care of child. But she wasn't having none of that and I talked to my mother about it a little. After awhile I started to get excited about being a daddy. We made plans, where we was going to live, me finishing school, getting married. I was into it one-hundred percent. But, like I said, we had a falling out and I figured she just didn't want me around her or the baby. It got to the point that every time I would try to talk to her she would be yelling at me. Telling me to go to hell and shit! I figured that was a clear message to keep away. So I just make arrangements with her mother to visit my daughter or bring her toys and clothes . . . I do this every now and then.

Overall, mothers and fathers felt that there was no "understanding" or general agreement between them with regard to men's paternal roles and responsibilities. Women tended to make demands of fathers, while fathers seemed to remove themselves from the situation—placing the blame for their actions on the shoulders of mothers. These men felt they were being pushed away from their children. In contrast, mothers felt they and their children were being abandoned.

Roles and Responsibilities as Parents

While mothers and fathers were asked to describe the "ideal" father and their initial expectations of parenthood, they were also asked to discuss the actual roles that each played in providing for the well-being of their shared offspring. What it is exactly they do as a mother or as a father. They were also asked to describe the role of the other parent. The following examples reflects the responses provided by most couples:

Mother

What I do is primarily to make sure he [son] has what he needs like clothes, pay the rent for a place to stay, food, the basics. I take care of him on the day-to-day basis, everyday. When he's sick I'm his nurse. When he has a problem I talk to him and ask his daddy or my brother to. It's my job to spank him when he needs to be taught

a lesson. His father, on the other hand, does very little. I have never received child support . . . Though there has been a few occasions when he gave me ten or twenty dollars to get clothes or boots or whatever . . . What he does do is he will buy him birthday presents, take him over to his mother's on the holidays especially, take him to the movies on occasion if it's something he wants to see . . . he sees him a couple of times a month at least but that's about all.

Father

My role is to basically be their to support my son's mother. She pretty much provides for his everyday needs. I'm their to support her getting him the extra things he needs and help to get some essentials. Then too, I also try to spend time with him and this is most important because in this way I stay in touch with what's going on in their lives and they know I'm there for them . . . So my role is to do what his mother can't or won't do . . . I take them to the show, spend time with him, get him extra things to make his life better . . . Then see, my biggest role too, is teaching him how to be a man, a black man . . . because that's something that his mother definitely cannot teach him . . . how to defend himself, how to act out here in the world, how to associate.

Mother

With my kids I am the primary caretaker. I see to their health needs, make sure they get to the doctor, to school, pay all the bills so that we have a roof over our heads, help them with their homework as much as I can. It's rough but that's my role as a mother. I'm their mother and a black single mother and I do for my kids what my mother did for me . . . Their father, he provides some things . . . I would say the role he plays is an important one because the kids love him. He talks to them on the phone a lot. He takes them to McDonald's every now and then. He does not have financial role as far as the kids are concerned.

Father

My attitude about my role is this, I do what I can. I try to do the very best that I can for my kids. That means I make sure that when I have money I do for my kids. I buy them something or take them somewhere, to the museum or zoo. I talk to my kids, I'd say, about

every day I'm on the phone checking on them, asking them how's school. Now, their mother all she wants me to do is give her money, which I do when I can. But I think it's more important that I spend time with them and if they need something and she can't get it then I'll try my best to see to it that they somehow get it . . . As far as her role is concerned, she would tell you that she does everything. That's not true and she knows it. She is a good mother, though. She makes sure they have breakfast, lunch and dinner and other material things. She makes sure they have a quality place to stay.

Mother

I take care of my son and my daughter. I make sure that they are healthy, dressed appropriately and all that. I make sure that they eat properly. I buy the right kind of food. I make sure that they can participate in sports and school activities no matter how much it costs because it's important that they are exposed to many different things. My son wanted to play the trumpet so I made sure that he got a trumpet. We used to have a little apartment when they were younger but it was cheaper for me to come live with my mother . . . This way the kids can go outside more. I got a swing set for them a few Christmases ago . . . My role is to take care of my kids in all ways. Now, my son's father really does not spend any time with him and really contributes nothing to raising him . . . He has been in and out of jail twice . . . So I recognize that it's difficult to pay child support when you're in jail. I will give him credit, though, because he asks his family to help me out . . . so I think he does what he can. My hope is that now that he's out of jail that he will stay out, stay off the streets and try to do right by his son, spend time with him. Get a job and help me with expenses. My daughter's father was killed when she was three so he has no role but she knows his family. They are very much a part of her life and they have always been helpful towards me.

Father of Son

Well, my role is limited by my occupational hazards, you could say. I haven't had much of a role because as I've told you, I've been in jail, prison. As a way to be a father that's not the best way . . . I try to make sure he's [my son's] safe. I have my brothers and sisters keep up with him and make sure he stays on the straight and narrow. I

call him, let him know I'm thinking about him. I did this even when I was locked up, I made it a point . . . Since I'm out I'd like to spend time with him more but his mother wants me to be straight first . . . Get my act together . . . Really, his mother does for all his needs, she is really like a mother and a father in the role that she plays. You name it. She does it. That's all there is to it.

Overall, the actual roles and responsibilities fathers perform do not seem to correspond with mothers' definitions of "ideal" paternal behavior. Few of these fathers offered economic assistance on any consistent bases. Rather, the roles they played were consistent with their own definition of fatherhood, which emphasized socio-emotional parental support. Yet, even in this arena fathers fell short of their own and mothers' goals. Both men and women felt fathers were not doing as much as they possibly could for their children.

Encouraging Fathers' Paternal Responsibility

Mothers expressed a general frustration with fathers. Nevertheless, they felt they should do their best to encourage fathers' economic and social participation in the lives of their children. These mothers discussed their methods of encouraging men's paternal behaviors:

Mostly, I just try to get him to spend time with her. Show her that he loves her . . . I ask him to help out [financially] but only when I know it's something Jewel [daughter] really needs. That way I know he'll give it to me. Any other time he sees me as hounding him for money.

If I ask him for money and he says "I don't have it," then I try not to make a huge deal of it. Otherwise, we start arguing and shouting and the result will be what? He won't even come around to see Marcus (son) anymore . . . I try to keep things even and stable so when I tell him he should pick up Marcus, there won't be no hassle about it.

See men will come around when they want something. And you know what they usually want. But then as soon as you ask them for something, they're gone. Ask them for money and you'll see they forget your name, their child's name, your phone number. So you have to let them think they're in control. Let them give you things

when they feel like it. Ask them for things at just the right time. Otherwise, you ain't going to get anything from them.

I let him be part of the family. For the kids' sake. Even though sometimes he helps with the payments and sometimes he doesn't.

Mothers generally felt that without their verbal encouragement and/or their employment of various subtle strategies, fathers would pay little or no attention to their offspring. However, some fathers interpreted this "encouragement" as an effort to control their behavior and curb their freedom. Two fathers explained:

Most times, when I call, she's pissed off at me because I called late, or I changed my mind about something, or didn't return her phone call. That's usually it—that I didn't return her phone call right away. I say, "We ain't married! We ain't in a relationship! I don't answer to you!" The only reason I tolerate her is for my son. Other than for him we probably wouldn't associate. She has yet to comprehend that she can't tell me what to do. She makes it hard for me to be a father sometimes.

She tries to get me to do right by her and my children. She makes me take on my responsibilities with them. She does her best at that . . . I pick them up from school, make sure they always safe, cook, put them to bed . . . I don't think I'd be a good father if Shandra didn't force me from the start . . . She's a good mother . . . The problem is this, though, when we argue, it's usually because she thinks I'm disrespecting her by my lady friends. But I never bring women around my children, never. I don't smoke or drink around them either . . . But, you see, at the same time I can't let her try to control my life . . . not just because we have children together . . .

Overall, fathers expressed a general fear of being "tied down" to family. While mothers conducted the day-to-day activities of parenthood, fathers tended to value the freedom that accompanied a noncustodial parenting status. For men, this liberty took precedence over women's expressed desire for them to be more accountable and attentive to their children. Mothers often found themselves "putting up" with poor paternal behavior in an effort to maintain some bond between fathers and children. They felt they valued the father-child bond more than the fathers

themselves. Mothers often expressed frustration and resentment for the fathers they described.

Improving Paternal Participation

In this section, both mothers and fathers agree men could do much more to meet their paternal obligations and improve participation in the daily lives of their children. Mothers tended to feel that fathers could, if they so wanted, "focus more on their responsibilities," "spend less time satisfying their own needs" and "make more of an effort" to meet the needs of their children. Fathers generally agreed that they could do more for their children, but cited many external barriers that hindered their ability to do so. Mothers, too, recognized barriers to men's paternal behavior but generally felt that these could be overcome "if fathers put forth a sincere effort." Two couples talked about what fathers could do better:

Mother

The first thing he could do better is to get out of jail and stay out of jail. This certainly would make a difference in my eyes as far as his children are concerned. I understand the world is not kind to black men. *However*, at some point these men need to decide what's best for their children. Jail is not the answer. In Keith's case, he had choices. He chose the wrong way and now me and our child are suffering because of it.

Father

I do my best for my child given my life circumstances and situations I've gotten myself into. I've had hard times all my life and I just went the way of my father, ended up in jail a couple of times. I think that if my father had been around more for me then I would have been a better man to Freda and a better father to Jellissa. People are the product of their environment and I'm no different. Right now I'm trying to do better by them. All I ask is for them to have a little patience with me.

Mother

I would like for him to spend more time looking for a better job. More time playing with his son and seeing to his needs. I've told

him that . . . He'd rather be out hanging out with his boys, going to the clubs, having different women. If he wanted to he could give me a little money every week or month and just be around his son on a consistent basis. But he doesn't want to. No, he ain't got time for that. I told him he's going to regret it because one day his son's not gonna want to have anything to do with him.

Father

I think I do pretty good as fathers go but there's always room for improvement. That's how I look at it. It's hard to be a father when you don't live in the same household as your child. Then what I have would be his, automatically . . . I think if I lived in the same household then I wouldn't have to go out of my way to spend time with him because I'd be around, part of the furniture. As it is, though, that's not the case. Now, to see my boy I have to arrange it around his mother's schedule or my schedule. So if you look at it from that angle, then you might say I do pretty good as a father, given the circumstances of living apart. I can do better only if the circumstances change themselves.

Mother

Understand that I think he does a good job as a father, especially compared to other men out there. But black men today always have excuses. Even if they don't live with their children that doesn't mean they have to be a part-time daddy. They keep blaming everyone else for them not doing what they're supposed to do. Black men are always complaining about the white man keeping them down, they can't find a good job, they can't get no good education, they can't buy a car. All that may be true, but what's stopping them from getting a second job, or taking night classes. Black men can do better if they want to and my daughter's father is no different. Women are tired of their sorry excuses for not being a daddy all of the time. Excuses don't pay the bills or help a child feel better when her daddy forgets to call.

Father

Yeah, I think I can improve, definitely. Me and her have talked about it some . . . what I can do better and what she can do better. She's understanding of my situation and my habits ,that's why she'll

always be my lady. My daughter, she thinks the world of me. She is the joy of my life. She's the reason I decided to change some of my habits, stop hanging with the wrong crowd so much. So things are changing that will help me be a better father to her.

From mothers' perspectives fathers seem to invariably have excuses for not providing optimal care for their children. Even though fathers admit they could do better, they also say that there are internal and external factors such as work schedules, bad habits, jail time, etc., that prohibit them from doing so. These mothers state they understand the hardships that these fathers, as well as many black men, experience. Yet, they also express a weariness with the justifications men regularly provide to defend their decision not to be better parents. For many mothers, being a good father is largely a matter of choice, which few external barriers can control.

Economic Support

Given their consistent emphasis on the importance of fathers' economic provider role, mothers were asked whether or not they formally pursued fathers for formal payment of child support. In general, most mothers expressed a reluctance with regard to seeking legal assistance. Yet, five mothers had attempted to obtain consistent child support payments through the courts or state collection agencies. These women explained why they chose such formal means:

I knew he could afford to take care of his child. That's what he's supposed to do. I knew he wasn't going to pay just because I told him to, or because his momma told him to; all those avenues had been tried . . . He's too selfish. So I took him to court.

He was taking care of his other children and I knew he could afford to take care of this one. I talked to him a lot. I warned him about what I would do. I told him I'd sue his ass! He didn't believe I'd go to an attorney . . . but that was the only way . . . I didn't really want it to be that way because I knew once I made the decision, he would essentially be out of our lives.

I felt like I should give him a chance to be a good father. He kept telling me that once he got another job he would help out. I was very, very patient with him. I did not want to take him to court for the money. I think, mostly, I was afraid of losing him . . . But, after

awhile, I felt like this was the only way I could be sure I was going to get help. I really needed the support . . .

While these few mothers chose a legal option to obtain child support, all perceived this as a final resort. And, generally they only utilized the option after months of informal negotiating and communication with fathers proved unsuccessful. However, most mothers chose not to pursue child support through the legal system. Several mothers explained:

Black people, we handle things on our own. We don't need lawyers or judges. The first thing they're going to do is throw the man in jail. Then what? I still don't have money coming in. And worse, now baby really ain't got a daddy.

Well, I didn't see a need for all the trouble. He does what he can. Nobody can make him give more than what he has.

At first, I thought he was going to be there for us . . . that he'd do his best. I didn't think it was necessary to get a lawyer. I didn't even think about it . . . Now, I just don't think it's worth it because there are too many bad outcomes possible. One, they could arrest him. Two, my daughter won't have the opportunity to get to know him better. Three, he will truly, truly resent it and then I won't get any help . . .

These and most other mothers felt that even if they sought legal action, little would result. Many felt it would be a "waste of time." Given their work and family commitments, "time" was an element these women felt they could not spare. They understood that formally seeking child support would require numerous meetings with attorneys and several court dates, all of which would necessitate their missing work and losing wages. Additionally, they expressed a fear of alienating the father by forcing him into a public forum. Further, a few mothers feared the father would be taken into legal custody for nonpayment and subsequently cut the father-child bond. For most mothers then, these "costs" outweighed any potential benefit they might receive from an award of child support, particularly since they also tended to believe that little if any child support would result from court actions. For many mothers, the best and most reliable options to secure any form of paternal support involved informal communication and persuasive approaches. "At least this way," said one mother, "I know he will at least come and visit his son."

Conclusion

These mothers' specific definitions of "ideal" fatherhood tended to reflect the traditional Western standards. However, their definitions contrasted sharply with those expressed by fathers. Similar to white divorced mothers (Arendall 1986), these African American never-married custodial mothers tended to define a "good father" primarily in economic terms. For them, a good father was one who provided adequate financial support for his children's care and well-being. However, unlike white divorced mothers of past studies, these mothers expressed a reluctance to use legal channels to pursue fathers for formal payment of child support. In fact, the majority chose not to do so at all, for fear of causing legal difficulties for noncustodial fathers or jeopardizing the paternal-child relationship.

These mothers distinguished between their ideal image of fatherhood and its reality in their own lives and communities. They generally felt noncustodial fathers rarely met their standards. Mothers generally acknowledged the existence of hardships and disadvantages for African American men in the labor market. Yet, they simultaneously expressed a frustration with men whom they felt did not work hard enough to overcome the various obstacles confronting them, particularly given fathers' financial responsibilities to their children. Mothers were also frustrated because they felt they themselves faced many obstacles and hardships; and yet were not deterred from meeting the needs of their children.

Fathers, on the other hand, tended to define fatherhood primarily in terms of their expressive roles. Consistent with the findings of an earlier study (Hamer 1997), these fathers discussed the importance of being a role model, a guide, and source of social and emotional support for their children. In terms of providing economic support or child support, these fathers perceived their function as one intended to support their children's mother in her role as primary caretaker. In this regard, many provided toys, and purchased clothing and miscellaneous items for children on an "as need" rather than consistent basis. These fathers correctly perceived that while they emphasized social and emotional paternal roles, money was what custodial mothers wanted them to provide

most. Many fathers admitted shortcomings in their paternal behavior and felt they could improve. However, contrary to most mothers, who equated paternal improvement with consistent economic support, noncustodial fathers equated it with spending more time with children and various other social elements. Those acknowledging paternal shortcomings perceived them as consequences of past or current circumstances and "situations" which they often felt were beyond their control. Despite explaining their paternal inadequacies on external terms, these men generally felt that given their circumstances, they were performing "better than most men" with regard to fatherhood.

Overall, it appears that African American, never-married, custodial mothers really want financial support from noncustodial fathers. Yet, they also value the social and emotional roles fathers play in their children's lives. The problem, as they see it, is that they often receive neither on a consistent basis. The problem for policy makers and social work practitioners who primarily emphasize paternal economic responsibilities is that mothers are willing to forego economic support in lieu of the social and emotional support fathers provide. These findings suggest that while mothers express an interest similar to the state with regard to child support, they simultaneously "understand" that fathers are not likely to provide child support monies regularly. Furthermore, they are generally quite reluctant to pursue any legal recourse to obtain such support for fear of jeopardizing the paternal-child bond, the fathers' freedom from the criminal justice system, or their own relationship with the father. Indeed, evidence indicates that low-income fathers are more likely than those with higher incomes to be arrested for nonpayment of child support (Hill 1997). And having low income or being in poverty are conditions African American men experience disproportionately. Thus, mothers tend to settle for what they can get from noncustodial fathers and generally do not make adamant economic demands of them. Rather, they attempt to encourage fathers to play a social role with their children, and call upon them for economic support only when they are fairly certain it will be received.

While well-intended "efforts have been aimed at showing how U.S. social welfare philosophy and policy have affected people of color, rarely—if ever—are the cultural values or worldview

of people of color used as a conceptual foundation to describe how social welfare philosophy and policy should look . . . [Schiele, p. 23, 1997]". Neither mothers' nor fathers' attitudes, definitions, or behaviors with regard to paternal roles and responsibilities are completely compatible with the goals of the state. In the eyes of many African American women and men, what is *best* for their children often has little to do with economics. Rather, the presence of fathers, and the social and emotional bond that develops within a father-child relationship are integral to the well-being of fatherless children. And it is a support fathers can provide independent of their economic circumstances. Federal and state policy-makers have the power to work *with* African American families to foster and strengthen the father-child relationship by redefining fatherhood and implementing policies that emphasize its social and emotional elements. As Hartman (1995) states:

Public policy reflects prevailing beliefs and values. Further, public policy is not only descriptive—it is also prescriptive. It not only reflects values . . . it also creates and recreates them through its enormous power to reward and punish, to encourage and prohibit, to shape behavior and exert control. [p. 183]

The continued punitive pursuit of non-paying noncustodial fathers may compel many African American fathers to turn away from their children and thwart African American mothers' attempts to maintain paternal involvement. Moreover, the demand for adequate and consistent child support payments seems almost ludicrous given the state's unwillingness to do what is necessary to insure that African American men have fair and equal access to permanent full employment, and pay sufficient to meet the daily needs of themselves and their families. Noncustodial fathers are more likely to pay child support when they earn adequate incomes (Meyer 1992).

Given the reluctance on the part of governments to guarantee living wages and adequate benefits, it is in the best interest of the children and African American families for states to develop and support programs and policies that will encourage men's social paternal responsibilities regardless of their ability to provide consistent financial support. Programs such as those offered by "The Fathers' Center" in East St. Louis, Illinois, and Charles

Ballard's Centers in Ohio and Washington D.C. specifically address the economic and social experiences of African American men, promote responsible paternal behavior and attitudes, and encourage mothers and fathers to work together to provide for their children. These centers and others are examples of what should be incorporated into programs of states' family service agencies. States must also offer incentives to companies to encourage fathers of all occupational and income levels to attend parent-teacher meetings and children's extracurricular functions, and to discourage employers from penalizing men for attending to the needs of their children (Tift 1995). Until the state emphasizes the expressive aspects of paternal responsibilities and provides for the full-employment of African American men, it is likely that custodial mothers will continue to meet the needs of their children by any means necessary, despite the assumptions, policies, and well-intended goals of current policy.

References

- Allen, W. D. and W. J. Doherty. 1996. "The responsibilities of fatherhood as perceived by African American teenage fathers." *Families in Society*; 1996, 77: 142:155.
- Angel, R. J. and J. L. Angel. 1993. *Painful Inheritance: Health and the New Generation of Fatherless Families*. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Arendell, T. 1986. *Mothers and Divorce: Legal, Economic, and Social Dilemmas*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Blankenhorn, D. 1995. *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem*. New York: Basic Books.
- Furstenberg, F. F. and A. J. Cherlin. 1991. *Divided Families: What Happens to Children When Parents Part*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Furstenberg, F. F. and C. W. Nord. 1985. Parenting Apart: Patterns of Childrearing After Marital Disruption. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, November: 893-904.
- Geiger, S. M. 1995. "African American Single Mothers: Public Perceptions and Public Policies." In K. M. Vaz (ed.) *Black Women in America*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications: 224-260.
- Glick, P. C. 1997. "Demographic Pictures of African American Families." In H. P. McAdoo's (ed.) *Black Families*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications: 118-138.
- Hamer, J. F. 1997. "The Fathers of Fatherless Black Families: What They Say They Do As Father." *Journal of Families and Society*, 78(6): 564-577.
- Hartman, A. 1995. "Ideological Themes in Family Policy." *Journal of Families in Society*, 76(3): 182-192.

- Hill, R. B. 1997. "Social Welfare Policies and African American Families." In H. P. McAdoo's (ed.) *Black Families*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications: 349-364.
- Leininger, M. 1994. Evaluation Criteria and Critique of Qualitative Research Studies. In J. M. Morse (ed.) *Critical Issues in Qualitative Research Methods*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Meyer, D. 1992. "Can Fathers Support Children Born Outside of Marriage? Data on Fathers' Income Over Time. In *Paternity Establishment: A Public Policy Conference. Vol. 2. Studies of the Circumstances of Mothers and Fathers* (Special Report 56B, pp. 223-263). Madison: University of Wisconsin, Institute for Research on Poverty.
- Orum, A. M., J. R. Feagin, and G. Sjoberg 1991. The Nature of the Case Study. In J. Feagin, A. Orum, and G. Sjoberg's (eds.) *A Case for the Case Study*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Schafran, L. H. 1988. "Gender Bids in the Courts." In E. A. Mulroy (ed.) *Women as Single Parents*, Dover, MA: Auburn House, 39-72.
- Schiele, Jerome H. 1997. "An Afrocentric Perspective on Social Welfare Philosophy and Policy," *Journal of Social Welfare*, Vol. 24, No. 2: 21-40.
- Stack, C. 1974. *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers.
- . 1986. Sex Roles and Survival Strategies in an Urban Black Community. In R. Staples (ed.) *The Black Family: Essays and Studies* (3rd ed.). New York: Harper & Row.
- Tift, N. 1995. "10 Ways to Reinvigorate Fatherhood," *Father Times*, Vol. 4, No. 1.
- Tripp-Reissman, T. and S. E. Wilson. 1990. Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Fatherhood. In F. Bozett and S. Hanson (eds.) *Fatherhood and Families in Cultural Context*. New York: Springer Publishing Company.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1992a. "Money Income of Households, Families, and persons in the United States: 1991." *Current Population Reports*, Series P-60, No. 180. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
- . 1992b. "Marital Status and Living arrangements: March 1992." *Current Population Reports*, Series P-20, No. 468. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.

This study was partially funded by the Office of Research and Projects, Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville. The author also wishes to express appreciation to Clarence Lang and Steve Hansen for their assistance in the preparation of this manuscript.