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## **Still Always the Dad': The Meaning of Fatherhood for Midlife Fathers of Adult Children**

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Truett Paul McAnear entitled "Still Always the Dad': The Meaning of Fatherhood for Midlife Fathers of Adult Children." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Psychology.

Charles L. Thompson, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Elaine Seat, Gary Klukken, Priscilla Blanton, William A. Poppen

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Accepted for the Council:

Anne Mayhew

Vice Chancellor and Dean of Graduate  
Studies

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“Still Always the Dad”:  
The Meaning of Fatherhood for Midlife Fathers of Adult Children

A Dissertation  
Presented for the  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Truett Paul McAnear

August, 2004

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family; especially my wife, Sharon, and my children, Erin and Matt, whose steadfast love and commitment provided the essential inspiration for this research. This dedication also includes my parents, Ann and Ken McAnear, who taught me the intrinsic meaning and value of parenting across the lifespan. I am grateful that they are “still always” my parents even as I embrace my role as “still always the dad.”

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## Abstract

This study describes the subjective experience of being an involved midlife father with adult children. While previous fatherhood research has focused primarily on the impact of father involvement on child outcomes, researchers have only recently begun to explore the impact of father involvement on the fathers themselves. Within this literature minimal research is evident regarding the impact of fatherhood on men at midlife. This study addresses this gap in the literature with a phenomenological investigation of the experience of father involvement for midlife fathers of adult children. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with 9 midlife fathers regarding their experience of father involvement. The transcribed interviews were analyzed using the Colaizzi (1978) method of empirical-phenomenological analysis. Through individual and group analysis of the participant descriptions the investigator generated a thematic description of the experience of involved fatherhood at midlife. This description was comprised of three themes; Accommodation: Continuity/ Change, Validation: Satisfaction/ Loss, and Generativity: Legacy/ Despair. These themes emerged from a ground of Relational Comparison including relationships with children when younger, with own father, with other fathers, and with spouse. The findings generally confirmed the continued significance of father involvement for these men at midlife suggesting that fatherhood continued to play a central role in their lives, provided a primary source of life satisfaction, and constituted one of their most valued contributions.



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## Chapter 1

### *Background*

The scholarly interest in fatherhood that emerged in the 70s has continued to blossom into the new millennium (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000). Over the last decade social scientists have established many of the benefits of positive father involvement for children and families (Amato, 1998; Lamb, 1997; Parke, 1996; Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 2002). Researchers have connected father absence to a multitude of negative child, family, and societal outcomes (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 1996). Meanwhile, a number of researchers have noted the comparative neglect of the impact of fathering experiences on the fathers themselves (Draper, 1998; Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; Marsiglio, Amato et al., 2000; Palkovitz, 1996, 2002b; Thomas, 1994). This neglect is surprising given that developmental theorists have long recognized that adults experience significant developmental changes throughout adulthood (Erikson, 1963) and that some of these changes may be associated with shifts in parental roles (Gutmann, 1987). Humanistic theorists have also suggested that fatherhood may play a critical role in optimal male development (Abell & Schwartz, 1999). Therefore, while fatherhood experiences may have a significant impact on men's growth and development, few researchers have yet explored this impact.

Recent empirical studies have provided compelling preliminary evidence that father involvement significantly alters men's developmental trajectory. For example, evidence suggests that fathers differ significantly from non-fathers in both their relationships and their work behavior (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001) and that men

perceive father involvement as having made important and distinctive contributions to their personal and professional development (Palkovitz, 2002b; Palkovitz, Copes, & Woolfolk, 2001). Father involvement may also play a critical role in shaping men's identity and their orientation to family life (Strauss & Goldberg, 1999).

However, this emergent body of research has focused primarily on young fathers with dependent children. For example, the fathers interviewed by Palkovitz (2001, 2002) were under 42 years old and had at least one dependent child still at home. Generally, fatherhood scholars have tended to overlook the fact that men continue to be fathers throughout their life span and that father involvement may persistently influence their development (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001). Few researchers have examined father involvement in middle and later adulthood (Thomas, 1994). Consequently, the perspectives of midlife and older fathers are largely missing from the contemporary discourse on father involvement and men's development.

Further, reviewers have affirmed the need for more mature and diverse conceptualizations of father involvement (Hawkins & Palkovitz, 1999) including closer examination of its emotional and subjective dimensions (Marsiglio, Amato et al., 2000). Acknowledging the co-constructed nature of father involvement, researchers have noted the need for greater understanding of how men perceive themselves as fathers including how their perceptions are shaped by contextual factors such as ethnicity, gender, socio-economic class, and the quality of relationships with children, family, and community (Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000). Contemporary conceptualizations of fatherhood that focus primarily on role fulfillment may fail to capture the essence of the experience for men

(Garbarino, 2000) and neglect the transformational impact of father involvement on the fathers' perceptions of themselves and their relationships (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997b). In short, contemporary conceptualizations of father involvement could benefit from a deeper understanding of the meaning of fatherhood for fathers.

### *Problem Statement*

While previous research has generally supported the contributions of father involvement to children's developmental outcomes, relatively little is known about the benefits and liabilities of fatherhood for the fathers themselves. Noting that contemporary changes in family and social structures have eliminated many of the classic benefits to men of bearing children, Draper (1998) has challenged scholars to consider, "why should fathers father?" In short, better understanding of the meaning of father involvement for fathers is needed. This study addresses that need by examining the meaning of father involvement for midlife men with adult children. This examination extends earlier studies on father involvement and men's development focusing on younger fathers with dependent children.

### *Purpose*

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the experience of involved fatherhood for 9 midlife men with adult children. The goal is to capture the meaning of the lived experience of father involvement for these fathers in order to enlighten the reader as to how and why these midlife fathers stay involved with their adult children. The research question is: "What is the experience of involved fatherhood for midlife men with adult children?"

This study extends recent qualitative work by Palkovitz (2002) examining the impact of father involvement for 40 young adult fathers. Participants in that study were primarily young adults with dependent children. A description of the meaning of father involvement for midlife men with adult children supplements earlier work with an understanding of the ongoing personal benefits and liabilities of father involvement. With childcare responsibilities ostensibly fading into the phenomenological background, the experiences of fatherhood for midlife men in this study are demonstrated to have both similarities and distinct differences from fathers with dependent children. The description of these qualities contributes important additions to current conceptualizations of father involvement and understanding of its impact on men's development.

This study also contributes to a growing body of research examining fatherhood from a generative perspective (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997b). Hawkins and colleagues have identified the need for fatherhood research that avoids a "role-inadequacy perspective" and examines the ways that men succeed as fathers. The researcher in this study examined the participants' experiences of father involvement with an open, non-judgmental, and naïve perspective with the goal of obtaining what is "really there" (Moustakas, 1994). The assumption of the researcher was that the experiences of the participants are valid and meaningful in their own right, an approach that is consistent with a generative perspective on fatherhood.

## *Definitions*

### *Involved fatherhood*

Fatherhood in this study refers to *involved* fathering, a term used primarily to differentiate fatherhood from paternity. Participants were allowed to define what father involvement was for them. Generally, the term refers to the myriad ways fathers and children influence one another. Involved fatherhood refers to a phenomenon described variously in the literature as “father involvement” (Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, & Levine, 1987), “responsible fathering” (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1996), “generative fatherwork” (Dollahite, Hawkins, & Brotherson, 1997) or simply being a “good father” (Palkovitz, 2002a). Participants were men who perceived themselves as having been meaningfully engaged with their children when they were dependent and for whom fatherhood had been a salient experience.

### *Midlife*

The term *midlife* refers in this study to adults aged 50-70 self-described as middle-aged. The establishment of an age range for midlife is somewhat arbitrary and researchers have offered various options. Levinson (1978) designated middle adulthood as roughly ages 45-60 with ages 40-45 and ages 60-65 constituting transition phases into middle adulthood and late adulthood respectively. More recently, Sheehy (1995) has proposed a ten-year upward shift in the normal adult developmental trajectory resulting in the later onset of middle adulthood. Based on this model, middle age or “second adulthood” may begin around age 50 with ages 45-50 constituting a transition phase known as “middlescence”. Researchers utilizing a life-span perspective have suggested



that midlife may be best defined qualitatively as the point where adults perceive the gains and losses of life to be relatively balanced (Staudinger & Bluck, 2001). For the purposes of this study, participants were fathers aged 50-70 who described themselves as “middle-aged.”

#### *Adult children*

Children of the participants were generally 21 years old or older and had established residency outside the parental home. One participant had 2 of 7 children still residing at home. The purpose of this study was to capture the meaning of fathering for men in the postparental period, men who no longer bore significant provisional responsibilities for their children. Therefore, children of the participants were relatively independent. Fathers whose children had reached legal age but were still primarily residing at home were not eligible for participation. Fathers with children in college and for whom the fathers provided primary financial support were also excluded.

#### *Participants*

The subjects of this study are involved midlife fathers of adult children and are referred to as participants. They served as informants regarding the experience of father involvement for men at midlife. While acknowledging that the collaborative process inherent in this study design encourages participants to function as co-researchers (Moustakas, 1994; Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997), the researcher accepted full responsibility for analysis of the data and the reporting of conclusions (Polkinghorne, 1989).

### *Phenomenological interview*

Phenomenological interviews are in-depth, open-ended, unstructured interviews designed to elicit a detailed description of the participant's experience of the phenomenon of interest (Polkinghorne, 1989). The interviews in this study described participants' experiences of involved fatherhood at midlife.

### *Scope of Study*

The purpose of this study is to describe the experience of fatherhood for 9 midlife fathers. Grounded in existential-phenomenological philosophy and reflecting a constructivist paradigm, this study seeks to describe the participants' lived experiences of father involvement. While this study is inspired by earlier qualitative work examining the impact of father involvement on men's development (Palkovitz, 2002b; Palkovitz et al., 2001), no attempts will be made to generalize the experiences of the participants to non-participants. Nor are the results of this study intended to contribute to a broader or more comprehensive conceptualization of father involvement. Rather, the reader will be encouraged to reflect on the personal relevance of the findings in order to gain insight into his/her own experiences of involved parenting. The reader may also evaluate whether present models of fatherhood accurately reflect the fatherhood experiences described in this study. Evaluation of the validity of the study should be based on the reader's judgment regarding the trustworthiness of the researcher's description of the experiences of the participants.

## **Chapter 2 Review of Literature**

The purpose of this review is to locate the present study within a representative sample of the diverse body of fatherhood literature. I review four areas of interest evident in this literature: recent trends in the conceptualization of father involvement, the importance of father involvement to children and families, the emerging literature on the importance of father involvement for fathers, and the impact of fatherhood for midlife and older men. I conclude with an assessment of the limits of previous literature and how the proposed study will address those limits.

### *Conceptualization of Father Involvement*

A recent review of the research on fatherhood (Marsiglio, Amato et al., 2000) revealed a decade of scholarship in which conceptualizations of father involvement have been expanded in an effort to capture the diverse ways in which fathers engage their families. Previous conceptualizations of father involvement have narrowly focused on observable, temporal events and have failed capture the complex personal and contextual processes that connect fathers and children (Hawkins & Palkovitz, 1999). More recently, researchers have acknowledged that fatherhood is a complex, dynamic, multifaceted phenomenon that confounds both observational measurement and the development of a unitary cross-cultural theoretical model (Booth & Crouter, 1998; Lamb, 2000; Palkovitz, 2002a). Palkovitz (2002a) has stated that the only clear point of agreement among scholars at present is that “further conceptualization is needed regarding the nature, origins, sources, and meanings of paternal involvement (p.124).” While no single

unifying conceptualization has emerged in the literature, several promising trends are evident. These trends include father involvement as patterns of behavior, the investment of personal capital, the fulfillment of socially constructed roles, and as value-laden generative work. In this section I review these trends and describe how they inform the present study.

Focusing upon patterns of father behaviors as opposed to discrete interactions, Jain, Belsky, & Crnic (1996) were able to articulate a fathering typology. Observing 69 married Caucasian fathers with 15-month-old first-born sons; the researchers rated the participants' involvement based on 2 naturalistic observations of 1-hour duration each per family. Cluster analysis of the ratings initially revealed four fathering types: caretakers, teachers/playmates, disciplinarians, and disengaged. These four types were compared with 6 antecedent variables: demographics, personality, relatedness style, moods and hassles, infant temperament, and marital quality. The subsequent discriminate analysis revealed only two clearly differentiated types: progressive (caretakers and playmate/teacher) and traditional (disciplinarian and disengaged). The progressive fathers had more education, more prestigious occupations, and were less neurotic (anxious, hostile, and irritable) than traditional fathers. These characteristics, combined with their lower daily hassles and higher trust in the dependability of others, presumably contributed to the greater levels of emotional availability evidenced in these fathers' interactions with their sons (Jain, Belsky, & Crnic, 1996). Overall, this study revealed the variety of ways that fathers may interact with sons and the utility of studying patterns of

fathering over discrete fathering behaviors. Further, it demonstrates how father involvement may vary significantly even within the same cultural group.

The social construction of fatherhood has been emphasized through much of the fatherhood literature. Feminist deconstructions of sex roles and childcare have challenged the essential nature of father involvement by asserting that the roles of fathers in families may be socially rather than genetically based (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). Other researchers have argued that fatherhood is grounded in male sexuality and have connected the absence of fathers in American families to family decline and a variety of social ills (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 1996). Central to this discourse is the growing realization that father involvement is enormously diverse, dynamic, and largely culturally scripted. Men's family roles have tended to change in adaptation to environmental influences. For example, contemporary historical analyses of father involvement in America have revealed the diverse range of roles adopted by men in families in response to changing cultural expectations and needs (Griswold, 1997). Yet, this diversity and flexibility of father involvement should probably not be construed as a clear progression from patriarchy toward androgyny that minimizes the unique contributions of men to families (Mintz, 1998). Rather, a constructivist perspective reminds researchers that father involvement may have multiple meanings and expressions both across cultural groups and among individuals within those groups. Overall, the meaning of father involvement for men remains an understudied area of inquiry (Christiansen & Palkovitz, 2001; Hawkins & Palkovitz, 1999).

Researchers conceptualizing father involvement as capital investment have examined how men's investment of resources (e.g., time, money, and social connections) pays dividends through positive child and family outcomes (e.g., children's psychological well-being, socioeconomic status, and academic performance). Amato (1998) identified three categories of capital investment in the literature. *Human capital* referred to the "skills, knowledge and traits" fathers bring to their relationship with their children and was typically operationalized as the father's years of education. *Financial capital*, indexed by income, referred generally to goods and services provided to the child. *Social capital* referred to the network of relationships provided to the child through the father's family and community connections. Studies of fathers' investment of social capital have contributed to our understanding of the relational contributions of fathers through their connections to partners, extended family members, and the community (Marsiglio, Amato et al., 2000). For example, Amato (1998) compared measures of father investment of human, financial, and social capital to six child outcome variables controlling for mother contributions and found significant unique benefits for children of father's investment. Kaplan et al (1998) used an investment model to explain men's fertility patterns in a sample of New Mexico men. Fertility patterns evident in these men suggested they were opting for higher investment of resources in fewer numbers of children perhaps explaining the lower fertility rates found in industrialized societies. Conceptualized as personal capital or resource investment, fatherhood involvement can be quantified and compared to various child and family outcome measures to verify the impact of men's contributions.

A number of fatherhood researchers have proposed more explicit value-based approaches to understanding fatherhood. In one of the most often cited value-based models, Lamb and colleagues proposed father involvement as consisting of three parts: paternal engagement (direct interaction with the child), availability (being in close enough proximity to be reached by the child if needed), and responsibility (general provision for the child's needs) (Lamb et al., 1987). Building on the work of Levine & Pitt (Levine & Pitt, 1995), Doherty and colleagues (1996) proposed responsible fatherhood as the preferred goal of fatherhood programs. Programs that promote responsible fathering would encourage: a) the establishment of paternity, b) nonresidential father presence vs. absence, c) nonresidential father's economic support, and d) increased residential father involvement (Doherty et al., 1996).

The most comprehensive value-based approach to date is the generative model proposed by (Dollahite et al., 1997). Grounded in Eriksonian life-cycle theory (Erikson, 1963), the generative model was proposed as an alternative to the "role-inadequacy perspectives" from deficit-based models in which fatherhood was conceptualized as a role that men generally fulfilled inadequately (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997a). Within a conceptual framework of 4 contextual factors (dependence, scarcity, change, and interdependence) and 4 categories of generative work (ethical work, stewardship, development, and relationship work), the authors identified 8 fundamental responsibilities/capabilities of generative fatherhood. These responsibilities comprised "ethical imperatives" to commit, choose, create, consecrate, care, change, connect, and communicate. *Commitment* was the promise to care and provide for the child. *Choosing*

referred to making day-to day decisions to provide for the needs of the child. *Creating* meant the provision of resources or production of creative opportunities for the child. *Consecration* involved sacrifice and dedication to provide what the child needs to thrive and grow. *Care* referred to the provision of developmentally appropriate supports. *Change* meant the ability to adapt to the child's developing needs. *Connecting* referred to the provision of healthy attachments. *Communication* concerned the maintenance of meaningful and improving dialogue with the child throughout the life span. Fathers were presumed to be both capable and desirous of fulfilling these responsibilities (Dollahite et al., 1997). To that extent the generative model is intended as descriptive rather than morally directive.

Researchers utilizing a generative perspective have criticized previous conceptualizations of responsible fatherhood as operating from a role inadequacy perspective that presumes men to be naturally resistant to nurturing responsibilities (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997a). For example, Popenoe (1996) suggested that men need cultural pressure to stay engaged with their children and are biologically disinclined to be involved with nonbiological children. Such “deficit paradigms” are characterized by three themes: a natural disinterest and disinclination in men toward responsible fatherhood, the emotional inadequacy of men in relationships with their families, and the unwillingness of men to assume their fair share of household responsibilities.

However, recent evidence contradicts deficit paradigms of father involvement by suggesting that men may be biologically and culturally predisposed to loving bonds with children. Mackey (2001) examined over 55,000 adult-child dyads across 23 cultures and



subcultures and found significant evidence of a biocultural basis for fatherhood. Making field observations of adult-child dyadic interaction, the researchers found evidence of man-child bonding that was significantly differentiated from woman-child or man-woman bonds. In other words, men demonstrated across cultures a desire to be with children that was separate from their desire to be with the child's mother suggesting a natural desire in men to bond with and care for their children. The generative model of fatherhood (Dollahite et al., 1997) provides an important challenge to deficit perspectives of fatherhood by assuming men's genuine interest in their children and by providing a positive and creative framework for describing the myriad of ways that fathers can and are involved with their children.

Conceptualizations of fatherhood that extend beyond discrete observable behaviors are important for understanding the dynamic and multi-faceted dimensions of father involvement. Palkovitz (1997) suggested that future conceptualizations should address cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains. He identified 15 categories of ways that fathers may be involved with their children including observable behaviors such as communication, teaching, and caregiving and less observable involvement such as planning activities, protecting, monitoring, and thinking about children. These categories of involvement were not intended to be exhaustive, but rather an illustration of the multitude of possibilities for father involvement that may be significant to men's experience and overlooked in previous research.

Several problems and limitations regarding contemporary conceptualizations of fatherhood have been noted in the literature. Most studies have examined a few discrete

and narrowly defined dimensions of father involvement overlooking the range of behavioral, cognitive, and affective processes by which men engage their children (Hawkins & Palkovitz, 1999; Palkovitz, 1997). These narrow conceptualizations have inhibited cross study comparisons of effects (Palkovitz, 2002a). Further, conceptualizations that focus on observable or reportable father behaviors often overlook the meaning of these actions for the participants (Christiansen & Palkovitz, 2001; Hawkins & Palkovitz, 1999). As researchers have suggested, the best examinations of father involvement must consider not simply *whether* men are involved, but *how* and *why* (Booth & Crouter, 1998).

One of the more intransigent difficulties in conceptualizing fatherhood has been capturing culturally diverse and nontraditional expressions of father involvement. Conceptualizations grounded in research examining White middle-class fathers fail to adequately account for culturally diverse expressions (Marsiglio, Day, & Lamb, 2000) and may miss nontraditional forms of fatherhood represented by nonresident, single custodial, minority, or unemployed/low-income fathers. For example, an understanding of fatherhood as the investment of personal resources may not capture father involvement for unemployed/low-income men whose scarcity of resources actually inhibits their involvement (Coley, 2001). Coley (2001) has noted the need for inclusive definitions of fatherhood that incorporate low-income, unmarried, and minority fathers. In pursuit of valid measures of father involvement for low-income white and African-American fathers, Bruce & Fox (1997, cited in Hawkins & Palkovitz, 1999) reviewed 150 fathering studies and delineated four functions of father involvement that may more accurately

capture the fatherhood experiences of working class men. These functions were: executive functions (e. g., planning and decision-making), social/emotional functions (direct social interactions), custodial functions (e.g., caregiving), and instructional functions (e.g., teaching, disciplining, guiding) (Hawkins & Palkovitz, 1999). Such models exemplify the attempts of researchers to capture the ethical dimension of father involvement that may transcend cultural constraints and provide a framework for a cross-cultural understanding of father involvement.

In summary, the conceptualization and measurement of father involvement remain significant obstacles in fatherhood research. While quantitative measures have substantially improved over the past decade, the metrics of fatherhood remain problematic (Hawkins & Palkovitz, 1999; Lamb, 2000; Marsiglio, Amato et al., 2000). Qualitative measures promise to capture a richer picture of father involvement. Such measures may provide insight into less observable cognitive and affective dimensions and begin to disclose the deeper meanings of the things men do to be involved with their children.

#### *Father Involvement and Child Outcomes*

Reviewers of fatherhood literature have noted the preponderance of research examining the contributions of fathers to children's developmental outcomes (Marsiglio, Amato et al., 2000). While some scholars have challenged the essentialness of fathers' contributions advocating a gender-neutral approach to the parenting discourse (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999), most fatherhood literature supports the unique and positive contributions of fathers to their children. Rohner & Veneziano (2001) identified

six categories of studies supporting the influence of father love on child outcomes with three categories supporting unique contributions from fathers: a) studies concluding that father love is equally as important as mother love in predicting specific child outcomes; b) studies concluding that father love predicts specific child outcomes better than mother love; and c) studies concluding that father love is the sole predictor of specific outcomes. Overall, it appears well established that the contributions of fathers to children, families, and communities are significant, unique, and positive (Booth & Crouter, 1998; Lamb, 1997; Marsiglio, Amato et al., 2000; Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 2002) while the absence of fathers from their families is detrimental (Blankenhorn, 1995; Doherty et al., 1996; Popenoe, 1996).

For example, Amato (1998) controlled for mother effects and found significant variance in children's levels of education, psychological distress, and self-esteem attributable to the unique contributions of fathers. These results were based on longitudinal research involving a simultaneous test of the human, financial, and social contributions of fathers to children's well-being. Data came from the 1992 phase of the Marriage Over the Life Course study begun in 1980 to examine couples and their children (Brown & Bumpas, 1998) and consisted of interviews with 471 young adult offspring of 2,000 married individuals studied 12 years earlier. Amato (1998) focused on 384 offspring who lived with both parents at the time of the earlier study. Six variables assessing multiple domains of child development were developed from measures of peer relations (kin ties, close friends), psychological adjustment (self-esteem, distress), life satisfaction, and education. Causal models were developed to examine the effects of

father's human, financial, and social capital investments in children's well-being using regression analyses to control for mother effects. While mothers' investments accounted for the larger share of variance in kin ties and close friends, fathers' investments accounted for a larger proportion of the variance in children's education, psychological distress and self-esteem.

To summarize, researchers have substantiated unique and lasting contributions of fathers to children and families. While some have questioned the essential nature of fatherhood for children (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999), others have argued for coercive social action to assure fathers' involvement in their children's lives (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 1996). However, researchers generally agree that the active involvement of genuinely caring fathers is good for children and their families. Less clear are the benefits of such involvement for the fathers themselves.

#### *Father Involvement and Men's Development*

Developmental researchers have long recognized parenthood as a significant developmental milestone for adults. Much of the recent research on the impact of fatherhood for men's development is grounded in Eriksonian (Erikson, 1963) developmental theory and posits fatherhood as a primary expression of men's generativity (e.g., Hawkins & Dollahite, 1998; Palkovitz, 2002; Snarey, 1993). While Erikson (1963) noted that generativity may also refer to productivity or creativity, his primary emphasis was the support and guidance of the next generation. The ability to contribute significantly to the development of the next generation through parenthood,

mentoring, or other forms of social fatherhood was understood to be a primary defense against stagnation.

Building on this notion, Gutmann (1964, 1987) proposed that parental transitions marked significant developmental crises for both men and women. Gutmann described parenthood as a chronic emergency that drives psychic reorganization. He argued that it is the parental and postparental stages, not adaptation to aging per se, that motivate and guide normal adult development in later life. Thus, the transition to postparental fatherhood may prompt significant developmental changes in men as they wrestle with changing identity and new roles in relationship to their adult children and to their spouse (Gutmann & Huyck, 1994). In summary, developmental theory suggests both that fatherhood prompts significant developmental change in men and that men's transition into the postparental phase of fatherhood presents unique challenges worthy of exploration.

Curiously, minimal empirical research is evident regarding the impact of fatherhood on men's development. Exceptions include recent work by Palkovitz (2002), Strauss & Goldberg (1999), Eggebeen & Knoester (2001) and some earlier explorations of men's experience of postparental distress or "empty nest" (Lewis, Freneau, & Roberts, 1979; Lewis & Roberts, 1982). Following is a review of this literature including a description of the location of this study within that body of research.

Evidence suggests that fatherhood significantly impacts men's views of themselves and their family role. Strauss & Goldberg (1999) examined how the first-year transition to fatherhood impacted men's view of self and their adjustment to fatherhood.

Examining the impact of the discrepancy between ideal and actual self-perception on men's transition to fatherhood, the researchers conducted prenatal and postnatal self-assessments on 56 first-time fathers with a subset of 32 men also completing a measure designed to capture the discrepancy between ideal (possible) and actual selves. Results from pre- and postnatal measures indicated a significant increase in the importance of the parent self, a decrease in the importance of the spouse self, and no change in the importance of the provider self. Men with higher ideal-actual self-discrepancy showed higher amounts of role change. In other words, men whose pre-natal view of their ideal self included higher levels of involvement in the family actually became more involved after the birth of their child. This reduction in ideal-self discrepancy was also associated with lower levels of depression and higher involvement in childcare. This evidence suggests that fatherhood may prompt significant changes in the way men view themselves and their involvement in their families. These researchers speculated that a possible mechanism for this change lies in the cognitive dissonance generated by the discrepancy between ideal and actual selves prompting both psychological and behavioral change.

Engelbeen & Knoester (2001) explored the effects of fathering experiences upon men's personal development. Drawing a sample of 5,226 from the 13,017 respondents to the National Survey of Families and Households (NSHF), the researchers identified five fatherhood settings: men who were not fathers (n=1,718), men sharing a residence with a minor child (n=2,310), men with older non-resident children (1,198), and men with at least one minor child living elsewhere (n=393). The group with resident minor children was subdivided into men with biological or adopted children (n=1,726) and men with at

least one stepchild (n=191). Focusing only on the latter four father groups, the researchers combined two questions on the NSHF survey (estimates of frequency of communication and visitation) for use as proxies for father involvement. Father involvement measures were compared to measures of men's psychological and physical well-being, social connectedness, intergenerational family involvement, and work behavior. Strong evidence was found that fathers differ from non-fathers in social connections, family relationships, and work behavior. Further, the effects of fathering were strongest for men living with their own children. The authors concluded that fatherhood impacts men's personal development positively and significantly.

While the Eggebeen & Knoester (2001) study provides impressive empirical support for the importance of fathering to men's development, this evidence is limited by the use of only two items on the NSHF survey that are acknowledged by the researchers as "crude proxies" of father involvement. These two items asked respondents to estimate from 1 (not at all) to 6 (several times a week) how often they telephoned or wrote to their child and how often they visited the child. Clearly, these items do not capture the range of expressions of father involvement. Further, studies based on national databases such as the NSHF have been criticized for reliability problems associated with shared method variance (Amato, 1998; Belsky, 1998; Marsiglio et al, 2000) and incomplete coverage (Eggebeen, 2002). Shared method variance results when the same sources are used for data on both dependent and independent variables, such as when children reported both on measures of time with father and on child's self-esteem. This design tends to artificially increase the correlation between variables. Finally, low to modest correlations



between respondent reports in the same family has led researchers to further question the reliability of these reports (Marsiglio et al, 2000).

Other researchers have used qualitative methods, in part, to address these shortcomings and capture a broader range of father involvement. Palkovitz, Copes & Woolfolk (2001) analyzed the responses of 40 fathers to four questions comprising a portion of larger in-depth interview designed to capture these men's perceptions of how fathering had impacted their development. Responses to the selected four questions reflected the participants perspectives on how fathering had changed their views of themselves. The researchers identified four identity related themes indicating these participants saw themselves as becoming more settled, less self-centered, more responsible, and more generative due to their fatherhood experiences. A fifth theme revealed that a significant proportion of the participants experienced this change as a "jolt" or sudden change in comparison to others who viewed the change as more subtle.

Palkovitz (2002) reported the results of analysis of the full interview with these 40 fathers. These results indicate a broad range of substantial change attributed by these men to their experience of being a father. Three domains of impact were identified: self, social, and work domains. The Self domain included (in addition to changes in the self domain described earlier) a more mature affective orientation, increased interest in moral and religious values including the avoidance of hypocrisy, and increased awareness of personal health issues. Specifically, these men experienced a broad range of positive and negative feelings associated with fathering and became more concerned with appropriately regulating affect, especially their anger. They also became more aware of

their personal values and the desire to instill them in their children. At the same time they became aware of possible hypocrisy and struggled to make their behavior match their values and beliefs. Finally, these men described concerns about staying physically healthy for the sake of their children while also struggling to find time and energy for exercise and healthy nutrition.

The Social domain included changes in participants' relationships with their partners, relatives, and friends. Participants described a shift in emphasis from relationship with partner to relationship with children. This shift seemed to ebb and flow in response to varying developmental needs of the children. While described changes in family relationships included a mostly positive emphasis on the importance of family connections, these men also reported critiquing their own fathers in light of their personal fatherhood experiences and felt critical of themselves and their fathers.

Finally, participants described significant changes in the Work domain attributed to father involvement. Most salient was the tension between being a good provider and being present, physically and emotionally, with the family. For many of the participants work demands often conflicted with family responsibilities and these men felt minimal support in their work environments for choices that gave family needs priority. Palkovitz (2002) concluded that the views of these participants contradicted previous literature claiming that men use career to avoid family involvement.

The evidence presented by Palkovitz (2002) suggests that the experience of being an involved father profoundly altered the developmental processes of these men. The underlying theme across all domains was one of balancing personal needs with family

and community needs. Most of these men struggled to achieve what Palkovitz described as a “provisional balance” between perceived personal, social, and career demands and their commitment to responsible fathering. While the fathering experience had both positive and negative dimensions that included personal losses as well as gains, most of these men agreed that the positive outweighed the negative.

The impact of fatherhood on men’s development is not limited to co-residential fathers with intact families. Similar developmental impact emerged from the examination of the experiences of 10 nonresidential African-American adolescent fathers (Allen & Doherty, 1998). Emergent themes included “being there” emotionally and physically for the child and mother, accepting responsibility for the fathering role, and acknowledging the influence of their own fathers. These participants also reported significant social obstacles to their involvement as fathers including conflicts with the partner, the partner’s family, and with social institutions. In spite of the difficulties, most of the participants reported that fatherhood had changed them in “...some inexplicable, yet fundamental way (p.239).”

In summary, the contributions of father involvement to men’s development have only recently been explored. This preliminary evidence suggests an array of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and social benefits that accrue to men as a result of their paternal involvement with children. In the next section, the researcher examines the literature pertaining more specifically to the developmental impact of father involvement for midlife men.

### *Father Involvement at Midlife*

Midlife has been recognized as a uniquely challenging transition stage for fathers where the central developmental task is the renegotiation of relationships with grown children and the development of a new identity less centered on fathering responsibilities (Robinson & Barret, 1986). Like other developmental tasks, successful completion may prompt growth while failure may lead to pathology. While most men progress satisfactorily through the tasks of middle adulthood, a small but significant portion may experience postparental distress (Lewis, Freneau, & Roberts, 1979).

Levinson (1978) asserted that the task of middle adulthood for men was to reduce the tyranny of The Dream. Based on interviews with 40 American men aged 35-45, Levinson observed that men enter young adulthood with a personal myth in which they are the central heroic figure on a personal quest. As they enter middle adulthood, this Dream must be reconciled with the reality of waning time and resources. According to Levinson (1978), middle adulthood is a time for choosing the final structure of one's life and coming to terms with what cannot be accomplished. During this phase, The Dream gradually transforms into a more rational reality-based construction that provides the foundation for later self-actualization.

Though Levinson and colleagues (1978) did not discuss the implications of these changes for father-child relationships, the application is apparent. At mid-life, fathers on a quest to become the "good father" are prompted to reconcile their dreams about fatherhood with the reality. Did they provide adequately? Were they "there" when the child needed them? Will the child maintain the father's values and traditions? Will the

father-child connection endure over the adult years? These are examples of the questions fathers strive to answer as they evaluate their father involvement and their influence upon their children's development to determine the ongoing meaning these experiences.

Ideally, this meaning-making process will provide a realistic construction of the fatherhood experiences that free the midlife father from the tyranny of The Dream, the fantasy of the "good" or perfect father, and enable him to affirm his contributions to the next generation.

Gutmann (1987) proposed parenthood as a primary experience that serves as a chronic emergency driving significant psychic reorganization in adults even into late adulthood. As both men and women move into the postparental phase of development, they grow beyond traditional gender boundaries toward greater androgyny. Men may move toward a more nurturing, supportive, and dependent relational stance while women may move toward a more assertive, independent stance. Postparental distress in men may be associated with unsatisfactory marriages associated with the conflicts that may arise when men become more interested in nurturing and supportive roles just as their children are leaving the nest and their wives need less support (Gutmann & Huyck, 1994; Lewis & Roberts, 1982). Generally, studies of postparental fatherhood support the notion that the launching of children initiates significant developmental change in the adult life cycle.

Gutmann & Huyck (1994) examined this developmental shift as a source of difficulty for older men by comparing vulnerable symptomatic men with vulnerable asymptomatic men in a community subsample. These researchers found evidence suggesting that men who developed an abnormally high passive and feminine profile in

later adulthood (syntonic dependent older men) and whose wives developed increased assertiveness and high masculine profiles were most vulnerable to pathological postparental distress (Gutmann & Huyck, 1994). In other words, postparental men who responded to their children's departure by seeking a more dependent relationship with their wives experienced distress when their wives were simultaneously seeking greater independence. For these men, the normative process of launching children prompted pathology rather than growth.

However, while some of the literature on midlife fathers examines problems associated with the launching of children, the majority of fathers weather this normal developmental phase quite well. For example, in a sample of 118 parents from northeast Georgia, 22% reported feeling unhappy over the departure of their last child while the rest reported feeling happy (26%) to very happy (16%) or neutral (35%) (Lewis et al., 1979). While a significant proportion of these fathers were distressed, the majority appeared to be coping well with the transition. For most men, the benefits of fatherhood at midlife may well outweigh the disappointments.

Snarey (1993) has presented what is widely recognized as the most comprehensive study to date of the benefits of fatherhood for men's development (Palkovitz, 2002a). As part of a comprehensive longitudinal study of father-child relationships, Snarey and colleague, Joseph Pleck, examined the impact of father involvement (parental generativity) upon men at mid-life. Parental generativity referred to researchers' ratings of three types of father involvement: support of child's social-emotional development, intellectual-academic development, and physical-athletic

development (Snarey, 1993). The sample of 240 men in this study comprised a subsample of a group of 500 boys studied over the previous four decades. The availability of this longitudinal data enabled the researchers to control for family of origin variables (occupational levels, boyhood developmental issues, and boyhood IQ) as well as family of procreation variables (child's gender, age, number of children, and spouse's employment status) known to impact midlife outcomes.

Controlling for these contextual variables, the researchers used hierarchical multiple regression analysis to test ratings of parental generativity as predictors of three midlife outcomes: occupational mobility (career success), marital success, and societal generativity (involvement in mentoring of young men or other contributions to young people outside the procreational family). The results indicated that fathers' involvement in childrearing during the child's decade of childhood predicted 9% of the variance in father's marital success and 7% of the variance in societal generativity at mid-life. Fathers' involvement in the child's adolescent decade predicted an additional 12% of the variance in marital success and another 7% of the variance in societal generativity. In sum, fathers' involvement in childrearing predicted 21% of the variance in marital success and 14% of the variance in societal generativity at mid-life. Further, no evidence was found to indicate that fathers' involvement in childrearing had negatively impacted their career mobility. These results suggest that father involvement may predict higher marital satisfaction and higher societal generativity at mid-life, but does not factor into a reduction in career success. Overall, this study provides compelling evidence of some of the benefits of father involvement for men at mid-life.

## *Conclusion*

Previous fatherhood research has focused primarily on understanding the contributions of father involvement to specific child outcomes. Comparatively little is known about the impact of father involvement on men's personal development. Further, previous conceptualizations of father involvement have tended to focus on discrete observable behaviors that fail to capture the range and diversity of men's involvement with their children. Researchers have called for broader and more diverse models of fatherhood that capture the subjective dimensions of father involvement. In sum, a better understanding of men's perspectives of the benefits and liabilities of father involvement is clearly needed. An understanding of the meaning of father involvement for the fathers themselves provides a significant contribution to the literature on father involvement.

Palkovitz (2002) has provided exceptional groundwork for this line of inquiry. However, participants in this qualitative study were aged 20-45 and had at least one dependent child. Thus, this emergent literature has yet to tap the perspectives of older men with grown children, men who have had some respite from the daily demands of child rearing and have had more time to assimilate their fathering experiences. Eggebeen & Knoester (2001) have pointed out that fatherhood researchers have tended to forget that men continue to be fathers throughout their life span. This study addresses this oversight with a phenomenological exploration of the experience of fatherhood for men at mid-life. This study contributes the perspectives of midlife fathers to the emergent literature examining the meaning of father involvement for men's personal development.



## Chapter 3: Method

### *Rationale for Method*

An existential-phenomenological methodology was selected as the most appropriate means of obtaining a full description of the experience of father involvement for fathers at mid-life. This approach was also deemed a useful supplement to previous fatherhood research that has been limited by methodological constraints. The preponderance of the literature on fatherhood has focused on the quantifiable, observable behaviors of fathers in efforts to explicate the connections between fathers' behaviors and child outcomes. Vital dimensions of the fatherhood experience have been necessarily ignored by these studies since the observation and measurement of discrete temporal expressions of father behavior cannot capture the intrinsic meaning of these behaviors for the participants. As Pollio (1982) has noted, "...much of what people do depends on who they are, what their goals are, how they perceive the situation, and, finally, what is important to them" (p.19). Without consideration of these subjective dimensions, scholarly understanding of fatherhood will remain incomplete. It was decided that the subjective perspectives of fathers themselves would provide an important contribution to the current fatherhood literature and that phenomenological inquiry would be useful for that endeavor.

### *Philosophical Framework*

Existential-phenomenological inquiry is grounded in the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty with secondary influence from the work of Heidegger, Husserl, and Kierkegaard (Pollio et al., 1997). Central to this philosophy is the concept of figure and ground

illustrated in Merleau-Ponty's description of the human experience of body (Pollio et al., 1997). From the first person perspective, one may go about a daily routine with little awareness of one's body. Awareness of the physical body is not figural, but rather, in the background of experience. Yet, adopting a third person perspective allows the awareness of body to become figural so that one sees oneself as a body and so is aware of aspects of experience that had previously been unattended. The main point is that the routine experience of one's body varies significantly depending upon what aspects of that experience are attended to or become figural in the moment. From this perspective, reality is subjective. Psychological reality is not "out there" readily accessible to objective measurement. Human behavior is an expression of meaningful experience, not simply a mechanical reaction to stimuli (Polkinghorne, 1989). Therefore, the study of human behavior from an existential-phenomenological perspective focuses on the meaning of experience for the participants.

The purpose of phenomenological inquiry is to capture the perspective of the participants (Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989; Pollio et al., 1997). Through rigorous analysis of naïve descriptions of participants' experiences, the researcher seeks to determine what the experience means to the participants and to produce a detailed description of the essential structure of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Descriptions are naïve because, in contrast to traditional positivistic research, phenomenological research begins with no *a priori* assumptions about the phenomenon nor does it seek support for preconceived hypotheses (Creswell, 1998; Pollio et al., 1997). Rather, the researcher sets aside his/her own assumptions and elicits naïve descriptions of a specific

phenomenon from which a general description can be developed (Moustakas, 1994). This description differs from other descriptive methods in that the focus is upon the meaning of the experience for the participants, not simply the observable behaviors (Polkinghorne, 1989).

### *Participants*

Selection of participants for this phenomenological study was based on several characteristics suggested in the literature: participants must have had experience with the phenomenon of interest, they must have the capacity to provide a full and complete description of their experience, and they must be able to establish enough rapport with the investigator to allow full disclosure of relevant experience (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989). Traditional concerns regarding randomization and sample size were not pertinent since the purpose of this study was to describe the experience of fatherhood for the participants rather than to describe fathers in general (Polkinghorne, 1989). The number of participants may vary depending on the nature and richness of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

These participants comprised a purposeful sample recruited using snowball sampling from the researcher's acquaintances. Potential participants were contacted by the researcher, verbally informed of the nature and purpose of the study as well as the requirements for participation, screened for appropriateness to the study, and invited to participate when appropriate. The researcher immediately made arrangements for the interview with those who agreed to participate.

Participants in this study consisted of 9 midlife men aged 55-67 who were fathers of adult children aged 21 or older and living independently. Eight participants were Caucasian and 1 was African-American. All participants were married from 29-48 years. The following profiles outline the demographic information for the participants in this study (see Table 1 for a synopsis). All names are pseudonyms.

*Joe* was 60 years old, Caucasian, and married for 34 years to Sally who was 56. They had 2 adult sons aged 26 and 23. Joe was a management consultant currently starting up an investment bank. His oldest son was single and working as an engineer in CA. The youngest son was married with one daughter and was in career transition at the time of the interview.

*Daniel* was 61 years old, Caucasian, and married to Patricia for 39 years. They had 3 adult daughters aged 37, 35, and 31. The oldest was married with 2 children. The second daughter was married with 1 child. The youngest was married with 2 stepchildren from her husband's previous marriage. Daniel owned his own business, a local petroleum distribution company.

*Jacob* was 56 years old, Caucasian, and married for 34 years to Sandra. They had 3 adult daughters aged 29, 27, and 25. Jacob was an attorney. His oldest daughter was single and also an attorney in another city. The two younger daughters were both married with no children.

*Charles* was 59 years old, Caucasian, with 2 adult daughters aged 30 and 28. The oldest daughter was married with one child. The youngest was to be married within a few

Table 1: Participant Profiles

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Years Married	Number Children	Sex/Age Children	Occupation
Joe	60	Caucasian	34	2	M: 26, 23	Management Consultant
Daniel	61	Caucasian	39	3	F: 37, 35, 31	Business owner
Jacob	56	Caucasian	34	3	F: 29, 27, 25	Attorney
Charles	59	Caucasian	35	2	F: 30, 28	Retired, Human Resources
Josh	55	Caucasian	30	1	M: 26	Retired, small business owner
Devin	57	Caucasian	33	2	F: 27, 24	Executive, manufacturing company
Peter	57	Caucasian	34	7	F: 33, 32, 26, 17 M: 24, 22, 20	Registered Nurse
Ron	67	African-American	48	4	M: 48, 45 F: 47, 43	Retired, US Postal Service
Duke	58	Caucasian	29*	2	M: 36, 25	Engineer, manufacturing company

\* Participant's second marriage with oldest child from previous marriage.

weeks of the interview. Charles had been married for 35 years to Kathy who was 58 years old. He was retired from his career in Human Resources with a local manufacturing company.

*Josh* was 55 years old, Caucasian, and married to Ann, aged 54, for 30 years. They had 1 son aged 26 who single. Josh was retired from his career with his own appliance repair business due to disability from a severe heart condition. Josh had undergone a heart transplant 8 years prior to the interview, an event that clearly impacted his perspective on fatherhood.

*Devin* was 57 years old, Caucasian, and married to Emily, aged 55, for 33 years. They had 2 adult daughters aged 27 and 24. Both daughters were single. Devin was a vice president in a local engineering firm.

*Peter* was 57 years old, Caucasian, and the father of 7 children aged 33, 32, 26, 24, 22, 20, and 17. The five oldest children were considered adults living away from home. Peter had been married to Julie, aged 57, for 34 years. Peter had been a house husband for many years and had recently returned to his profession as a registered nurse.

*Ron* was 67 years old, African-American, and the father of 4 adult children. He had been married to Cindy aged 65 for 48 years. They had 4 adult children; 2 sons aged 48 and 45 and 2 daughters aged 47 and 43. There were 4 grandchildren. Ron was retired from the US Postal Service and currently worked part time as a blacksmith at a local tourist venue.

*Duke* was 58 years old and married to Katie, aged 55, for 29 years. Duke had a son, aged 36, from an earlier marriage. This son was married with 2 children and worked

as a police officer. Duke and Katie had 2 sons. One son died in a car accident at age 24. Their other son was 25, single, and working as a diesel mechanic. Duke worked as a quality control engineer at a local manufacturing company.

### *Data Collection*

Data collection in this study was a reiterative process of collection and analysis consisting of two phases: a bracketing interview with analysis followed by participant interviews and sequential analyses. First, a bracketing interview was conducted with the researcher by an interviewer familiar with phenomenological interview techniques. The audio taped interview was professionally transcribed and then analyzed by the researcher with the help of the research group (see data analysis section for more details). This process enabled the researcher to suspend his expectations about what participants might say about fatherhood and to be open to what they actually said. The second phase of data collection consisted of interviews with the participants selected for the study. Transcripts of the audio taped interviews were individually analyzed in sequence during the data collection process and it was determined that redundancy was reached with the sixth interview. Three more interviews were conducted to confirm redundancy. The resulting data for this study consisted of the verbatim transcripts of the bracketing interview and the interviews with all 9 participants.

#### *Bracketing interview*

The bracketing interview was conducted prior to data collection as a protection against investigator bias. The researcher was asked the same question asked of the participants in this study, “Please take a moment to reflect on your experience of being the

father of an adult child and when you're ready please begin by describing this experience to me.” Since the researcher was not yet the father of an adult child he described his experience of being the father of an adolescent (16) daughter.

Analysis of the bracketing interview revealed four major themes: Changes, Self-Appraisal, Accomplishment, and Loss. Changes referred to changes in the father-child relationship and changes in the self. Self-Appraisal referred to evaluation of current performance as father. Accomplishments referred to recognition of successes of child and of self as father. Finally, Loss referred to the fear of losing power and influence and the increased risk of losing the relationship as the child gained autonomy. These themes seemed to emerge from a background of Past Experience. Descriptions of the main themes generally included references to past experiences when the child was “little” or before the child was born. A full analysis of the bracketing interview may be seen in Appendix A.

#### *Interview process*

Participants were interviewed in a mutually agreeable setting, typically the participant’s home or office. Prior to interviewing, participants were asked to read and sign an informed consent form (Appendix B) providing a written explanation of the nature, purpose and requirements of the study including any possible risks to the participant. After obtaining informed consent, the interviewer collected basic demographic information including name, contact information, and nuclear family composition. Review of family information served to confirm participant appropriateness for the study and to help in building rapport. The researcher then conducted an



unstructured, open-ended interview allowing the participants to describe their experience of being the father of an adult child. Specifically, participants were asked, “Please take a moment to reflect on your experience of being the involved father of an adult child and when you are ready begin describing that experience to me in your own words.” Generally, interviews proceeded in an unstructured, spontaneous fashion as the investigator asked open-ended questions, probed for clarification, and otherwise facilitated the participant’s verbal disclosure of any aspect of the experience deemed meaningful by the participant. Interviews lasted approximately 60-75 minutes.

#### *Creation of protocols*

A professional transcriptionist was hired to type verbatim transcripts from the audiotapes of the interviews. A written pledge of confidentiality was obtained from the transcriptionist to ensure confidentiality of the participants (see Appendix C). Next, the primary investigator verified the accuracy of the transcripts by reviewing the typed manuscripts while listening to the audiotapes. Corrections were made as needed for typographical errors or missed words or phrases. Occasionally, passages were reviewed multiple times to in an effort to capture the exact wording or nuance in the transcript. No corrections were made for incorrect grammar or poor syntax. The resulting protocols were as close as possible to verbatim reports. After verification of the accuracy of the protocols, the audiotapes were erased. Each transcript was assigned a pseudonym and all personal identifiers were removed. The transcriptions of the bracketing interview and the 9 participant interviews comprised the protocols that constituted the data for this study.

## *Data Analysis*

### *Individual analysis of transcripts*

Phenomenological studies utilize linguistic rather than statistical analysis and the nature of the data precludes the establishment of tight, formal procedures (Creswell, 1998). However, several protocols for analysis of phenomenological interview data have been proposed and researchers have acknowledged their similarity (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989). Each incorporates a series of steps that essentially involve: (a) dividing the original protocols into units, (b) discerning and communicating the essential meaning of each unit, and (c) clustering the meaning units into themes that comprise a general description of the phenomenon (Polkinghorne, 1989). The researcher for the current study analyzed each individual transcript using a seven-step process similar to the process described by Colaizzi (1978) and summarized by Polkinghorne (1989).

First, the researcher read through the entire protocol to get a sense of the whole document. The purpose of this introductory reading was to allow the researcher to notice the ebb and flow of the conversation and to get a sense of what stood out or was figural about the experience for the participant. The first reading also allowed the researcher to sense what aspects of the experience seemed to sit in the background and provide the context for the experience. Having a feel for the entire transcript enabled the researcher to keep the whole of the transcript in mind while analyzing individual sections; a process described as the hermeneutical circle (Pollio et al., 1997).

Next, the researcher conducted a second reading of the transcript and noted each change in meaning within the text. The text was subsequently divided into *meaning units* or blocks of self-contained ideas. A meaning unit constituted a significant statement that seemed to capture an important aspect of the experience for the participant. Units were functionally determined to occur whenever the researcher perceived a shift of meaning in the text (Giorgi, 1989). Sometimes meaning units were evident at speaking turns; at shifts between the researcher and the participant. At other times several meaning units were discernable within one section of text as, for example, when participants referred temporarily back to earlier comments in order to clarify the current discussion. The researcher drew lines between sentences in the transcript to designate meaning units and wrote quotes or significant statements from the participants in the margins to identify the main idea of the unit.

In the third step, the researcher created a list of the meaning units for the transcript noting redundancies and irrelevant material. For example, participants frequently reiterated important aspects of their experience. While noting that repetition may also serve as an expression of emphasis, units with the same meaning were either consolidated (when they provided fuller understanding) or eliminated from the list for the sake of clarity. Participants also occasionally discussed tangential issues acknowledged by the participant and the researcher to be “off track” (e.g., current conflicts at work or news about mutual acquaintances). Such irrelevant material was also deleted from the list of units.

In the fourth step the researcher stated simply, concisely, and in his own words the meaning that seemed to dominate each natural unit. This is where the researcher introduced original terms in order to explicate the psychological meanings implicit in the text. The researcher was careful to use terms that helped illuminate and clarify the experience and stayed close to the meaning for the participants (Colaizzi, 1978). This step generally involved multiple readings of the transcript to assure accurate interpretation of the unit in light of the surrounding material.

Next, the researcher clustered the individual meaning units into *themes* or units of “essential, nonredundant psychological meanings (Polkinghorne, 1989, p.54)”. The themes were based on the researcher’s own words reflecting the researcher’s understanding of the meaning of the units taken together as a whole. For example, participant phrases from the protocols, “backing off”, “mellowing out”, “changing roles”, and “just enjoying them”, were each determined to reflect the essential meaning of “letting go of” or relinquishing primary parental responsibilities.

In the sixth step, the researcher presented a summary of the identified meaning units and themes to the individual participants for validation (for an example, see Appendix E). The researcher requested feedback on the accuracy and inclusiveness of the analysis. Participants were invited to respond by e-mail, phone, or by personal interview to affirm or clarify the analysis. They were also encouraged to provide further descriptions of their experience if desired. Four participants responded to the request; three confirmed the analysis as presented while one participant suggested a clarification of one meaning unit. Follow-up contacts with the remaining participants yielded no

further changes and it was determined that the individual analyses accurately reflected participants' experiences.

Finally, the researcher organized the participant validated themes from the individual transcripts into global themes that seemed to capture the essential experience for all participants. Individual participant themes were typically clustered into sub themes under the global themes. For example, some of the participants in this study described experiences of providing advice or counsel to their adult children. Other participants described experiences of providing financial or other material support. Still others described helping with mundane daily activities such as babysitting. All of these descriptions were clustered under the sub theme of *role continuity* within the global theme of *Continuity* because the researcher determined that each of these meaning units pertained to ways that men in this study continued to maintain their role as fathers or to do fatherly kinds of things for their adult children.

#### *Group analysis of transcripts*

Central to the process of phenomenological research is the concept of Epoch, the setting aside of everyday assumptions that might keep the researcher from seeing what is really there (Moustakas, 1994). Two interpretive processes were utilized to help guard against the intrusion of the researchers own biases into the data analysis: a bracketing interview and group analysis (Pollio et al., 1997). As mentioned earlier, a faculty member familiar with phenomenological interview technique conducted a bracketing interview with the researcher prior to data collection. In the bracketing interview, the researcher was asked the same question as the participants. This interview was audio taped and

transcribed. The subsequent protocol was analyzed by the researcher with the aid of a research group to facilitate the researcher's awareness of his personal perceptions of the phenomenon. This awareness enabled the researcher to set aside or "bracket" his preconceptions and enter the investigation open to the experiences of the participants.

The researcher also utilized the research group to assist with the analysis of 4 participant protocols. This group was comprised of the researcher, 2 doctoral students, and 2 professors who were familiar with phenomenological research methods. Group members signed a pledge of confidentiality (Appendix F). The researcher brought an early protocol to the group where it was read aloud with frequent pauses to allow group members to discuss units of meanings and relationships of units. The group functioned to orient the researcher to the nature of the data and to facilitate the difficult process of organization and interpretation. The researcher alone analyzed the remaining 5 protocols. The researcher periodically discussed his perceptions regarding the data with group members both formally and informally. In the later stages of analysis, the group functioned as an auditor to verify the researcher's interpretations. The inclusion of a bracketing interview and group audit helped to protect against researcher bias and facilitated the discovery of the "real" experience of the participants.

*Synthesis: Creating the report*

Following the development of the thematic description of the structure of the experience, the researcher read through the transcripts a final time to highlight the theme associated with each meaning unit. It was during this reading that the researcher identified the specific quotes from each participant illustrating each theme by

highlighting the quotes in different colors designating different themes. During this phase of the project, the researcher gained greater awareness of the ambiguity of various meaning units and their applicability to multiple themes. Quotes that appeared to mean one thing earlier in the analysis seemed to mean something else as well during the creation of the final report. Colaizzi (1978) acknowledged the need for phenomenological researchers to tolerate ambiguity while considering all possible meanings. It was determined that some quotes could be used to illustrate multiple themes depending on emphasis, on what aspect of the meaning unit became figural. Thus, some quotes were highlighted with one color and circled with another. The creation of the final report consisted of working through both the highlighted paper copy and the electronic copy of each transcript to “copy and paste” appropriate quotes into the final manuscript.

## Chapter 4: Results

### *Overview*

Analyses revealed that the thematic structure of the experience of fatherhood at midlife consisted of three main themes: *Accommodation*, *Validation*, and *Generativity*. *Accommodation* referred to the experience of both Continuity and Change in the father-child relationship. The participants in this study affirmed their ongoing identity and role as “father” while at the same time seeking to accommodate their children’s evolving autonomy. *Validation* referred to the experience of both Satisfaction and Loss associated with children leaving home. Fathers in this study expressed a deep abiding satisfaction in their parental identity and accomplishments while at the same time acknowledging loss associated with launching their children into adulthood. *Generativity* referred to the experience of celebrating the Legacy personified in one’s children accompanied by a sobering awareness of the potential for Despair. Participants in this study affirmed their fatherhood accomplishments as their lasting contribution to future generations while speculating on the emptiness of a life without children. Thus, the experience of fatherhood at midlife as described by the participants consisted of three major themes associated with three core bipolarities: *Accommodation: Continuity/ Change*, *Validation: Satisfaction/ Loss*, and *Generativity: Legacy/ Despair*. Figure 1 provides an illustration of this thematic structure.

These bipolar themes were grounded in a context of *Relational Comparison*; i.e., other relationships to which fathers compared their current experience. Specifically,



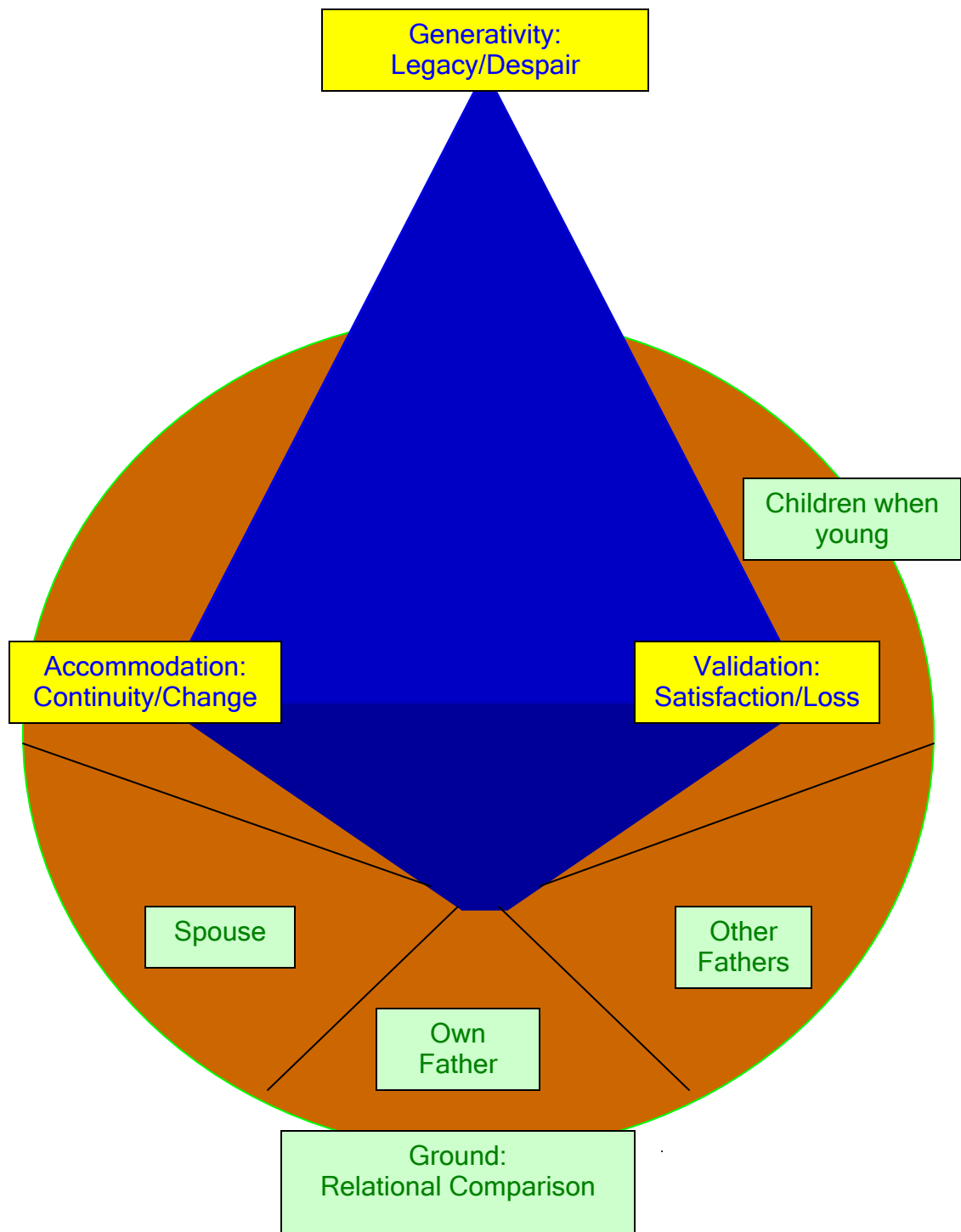


Figure 1. Thematic Structure of the Experience of Involved Fatherhood at Midlife

fathers compared their current experience to experiences with their children as dependents or “when they were younger”, with their own fathers, with other fathers, and with their spouses. These other relationships provided fathers in this study with a point of reference for making sense of their current fatherhood experience.

The following chapter consists of the exploration of these major themes along with a variety of sub themes in the words of the participants in order to further explicate the experience of fatherhood at midlife. First, the ground of the experience is explained in order to provide the context for the participants’ descriptions. Next, themes and sub themes are discussed and illustrated with representative quotes from participant transcripts. The chapter is concluded with a summary of the findings. The reader is invited to consider the participants’ own descriptions of their experiences and to evaluate the reasonableness and trustworthiness of the researcher’s interpretation of those descriptions including support for the essential structure of the experience.

*Ground: Comparison to Other Relationships*

Fathers described their experience against a backdrop of other relationships. The primary ground was the relationship with children when they were dependent, the younger years. Other referents included the participants’ fathers, other fathers, and the participants’ spouses. These “other relationships” provided the ground from which fathers made sense of their experience.

*Comparison to earlier relationship with child: “When they were younger”*

“Well, to start with, I think you need to know a little bit about my kids when they were younger” (Peter). Peter used these words of introduction to begin his description of his

experience of being a father at midlife. His introduction aptly described the ground from which each of the fathers in this study described their experience. Fathers explicitly referenced their experience of fathering when the children were younger and dependent when describing their experience of being the father of an adult child. For example, fathers typically referenced earlier years to describe change in the fatherhood relationship. Devin described changes in parental responsibility.

When they were very young I felt a significant responsibility for their day-to-day development and their security and providing for all of their needs. As they have grown older, obviously that requirement has gone away as they've become more responsible and self-reliant. (Devin)

Another father used younger years to describe changes in his parenting style, "I try not to criticize either one of them at all... I think it is important because maybe it is a dramatic difference.... from the past.... from my younger days" (Joe). Still another father described a change in role as compared to younger years, "Particularly when I was younger anyway I thought my primary role was ... more of the bread winner and kind of the enforcer" (Daniel).

Charles referred to the younger years to describe changes in material supports saying, "When they were young in high school I bought them a car. But today if they want a car, I'm not going to buy it for them. They are going to buy a new car."

One father referred to younger years to describe changes between the way he and his spouse interacted with their adult children.

It didn't seem to me in my younger years that there were times when you better talk to your dad.... It just didn't occur. I don't know, I just felt like I could do everything that S [spouse] could do, but she was also able to do a lot of things I could do....

Now there seems to be things that she thinks I can do that maybe she can't do. And I know there are things she can do that I can't do.... I mean there is more of a role-differentiation. (Joe)

Fathers also referenced younger years to describe regrets. One father reflected, "In retrospect... I was more of an executive than I was a dad" (Joe). Another father acknowledged, "I don't think I really appreciated the kids when they were young and growing up" (Daniel). Still another father expressed penance.

Our first two children, I actually apologized to them because I expected them to be little adults [when they were younger], and it took a while for me to realize - and I was a house husband at that point - that.... children are going to be children and they can't be expected to be little adults. (Peter)

Inversely, Josh summarized the nature of regret through the ground of "when you get older" when he suggested, "Everybody says that when you get older and you look back there is so much you would change. In short, the participants' current fatherhood experiences were grounded in the past, in their experiences with their children "when they were younger".

*Comparison to own fathers: Doing "what my father done for me."*

Father also referenced their fathers when describing their fatherhood experience. They frequently referred to their fathers as a model for parenting.

Growing up and going to school... [Dad] was able to help me out and put some money aside for me... he was always working out a little financial, "You do this, and we'll do this"... We do that with [our] kids. (Daniel)

Well, it's good [that] ... they don't think of me in terms of getting old... I felt the same way toward my dad... He was always a strong and vigorous man. He never did age in my eyes. (Duke)

Well, we don't have a guidebook or rulebook that we use, you know. I guess it comes from our upbringing and life experiences that we had ourselves. I guess a lot of that comes from that. (Charles)

I think you learn your parenting skills or you develop your parenting skills or you see your parenting skills based upon how you were parented to yourself. So, I think that is sort of where all this comes together. I think we model and do more things that we see and that we learn without knowing we learn it and we learn trying to learn it. (Jacob)

Other fathers described their experience as an attempt to improve on the fathering they had received.

I have just done what my father done for me and tried to expand on it. Kind of what I'd have liked for my dad to have done for me and didn't do... maybe listen more, things like that. Be more a part of his life. That is not putting my dad down. My dad was wonderful, I think. But, again, I think as times change he did the best thing he could do and learned from his father. (Josh)

I guess I don't think I had very much of a model to go by.... [But] I probably am reflecting a model. He wasn't a bad father. He just wasn't much of a father.... Of course, he was probably much more of a father than most people have.... You know he was a good provider.... But, we never, rarely anyway, did things like go to the zoo, you know, that kind of stuff. He took me to a few ball games. But that was just a very occasional thing. [He was a] pretty impatient guy. Didn't like to look in the mirror. [I'm the] same way. (Joe)

Fathers also referenced their own fathers to describe their satisfaction and fulfillment with fatherhood.

My dad was a scholar and that is sort of what he expected me to be... Other things were more important to me than that. I've always liked mechanical things. I was more for that type of thing than being a scholar. (Ron)

My dad raised me to be independent. I probably could have done a lot more with my life if I had just done some things for some people where I could call some favors or something, but I just never liked to ask anybody for anything. (Ron)

*Comparison to other fathers: "I look at my wife's brother..."*

I look at my wife's brother and his wife and their children, and they do about the same thing we do. They are down there helping their kids and grandkids all the time and doing stuff for them, working with them and helping out. (Charles)

Like Charles, several fathers referred to other fathers or father figures when describing their experience.

C's [son-in-law] dad is very much "hands on..." I mean, he'll dive in there and do that stuff. I hate to do that stuff. I'd rather give them my opinion about certain things and help them out financially and that kind of thing. (Daniel)

One father referred to other fathers in absence of his deceased biological father

I am sure that even though I did not have a father when I was an adult, I think you have father figures and see other people including my father-in-law primarily and including some of my employers and including some people now who are fathers of my contemporaries, I see how they do it and you have a relationship with them, and this makes a difference.... You see their relationship and their ways sort of model your relationship with your children. (Jacob)

Another father referred to anonymous fathers he had observed in public places as a point of contrast for his own experience.

Well, I don't understand how you can take your kid to a theme park and do what you want to do and not let the kid do what [she or he] wants to do. I also don't see how you can get so mad at a kid at a theme park that you can bust them one. The whole idea seemed to me would be for the kid to have fun more so than you. (Ron)

Thus, fathers in this study used references of other fathers to describe their own fatherhood experience. Fathers also referred frequently to their spouses.

*Comparison to spouse: "It took two."*

Well, it took two. My wife had her opinions in there too. I don't know if we ever really had to discuss anything. It seemed like we were always on the same wavelength. (Ron)

Near the end of his interview, Joe alerted the researcher, “Well, we haven't talked about the dad being the half of a paired relationship.” Fathers frequently referred to their partners when describing their fatherhood experience. Many of the fathers lapsed into the use of second person pronouns when describing their personal experience. For example, Daniel began his description of his fatherhood experience as follows.

I think this is one of the real nice periods of time now. They are all on their own. They are pretty well self-sufficient. *We* try to help out financially where *we* can and emotionally as counselors. They seek *our* advice sometimes. Hopefully *we* don't give too much advice unsolicited. It is really nice with the grandchildren now at this stage. *We* haven't had any healthy problems and that kind of burden, so *we* have really enjoyed the grandchildren. It's nice to have them this close. It is just kind of a joyous time for *us* [all italics added]. (Daniel)

This pronoun change seemed to connote the partnership that served as the context for fatherhood. Another father stated this context more explicitly, “Well, I . . . me and my wife (pause). When I talk about this, it is my wife and I both. She is pretty much the same way . . . I guess she is probably the link pin that holds us all together” (Charles).

Fathers in this study typically perceived their fatherhood experience as a shared experience. Jacob stated the following:

My perspective is my wife's perspective . . . I guess there is a difference in my mind between a single adult parent and a married adult parent. My perspective is obviously shaped by my wife's perspective. I would hope that her perspective is shaped by my perspective in these things. I think this is part of it. (Jacob)



Later, he clarified further, “I don't know if it's fatherhood or parenthood. I think we influence each other in our roles as parents.” Simply put, fathers typically described their experience in the context of a partnership with their spouses.

Well, it took two. My wife had her opinions in there too. I don't know if we ever really had to discuss anything. It seemed like we were always on the same wavelength. (Ron)

Fathers frequently described their experience by comparing their experiences with their perceptions of their spouses.

[Being a father] is still important to me and I think will always be. . . . All the emphasis is put on the mothers. The mother is always there for you and the father is just there sometimes, but I don't know that that's true. My son is as important to me; I'm sure, as he is to [my wife]. (Josh)

Several fathers described differences with their spouses.

My wife wants to hang on. . . . On some issues she wants to be more involved than I think appropriate. Therefore, I will encourage her to back off and let them decide. On other issues. . . I may do something where she thinks it is their business and I ought to keep out of it. (Jacob)

My wife. . . tends to interact more on the. . . interpersonal, social life type of issues. My daughter. . . tends to relate those more to my wife and less to me. I think that has been. . . the pattern [since] late in their teenage years when they were both in school. They tend to talk to me more about the. . . task type doings of their daily lives and to express more with my wife. . . the social type things. (Devin)

Such differences were generally perceived as complementary by enabling the achievement of mutual goals.

I relate more on the... financial side or the task side, wanting them to reach a level where they can be self-supportive and all that stuff. That's why I don't pick up the phone and just visit with them. I think I acquiesce to P [spouse] a lot on that... We complement each other, I guess... she kind of helps cover for me. (Daniel)

We are not in lock step with one another, but I do think her role is influenced by my beliefs and I think my role is influenced by her. I don't think we are independent of one another.... They are her kids too. (Jacob)

My wife and I have the same objectives... and that is to help the kids as much as we can.... The goals and objectives are common between us. We want to help out and do what we can. We don't want to do a lot of lavish gifts and things that are unnecessary and extraordinary. We don't have a lot of differences in that area.

(Charles)

Fathers also identified spouses as a source of support for their fatherhood relationships.

J [spouse] is very good in that when she sees something is going on that is bothering me she will help me to mellow out.” (Peter)

My wife now plays a big part in getting me through those [bad] times. She was a great healer.... When things seem pretty bad, she has always had the ability to have a different picture. She has this way of showing you that things are not really all that bad and as a matter of fact are pretty good. She's been a big inspiration to me.

(Duke)

In summary, midlife fathers in this study described their experience from a context of relational comparison. They compared their current relational experience of fatherhood to previous relationships with their children “when they were younger.” They also referenced their experiences with their own father, other fathers, and their own spouses. These “other relationships” provided the ground from which the experience of fatherhood at midlife became figural for these participants. Next, the major themes that emerged from this ground will be explored.

*Accommodation: Continuity vs. Change*

I don't know if you ever get over your relationship of a child with a father, if the parents ever recognize that the kids are self sufficient and can do things on their own. It's hard to change roles. I think it takes a long time to do that. (Daniel)

A recurrent theme for fathers in this study was the experience of both continuity and change in the father-child relationship and the need to accommodate those changes while at the same time affirming the essential nature of the relationship. Participant’s descriptions regarding the ways things stayed the same and the ways things changed in their relationships with their adult children are explored separately followed by a summary of the accommodation theme.

*Continuity in the Father-Child Relationship*

Fathers in this study expressed a strong sense of continuity in their relationships with their adult children. Two sub themes of continuity were evident. Fathers saw themselves as “still the dad”. In other words, they continued to identify themselves as the father and were presumably perceived that way by their children. Fathers also continued

to “help out” in a variety of ways. They still provided for their children with advice, material supports, and help with daily activities. These two sub themes are explicated as *identity continuity* and *role continuity*.

*Identity continuity: “Still the dad.”*

I guess the first thing that comes to mind is even though the kids are grown and moved out on their own, to me they are still my kids and my feelings towards them do not change...the love for your children never changes whether they are thirty-six or three years old. Those feelings are still the same... It is an unconditional love.

The way I feel about them will never change. (Duke)

Each father in this study concurred with this beautiful description of the continuity and steadfastness of his loving relationship with his adult children. The first sub theme of *identity continuity* consisted of the continuity of “being the father”, maintaining the identity of father after the children are grown. The following excerpts were representative of this sense of continuity.

They are still kids...I guess that is one of the aspects of being a dad that doesn't change. You are still always the dad... they can come to me, and they are not going to get turned away. (Joe)

You don't ever lose your relationship as a parent. You're still that parent... You don't provide everything... but you still have that parental relationship...you still don't lose the title of "father." (Jacob)

I don't know if you ever get over your relationship of a child with a father... (Daniel)

The fathers in this study described active ongoing involvement with their children. For example, Charles reported, “We keep in constant contact... We are involved or at least aware of what is going on in their life and the things they are doing.” Ron described a typical week saying, “My son calls his mom every day. R [adult daughter] will stop by almost every day. G [adult daughter] will call here every day. D [adult daughter], we hear from her about once a week.” Similarly, one father recognized that his son would always be a part of his life.

He will always be a part of me even if he is not here. I mean the memories, the thoughts, the fun; they're here daily. Sometimes when I am doing things, it just brings things back to me that we used to do. So, if I never seen him again, he would still be here if that makes any sense, not physically maybe, but he is always a part of my life. (Josh)

Representative of other participants was this father's expectation to remain actively involved with his children indefinitely.

Well, I look at my wife and I ... don't think we'll ever reach a point in our lives that we won't be involved or want to be involved with the kids. I think that will go on for as long as we live. I don't think there is a cut off point. (Charles)

Some of the fathers described their relationship as a special closeness that has not only endured, but also grown and prospered with their children's emerging maturity. Charles stated, “My wife and I have always been close to our kids, and that hasn't changed. At this stage in our life, we are probably as close or closer than ever.” Josh reported

interacting with his son “as an individual just like I would some other friend yet there is still that special bond.” Other fathers also affirmed an ongoing special bond.

It’s a bond type...relationship that’s occurred over the years... So to call them children is... maintaining the envelope... around this relationship and what's happening within it and the exchanges that take place. It's a differentiation of them from, for example, very close friends. (Devin)

I think I have a tighter bond with my two older daughters than I do with my older sons.... Yet, C [son] is 31 and every time we come together he always has a warm hug and we talk about how things are going in his life and with his two children. So, I still have a good relationship with him.... I'm still following J [son] closely on how he is doing in [college] and encouraging him... (Peter)

For one father this special bond extended to adult children added by marriage.

My daughter-in-law ... is a big part of our lives. She is like the daughter we never had... She has always called me, “Dad”.... She really is a daughter-in-law but she feels like a daughter. (Duke)

For fathers in this study, fatherhood remained a high priority and continued to be a central focus of concern. For example, Peter stated, “My children tend to be high on my list of importance.... They just know that I am always thinking about them.” Charles also said, “We are still very close... and it is a big part of our life in terms of what we are focused on.” For two fathers the significance of the fatherhood bond seemed only to increase with the advent of grandchildren to the family.

Well, I have to say that I think it [fatherhood] is just as important and maybe more important - well, I don't know how you can say more important - it is just as important as it ever was...especially when you have a grandchild. That makes it even more important... It's just something that provided an additional...tie, an additional bond there. (Charles)

We usually go get the grandchildren about once a month and bring them up for the weekend.... We always enjoy those times.... It's almost the same as being a father. In many ways, I guess it [may] be better. I don't know if that is possible. (Duke)

In summary, midlife fathers in this study perceived themselves in a variety of ways as “still the dad”. They described fatherhood as an ongoing identity maintained even after the children were grown. They described an enduring bond manifested in ongoing involvement with the adult children who continued to be a top priority. Generally, these fathers expected the importance and significance of the relationship with their children to only increase over the years.

*Role continuity: “Still helping out.”*

We still maintain our focus on life on them and their activities and helping them get things done like moving [daughter] and getting set up...just helping them with their life experiences and support. You know, not leaving them to have to do it all themselves. It is primarily helping them with major life experiences. (Charles)

The second sub theme, *role continuity*, pertained to ways that fathers in this study continued to provide for their adult children. This provision was described with enough

similarity among the fathers as to constitute three tertiary themes. These tertiary themes pertained to support and advice, material resources, and help with daily activities of living.

Fathers in this study frequently talked of giving advice to their adult children. For example, one father spoke of the joy of helping with a major decision.

It seems like... when there is a big decision to be made by [son], he comes back and talks to me. He handles the little ones fine, but like last year he was wanting to buy a car awfully bad. And... he came home to talk to me. He wanted me to go with him to make sure he did it right, and that made me feel good. I mean he knew where to come when he was nervous about something... It is still important to me and I think will always be. I think that is just part of being a father. (Josh)

Another father spoke of being available to listen.

I think both daughters ...when they have any kind of difficulty... at least rely on us to listen to what those difficulties are... I see it more as a given or a natural thing or almost an obvious thing that these two people would do that. (Devin)

One father spoke of the differences in advising his two sons.

J [oldest son] has been fairly easy.... He is the ideal kid you know. Always did the right thing, always, was very easy to raise. So as he goes through challenges with a job, and deciding to stay at one company or leave... [I try to help him] keep his head above the water, his perspective on what he was facing.... I am trying to share some of that kind of stuff [personal inspiration] with J [youngest son] to see if we can't give him experiences that are different and positive, and even exhilarating so that he



can develop a different perspective... I hope that that will work... I'd like to help him. (Joe)

Some fathers described an awareness of the dilemma of giving advice to adult children who might not want to hear it.

Yeah, we give advice, you know, like, "Go to church. Are you going to church? How are you doing on that?", those kinds of things that you are always interested in...if they have problems that they are experiencing, we like to talk about it and so forth and share any advice that they might not want to hear or sometimes don't want to hear. At any rate, we always have this feeling of being interested in their welfare. I don't know if you ever get past that. (Charles)

She [daughter] called one time and I could tell that she was troubled about something. I just asked her what was up. She [described the problem]. I said, "Well, have you tried 'this' yet?" She said, "Dad, I'm twenty-four years old and second lieutenant in the Marine Corp. I don't need you to tell me what to do." I said, "Well, guess what? You're still my firstborn and I don't care if you're one hundred and a commandant in the Marine Corp, if I think I can help you, you have to put up with me." It didn't work... but at least we had that type of relationship. (Peter)

Fathers also talked of providing material assistance when necessary or desired. For example, one father spoke of helping with major purchases.

Well, we have provided money for down payments on houses. We have provided financing for some cars. We provided furniture for all of them. We have provided

car repairs. Whatever they need. We have provided vacations... if they need it, it doesn't feel peculiar... what are you going to do? Are you going to pay taxes on it when you die (chuckling)? That is sort of what it comes down to. What are you going to do with it? If it doesn't help them, what good is it just to sit there? (Jacob)

Another father spoke of helping with unusual projects.

When Sarah... called prior to Christmas and said, "Is there any way you can see about sending Christmas stockings to my troops?" ... We just raised money by telling people what the need was in church and elsewhere and sent Christmas stockings, enough for the whole company. They have come to know that just because they are older and on their own they can still rely on Dad. (Peter)

Still another father spoke of ongoing concerns about making sure his adult children had the material supports they needed.

I still, even though my oldest son is thirty-six years old... concern myself with how well he is doing and what he might be doing any particular time during a day that I think about him... When he and his wife first got married, my oldest son, I used to concern myself with if they had enough money. .... I think when your kids are small... you make sure they have what they need. As they get older, it does not change that much. You still are concerned that they have everything they need and things are going well with them, [that] they are comfortable in their marriage and happy... That never changes. (Duke)

Fathers also talked of "helping out" adult children with mundane daily tasks such as childcare, pet care, moving furniture, and home repair. Consider the following excerpts.

They call on me sometimes to do things for them, and that's fine...they call me and I do it... just whatever they want, whatever they need for me to do, take the children somewhere, watch the children, or anything like that. Go watch the children play ball some place, stuff like that. (Ron)

I'm here...I talk to them.... I keep the dogs for my middle daughter.... She has two dogs. I took her piano down to her.... We provided help... with landscaping, particularly my wife. (Jacob)

We are working with our youngest daughter almost on a daily basis helping her plan her wedding.... We have spent a lot of time doing that.... We just recently have gotten back from Florida helping our youngest daughter. She bought a new house and we were helping her getting set up. We spent about a week or so working down there... doing all the things you do when moving into a new house. (Charles)

In summary, the midlife fathers in this study described being a father as a continuation of their earlier fatherhood identity. They also described ways that they continued to function as fathers by providing advice and assistance with life experiences. However, the fathers in this study experienced this continuity in creative tension with a profound sense of change sometimes described as an evolution of the relationship. The next section will explore participants' descriptions of that experience of change in the fatherhood relationship.

#### *Change in the Father-Child Relationship*

There is an evolution of the relationship that occurs... now they are an adult. They have their own family. They have established themselves pretty much in their lives.

They have their own right to, I guess, do things, maybe things like taking on risks and challenges, and you try to, I think, not worry so much about giving them direction in what they have to do or don't do or when to do... all that does not seem to be the focus of the relationship. (Charles)

Fathers in this study described profound changes in the parental relationship as a part of the experience of fatherhood at midlife. Analysis of their descriptions of change revealed three sub themes: relinquishment of parental responsibilities, respecting boundaries, and collegiality. These changes are described below in the words of the participants.

*Relinquishing parental responsibility: "Backing off"*

One sub theme of change was associated with relinquishing primary parental responsibilities, especially responsibilities for discipline or correction. Participants noted the importance of "backing off" from the disciplinary or corrective responsibilities of fatherhood in order to maintain the relationship. For example, Devin stated, "They can never be independent truly if you don't *back off* [italics added] a little bit at least... I mean, they can leave your life if you don't." Another father described the importance of not imposing on adult children.

You cannot impose anything, and I don't think you could anyway. It's a danger to try to. I think the more you try to impose the more you're going to drive them away potentially. Plus, it puts your own child in a terrible situation because it pits your child potentially against their spouse... That is just not healthy. (Jacob)

Similarly, another father discussed his efforts to coordinate communication with his adult daughter while she traveled abroad.

We told her when she left that we realized we couldn't do a lot of dictating because, "you are of age and are going to be off on your own in Australia, but we do ask that you call us once a week so that we at least know where you are." (Peter)

Other fathers noted that they had "mellowed" over the years and were feeling less need to direct or correct their adult children. Duke reported, "I guess as I got older I mellowed a little more, and when the youngest one came along, dad wasn't quite as tough as he was with the two older boys." Another father described the change this way.

I feel that I have mellowed out a whole lot... [I] wasn't tolerant, wasn't open to comment, input, stuff like that. I think I am a lot more now.... [I am] more available... and, if not [non]-judgmental, at least not critical... I try not to criticize either one of them at all. (Joe)

For several fathers the freedom from the need to direct their children allowed the parental relationship to evolve toward a more positive focus.

I think [the relationship] evolves to the point where they take responsibility for their own lives and make good choices and decisions. I guess that gives you a certain amount of freedom to not worry too much about them. (Charles)

When they were very young I felt a significant responsibility for their day-to-day development and their security and providing for all of their needs. As they have grown older, obviously that requirement has gone away as they've become more responsible and self reliant... it's been a pleasurable experience, I think, to be able

to realize, "Okay, you can pull back from that activity", it is no longer necessary or wanted... and then to have the role more evolve into a positive dealing. (Devin)

This positive focus allowed participants to be more supportive, nonjudgmental, and less critical or directive. Describing his current involvement with his adult children, Joe said, "I am more involved as a supporter, and hopefully counselor, non-judgmental observer, trying to be non-judgmental." Another participant stated,

My involvement with my children at the present is more in the nature of someone who is here to talk to them when they need to talk to somebody or if they want to talk to me and to offer some advice if sought and to offer a financial back-stop.

That's where I am now. (Jacob)

Participants also described a growing interest in simply enjoying the relationship with their adult children, an interest that seemed to grow from their newly acquired freedom from disciplinary responsibilities. This interest in "just being with them" versus "doing for them" was especially pronounced in fathers' relationships with grandchildren.

Particularly when I was younger anyway I thought my primary role was ...more of the bread winner and kind of the enforcer...but with the grandchildren particularly, I think you kind of look at [toddler grandchild], you watch his movements, and see him change from week to week... to see him develop, I really appreciate that.

(Daniel)

Another father described a shift in parental role from correcting behaviors to just enjoying the relationship that became most prominent with the advent of grandchildren.

I think as a parent you have more of the disciplinarian thread woven through your relationship. As a grandparent, that is sort of down on the scale. You don't let them get away with things you shouldn't and do things that are wrong, but you are more into enjoying them and having the time with them. You are not worried so much about if they throw their green beans in the floor and that kind of stuff. There is maybe not quite so much emphasis on discipline and so forth as it was with your child... just this experience of being with them. (Charles)

Daniel also acknowledged his ongoing struggle with this change.

I've had "go to lunch with [adult daughters]" down in my things to do... I guess we went out to eat...one time, just for lunch. And I wrote it down and said, "I'm going to call them up and just go do that spur of the moment." Well, that was six months and I haven't done that.... [But] that is getting better. (Daniel).

Another participant also expressed a desire for their adult children to become more appreciative of the importance of relationship or just being together.

I guess for the most part, kids tend to not call unless they need something... Some friends of ours... They are always saying the same thing, "The kids called last night. They needed something." I guess that's pretty much standard for people my age when the kids are grown. They're either looking for a baby sitter or something (chuckling).... Every once in a while one of the kids will call and say, "Just wanted to check on you and see how you are doing." .... Well, I like to hear that. I like for them to call just to check on us and see how we're doing. (Duke)

Thus, participants experienced change described as an evolution in the fatherhood relationship. This evolution required that they relinquish their primary parental responsibilities. Freed from the tasks and obligations of fatherhood, these fathers seemed to assume a more relational orientation. They backed off, mellowed out, and simply began enjoying the relationship with their adult children and their grandchildren.

*Respecting boundaries: "You need to accommodate."*

You discuss your hopes and aspirations for them, but you have to leave them enough room and freedom so that they can decide themselves what their hopes and aspirations are. You cannot impose anything... You need to accommodate. (Jacob)

A second sub theme that emerged from participants' descriptions of change pertained to the accommodation of the adult child's emerging independence through the negotiation of new boundaries in the relationship. Several fathers described having an ongoing interest in the welfare of their children and wanting to offer advice while recognizing there were limits to their influence. One father discussed the importance of not "butting in" regarding the relationship of his daughter and son-in-law.

I can offer advice from my perspective and my age and what I have gone through.

But on the same token, I am really not a member of that particular family unit, but I do have an interest in their welfare. I guess that is the best way to put it... You want their marriage to be successful...which means you shouldn't butt in too much.

(Jacob)

Another father described his experience of trying not to "overstep his bounds" when advising his adult children regarding a grandchild's academic problems.



Without overstepping our bounds. we were pretty direct.... We just offered a lot of our own opinions. They will take it or leave it.... They have their own lives to lead and they certainly need to make their decisions. And when you see them make decisions this close, and you can see them doing things all the time, and you just go, "Maybe we wouldn't have quite done it that way," but that's their own business, you know. See, so we really try to (pause)...if they ask us for advice, we will be glad to give it. (Daniel)

One father also described limits regarding the potential topics for advising:

There are certain areas you don't get into (pause) ... you're intruding.... with respect to my oldest daughter... she had a dating relationship which she thought was going to go further than it did. It was painful to her... My view of that relationship or what I thought of the other person was not something I should be a sounding board for.... I can't intrude in that area because the important thing is what makes her happy. (Jacob).

Fathers also acknowledged the ambiguity of the boundaries, of deciding when and how much to intervene with their adult children. For example, Charles noted, "We don't have a guidebook or rule book that we use, you know. I guess it comes from our upbringing and life experiences... certainly there is no set of rules that we have." Another father put it this way:

I don't think there are rules.... There are no rules as to when I [offer an opinion] and when I don't. It is more of a situation where I feel comfortable.... It may not be the biggest thing. If I feel comfortable saying something then I will say it. If I don't feel

comfortable or I feel like this is an area where I shouldn't be sticking my nose in or this is an area they are going to have to work out for themselves or the timing isn't appropriate... I don't say anything. (Jacob)

Another father described boundary setting in relation to setting appropriate limits and avoiding being taken advantage of.

If I've judged that I am being expected to do something that is not my place to be expected to do, I can be resentful... That is probably the only area that gets me fired up is if I think I'm not being appreciated, that I'm just a source... or, "There, I'll just call dad and he'll take care of it", even if it is not mine to take care of. I tend to then give that back to them and tell them, "No, this is not my problem. This is your problem. (Peter)

Still another father described boundaries when deciding when and how to provide material supports.

We try not to go overboard by doing things that they themselves should be responsible for. We don't lavish gifts of money on them or things like that, but it is more being there to help them with things like moving and taking care of the children, the grandbabies, and things like that as opposed to lavish gifts or those kinds of things... Our relationship evolves a little bit as we go along too. It changes a little bit. They begin to take on the financial responsibilities and other responsibilities, which they should as adults. We still are there.... If they got in a crisis situation where they had to have food and shelter and so forth we are going to give it to them, but once they are up making their own living and incomes and so

forth they are going to have to decide how they want to handle that. We are not going to be buying their cars and houses and paying for vacations and stuff like that.... That is just not part of the things we are going to do. (Charles)

For Charles, boundary setting was an important consideration in the ongoing growth of his adult children and his grandchildren.

I thought about this when my granddaughter came... I said, "Well, you know, it would be great to set up an educational trust fund for this child." But then I thought about that for a minute, and I said, "Well, I really don't want to take that away from her father and mother, for them to do that." Because I think they need to have "one", the responsibility, and "two", the satisfaction of having done it. I think for them that is an achievement that they need to realize in their lives. So there's, yeah there's boundaries you've got to set.

There were also limits to how much time Charles would spend helping his adult children.

I certainly feel good about being able to [help out]. After a while though you go, stay, work, and do all this, but you want to get away and have some time of your own, you know? You don't want to have a steady diet of it constantly day in and day out. A couple of weeks or so is about enough of a period. Then you take go and take a little time for yourself. (Charles)

In some ways, respecting boundaries was a struggle.

I don't know if you ever get over your relationship of a child with a father, if the parents ever recognize that the kids are self sufficient and can do things on their own. It's hard to change roles. I think it takes a long time to do that. (Daniel)

However, in many ways respecting boundaries was a pleasant and easy task. Daniel also described how nice it was to play with grandchildren without having to embrace full responsibility for them, “You can just give him back to the parents. That’s the real nice part sometimes.... Okay, ‘I’ve had enough now.’ ... You play with him...then, ‘you can go back to your parents now.’” Another father described his surprise at the relative ease of the transition into midlife fatherhood.

I guess I am a little surprised that it has been this easy to allow them to become independent.... Seeing them mature and realizing that there were certain aspects of our relationship that it was time, it was time that they should change.... I think it was a fairly easy process. So I am a little surprised at how easy and to what extent both my wife and I were able to transition from one phase to another. (Devin)

Another father expressed his contentment with simply letting his son follow his own career dreams.

My youngest son... is doing just exactly what he wants to do. It is not necessarily what dad wanted him to do. I thought he would have made a real good engineer, but he preferred to do this and has been quite successful at it. (Duke)

Still another father described his differences with his son regarding food preferences as a source of fun and interest in the relationship.

We sure don't have the same likes in food. Some of the restaurants that he thinks is wonderful that we have tried, well (laughing)... he doesn't have my taste in food, let's put it that way...but I'm sure I've drug him to places that he will never go back

to too, so that part is fun. It's interesting to see the things that he likes and how they vary from the things I like too. (Josh)

In summary, the fathers in this study experienced change in the father-child relationship through various concerns about accommodating appropriate boundaries with their adult children. They wanted to be careful not to “intrude”, “overstep bounds”, or “butt in”. They described boundary accommodation as an ambiguous endeavor that brought both challenges and rewards. They wanted to be sure that they did not give “lavishly” to their children and detract from their children’s experience of growing independence or allow their children to take advantage of them. Yet, they also described the various rewards of having limits to their responsibility with their children. Overall, accommodation was a relational imperative for these fathers. As Jacob acknowledged, “I think it's something that you have to do. I don't see how you can do it otherwise.”

*Collegiality: “Not so much a father, but a good friend”*

A third sub theme regarding change in the fatherhood relationship pertained to growing collegiality, the establishment of a more egalitarian relationship. Most of the fathers in this study described their relationships with their adult children as more collegial, more mutually influential, and more like a personal friend. Several fathers discussed working with their adult children as professional colleagues, either formally or informally.

I think I can help him now in a way different from the way I would have tried that 10 years ago. And help him as a colleague as opposed to a charge... it means that

being in a business environment, I would not particularly treat him as my son. I would treat him as a fellow worker, a professional. (Joe)

Well, I'm the sounding board for my oldest daughter because we have the same profession. She will call and ask me questions regarding what she's doing and seek my advice on what I do and whether her thinking is sound or whether it isn't sound... and from that standpoint... It's more collegial... it's collegial in that it is the same advice that I offer her within the professional setting that I would offer any other person who would call me and seek advice regarding the performance of a job. (Jacob)

With [an adult daughter and son-in-law]... working in the business, I am involved with them on a day-to-day basis... One of the real neat things I like about having a business of our own is... [having] kids wandering through the business during the day sometimes. S [daughter, 37] was just in there today meeting her husband. She came by and gave me a hug... It's kind of neat (Daniel).”

Participants spoke of how the relationship with their adult children had evolved into more of a friendship in which father and adult child played together as friends.

It's more that as a person rather than as a parent [that] I am able to enjoy them... there comes a time, I think, as they are developing where you begin to... genuinely enjoy them just as intelligent and knowledgeable human beings. (Devin)

I guess [I'm] not so much a father anymore but a good friend. [Son] is somebody I can have a relationship with, go out and go fishing with, you know, just have a good

time. Not so much as a father and son but just as a good friend... As an individual just like I would some other friend. (Josh)

One thing I have noticed when I am together with my two other sons... whether riding motorcycles or just going fishing or something... they kind of forget that I am pushing 60 years old... they think of me as just another one of the guys... I guess that's a good thing in a way... Sometimes it's not easy for a 58-year-old man to keep up with a 25-year-old and 35-year-old... [But] it's good because they know I'm their dad but they don't think of me in terms of getting old. (Duke)

Participants also described the relationship as mutually influential.

I would say at this time in my life the children help me more than I help them... they'll just do things that I don't even ask them to do. My oldest daughter right now is helping me remodel the house, things like that... She's the one who started it... She brought the paint and everything. (Ron)

I mean he [adult son] has influenced me as much as I have influenced him because of things he has done that I remember... I have changed my way of doing things because of him... the way I do things and the way I see things, especially in music. I have never been much of a music fan and... he has shown me a new world, you know. (Josh).

My oldest daughter [medical researcher]... advises us even on things that affect our lives... She clearly feels very comfortable that she's much more knowledgeable about, for example, the impact on the human body of certain things. And she feels

very comfortable saying, 'If you will do this, this, and this, it will have this result for you and I really think you ought to do that. (Devin)

Devin went on to clarify the evolution of this mutuality in the relationship.

I think as young children... they didn't feel comfortable or didn't feel the need... but they didn't so much offer advice, which sometimes now they do... I think there was perhaps a point where... there was a transition from, on their part [being] concerned about making us comfortable or something... And it was almost as if they had discussed it because [advice] suddenly came from both of them. (Devin)

In summary, midlife fathers in this study experienced an evolution in the parental relationship as their children entered adulthood. This evolution was experienced as a chance to back off from the primary responsibility for parental guidance, to mellow out and to just enjoy the relationship with their adult children. Fathers also described the mutual accommodation of new boundaries of responsibility in the relationship. Finally, fathers described their emergent relationships as more collegial, mutually supportive, and positive. Summarizing the first theme, fatherhood at midlife consisted of accommodating both continuity and change in the father-child relationship. While some things stayed the same, other things changed dramatically. Fathers indicated that their identity as father and their loving commitment to their children's welfare remained immutable. They continued to "help out" their adult children in whatever way they might be genuinely needed. However, fathers also acknowledged substantial change; even an evolution in the relationship, brought about by the need to accommodate their children's evolving autonomy. This evolution was thematically described as backing off, respecting boundaries, and building collegiality. The



next section explicates the second major theme of fatherhood at midlife: the validation that occurred as fathers affirmed both satisfaction and loss in their evolving relationships with their adult children.

*Validation: Satisfaction and Loss*

I guess that it's kind of two-fold. It's good to know the kids are off on their own and they don't really need your support, but at the same time it can make things a little bit lonely for you too.... I guess it's a good thing in a way. Kids feel like they don't need their dad... but at the same time, you like to hear from them from time to time.

(Duke)

The second major theme emerging from midlife fathers' descriptions was a sense of personal validation associated with the affirmation of the successes of fatherhood while accepting the inevitable disappointments and loss. The experience was bipolar or "two-fold". Fathers expressed profound satisfaction with themselves and their children while at the same time acknowledging some regrets. Fathers affirmed their success as fathers in spite of missing their children and feeling less important to them. The next section will explore these themes through the words of the participants.

*Satisfaction*

*Satisfaction with children: "Reveling in their achievements"*

"To enjoy my young-uns with hands off... Just revel in their achievements. I have told each and every one of my independent...children how proud I am of what they have decided to do." (Peter)

The above quote constituted one father's response when asked about the meaning of fatherhood at midlife. Satisfaction with children constituted a strong sub theme of satisfaction. Fathers in this study described a profound sense of satisfaction and contentment that stemmed from their pride in their children's professional and personal development. Fathers expressed pride in their children's educational and career accomplishments as well as their independence, responsibility, and character development. In other words, fathers expressed pride in both what their children had done and who they had become.

Satisfaction with accomplishments could be seen in several fathers who expressed pride in their children's educational and career development. For example, Josh shared, "You get to go see [son] perform [musically], and it makes you proud. A lot of people can't say that so I feel very blessed that he has done so well." Ron declared, "They all make more money than I ever dreamed of making. Their starting salaries were probably as good as my salary when I quit...[It is] wonderful." Ron later expanded his thoughts.

They're just good kids, and it's good to just watch them and see how they're doing, you know... I've got an R.N. and a P.A. My son is a lieutenant ... at the security department [of an engineering research facility]. D [daughter] is a housewife. She has done some teaching when they have needed a teacher in the church school...

They all went to college... I don't know how we did it, but we did. (Ron)

Other fathers expressed similar satisfaction with their children's accomplishments.

It seems like in every job situation there was some kind of upheaval, and he [son] ended up with all the "reject workers." And he turned them around. His became the

team to be on. That happened at least twice, three times I think. So he's got some leadership there. (Joe)

I certainly enjoy being around them... they are both very intelligent people and very knowledgeable about what is going on, so it is very interesting to discuss view points on things with them.... it's very interesting to hear their slant on things.

(Devin)

They have done well and they have moved on and bought them a really nice house on the lake. Maybe dad has helped in a lot of ways to get them there, I don't know.

They have done well, and I am real proud of them. (Duke)

In a similar vein, Daniel expressed satisfaction with knowing that his children were hard workers. For him this meant, "I was a sensational parent (chuckling)... Passed on my values to them... you don't have to make a lot of money or anything.... [Just] enjoy what they're doing and be hard working... just good citizens who make a contribution"

Several fathers expressed satisfaction stemming from their children's evolving financial independence. As Ron stated, "They're all independent. They really don't need anything from me monetarily or anything like that." Josh concurred with this sentiment.

I think I've raised him well and he's been able to go away from home. I know a lot of people; their children just kind of stay there and depend on them all the time. M [son] has always been.... very independent and taking care of himself. (Josh)

Other fathers noted the satisfaction of being free from the responsibility of child support. Peter confessed, "I really am happy when they are gone and on their own... I am happy they're not physically under foot sometimes." Several fathers concurred with this sentiment.

Since I have gotten older and the kids have moved out, I tend to have a little time to do some of the things I didn't have time to do when the kids were smaller... My wife and I, we like to get out on the weekends and take little day trips and so forth. We enjoy raising horses. We raise a few horses on our farm. I have a [motorcycle] that I like to get out and ride. Both the boys have [motorcycles]. We work towards the three of us getting together for a ride once in a while. (Duke)

Well, we're free. It's kind of like before you're married again; I mean... you're not depended on so much. You're free to do what you want.... It's kind of the best of two worlds. You can have him when you want him and then have your own freedom too. So that works out well. (Josh)

Apart from satisfaction with children's accomplishments, fathers in this study also expressed profound satisfaction stemming from their children's personal development. For example, while Ron was proud of his children's accomplishments, he also clarified, "All I wanted from mine was to grow up and be good human beings, and they all seem to be doing that, so that's good enough." Other fathers shared similar experiences.

Seeing them do well is another thing I admire about them... watching them grow from little boys into manhood and becoming a man and being a responsible man, the oldest one particularly as a parent. Sitting back and watching them mature. (Duke)

To say it a different way, if they weren't my daughters... and I found myself having an opportunity to have dinner with them and to hear their view points on things and so forth... I would readily welcome the opportunity because they are both very interesting people. (Devin)

I know like S [daughter] was always worried... she'd say, "I'll never be a good parent" but she's been a wonderful mother. She really has.... I have sure been pleased to see that. I think K [daughter] will be a great mother and R [daughter] has [become one]. I really feel awful good about that. (Daniel)

Well, it's fun just to sit back and watch him develop. That, you know, I can be a part of him and he not even know it by just watching him progress... it is just exciting to see him mature and develop and this-how can I say it? - It's just exciting to sit back and watch him. (Josh)

*Satisfaction with father involvement: "My job is complete."*

It's kind of like I have been retired as a father, you know. My job is complete.... I have done all I can do for him. I can't improve on him anymore. He is his own person.... I'm content.... I'm satisfied with letting him go. (Josh)

A second sub theme emerging from the data pertained to fathers' satisfaction with their work as a father. Fathers in this study described a profound satisfaction and deep contentment associated with a sense of accomplishment or a "job well done." As Duke reported, "It's a good feeling when you think you have done a pretty good job." Other fathers expressed similar feelings.

I get a lot of satisfaction from helping them through these life experiences and giving them assistance.... To see [my] children get established in life and become independent and get set up and go on their life journeys and to be able to help them with that, you know, to me, is gratifying, (Charles)

I think this is one of the real nice periods of time now. They are all on their own. They are pretty well self-sufficient... It is really nice with the grandchildren now at this stage.... It is just kind of a joyous time for us. (Daniel)

I think that was a good example of what you do, [not] just stick [parents] in a nursing home and forget them.... That just because you have to put yourself out a little bit, that doesn't mean that you don't do it.... So I think that was a good example for our kids. (Joe)

One father clarified that his satisfaction was derived not so much from trying to feel good about himself, but rather from the sense of having fulfilled his duty. Ron stated, "I never thought about feeling good as a father. I just always thought, 'they're mine, that's what I'm supposed to do.' I never thought about me feeling good about it." Nevertheless, Ron's satisfaction was no less than other fathers as he went on to say, "As far as I'm concerned, I'm satisfied. I have done as well as a lot of people with an education... I seem to have everything."

*Satisfaction through personal growth: "I proved everybody wrong."*

Finally, several fathers noted the satisfaction they gained from the personal growth garnered from their involvement with their children over the years.

Having a child at first was very scary to me. I never thought about being a parent before. It scared me to death. Once I saw him that first day, there was just nothing like him, you know. It has been a wonderful experience. I wouldn't trade it for anything. (Josh)

You sit and think about all the bumps along the way. They sure were worth it... I experienced a divorce many years ago... I got custody of my [two] boys. To reflect back on the bad times and then to look at how things have turned out, it makes me very proud... Maybe you have to see some bad times to appreciate the good ones.... My first wife missed out on a whole lot of things. (Duke)

I guess I am a little surprised that it has been this easy to allow them to become independent... Seeing them mature and realizing that there were certain aspects of our relationship that [meant] ... it was time that they should change... I think it was a fairly easy process. So I am a little surprised at how easy and to what extent both my wife and I were able to transition from one phase to another. (Devin)

Satisfaction from personal growth was further evident in this father's description of exceeding the expectations of others in the community regarding the viability of his marriage and fathering abilities.

We stayed married and we were young. As a matter of fact, too young according to everybody else. I had a college professor come over to my little shop out back and told me how much he liked my little studio. I said, "What are you talking about, studio?" He says, "This." I says, "Oh, you mean my blacksmith shop?" I was just joshing him, you know? He said he came over to apologize to me and to say he was wrong. He said I proved everybody wrong.... I probably shouldn't have accomplished the things that I did with my family, I imagine. I was a wild young man, but you grow up when you start having babies.... People thought they were

going to have to help us because we were so young. From day one I helped take care of the babies. Nobody had to teach me anything. (Ron)

In summary, a major theme for fathers in this study concerned their profound sense of satisfaction derived from seeing their children develop into successful, autonomous human beings. Fathers felt validated as fathers as they reveled in their children's achievements. However, this satisfaction was expressed in tension with a sense of loss and regret. This loss will be explored in the next section.

### *Loss*

#### *Lost opportunity: "Regrets"*

"I don't think I really appreciated the kids when they were young and growing up."

(Daniel)

This candid statement reflected the sentiments of many of the fathers in this study. Most of the fathers in this study expressed the theme of *Loss* as regret regarding some of their interactions with their children when they were dependent. Most of these regrets reflected the fathers' current maturity and wisdom honed from years of experience in parenting. For example, one father noted that if he had it to do over again, he would spend more time with his son.

Everybody says that when you get older and you look back there is so much you would change. I would find more time for him - try to.... I would have found some way to be with him more or do more with him. (Josh)



Other fathers reflected on ways they would improve communication with their children by being more open to input, listening more effectively; and establishing more direct lines of communication.

In retrospect... I was more of an executive than I was a dad... I wasn't around them much... wasn't tolerant, wasn't open to comment, input, stuff like that... so, there still isn't a whole lot of idle chit- chat... just undirected talk, and discussion, and sharing of ideas and feelings and stuff like that... I don't think that is one of the more desirable aspects. (Joe)

Thinking back ... I say that with perhaps a little regret and sadness - maybe some of those opportunities [for dialogue] along the way were missed and I should have been listening more when I was offering my own words of wisdom to them. (Devin)

I often wonder if P [wife] wasn't here if I would... if they would call me or if I would to step out and call them. For most of our adult life... the girls have been communicating through her, and she will... then tell me what is going on in their lives a lot. I mean, that's, that's just kind of been the, the way we have operated... that's still the way we operate. (Daniel)

Fathers in this study also noted that they would prefer to have been more encouraging and supportive.

When I look back, I recognize some of the mistakes I have made. All parents make mistakes and see things after and maybe wish they had done some things different.

There were times when I was probably a little tougher on my two older boys than I

should've been... I wished I hadn't been as harsh at times... I regret some of that now. (Duke)

He [youngest son] has tremendous potential. He is held back by some self-image stuff. I do pretty much put the blame for that at my feet. That is a regret that I have... as I recall, we were always pushing him to be what he could be, what he knew he could be. Maybe the message coming through was that he was not very good. (Joe)

Overall, many fathers in this study shared a common theme of regret over lost opportunities for more effective parenting. While deeply satisfied with fathering on the main, they each acknowledged room for improvement, some sense of disappointment.

*Loss of child's daily presence: "Missing them"*

"I really miss him. They grow up so fast. I wish I had more time." (Josh)

Several fathers in this study described a sense of loss from the absence of the child's daily presence in their lives. This loss constituted as second sub theme exemplified in the following excerpts.

Well, right now, of course he works and I don't see him very often any more, probably once a week or so... And when he does come home, it seems like it is just for a short time and then he's off doing his own thing again. (Josh)

It's good to know the kids are off on their own and they don't really need your support, but at the same time it can make things a little bit lonely for you too. If I don't hear from somebody, either my daughter-in-law or my son or my youngest

son, if I don't hear from them every few days it kind of aggravates you because it looks like the kids would call. (Duke)

The oldest was the first to go away to college... We [father and spouse] both went up there with her. When the day was done and I was to leave her in the dorm, she could tell by the expression on my face, she said, "Dad, if you cry I'm going to cry, so go sit in the car." So, that's what I did. (Peter)

Later in the interview, Peter acknowledged an ongoing sense of loss over his children's absence as he shared, "When the first child was away at college, that was kind of emotional. The first child to go to war, that was emotional... I can't really speak very long about [daughter stationed in Baghdad] without cracking my voice."

Most fathers in this study acknowledged that the absence of the children was part of the experience of fatherhood for them even when it did not elicit deep sadness. "I don't feel remorse or anything about our current situation. It just would be nice to see them more often" (Devin). Even fathers who saw their children regularly acknowledged missing the joys of early childhood years. As Ron reflected, "I believe I was my happiest when [wife] was pregnant, and when the baby came I got even happier if that is possible." Thus, fathers in this study expressed various levels of loss in missing the daily presence of their children.

*Loss of power and influence: "Not really needed"*

"They don't really need me other than just [to] know that I'm around." (Duke)

A third sub theme consisted of fathers' experiences with a loss of influence and power in their relationship with their adult child. This appeared to be the flipside of the relinquishment of responsibility. With freedom from responsibility came a reduction or loss

in power. Jacob described this experience poignantly, “At times you may tell them that, that you think they are making a mistake, but you don't have the power to prevent it. You don't have the power to prevent that.” Another father noted the ambiguity of being needed less.

I know the day will come when... Well, they're actually there. They don't really need me other than just know that I'm around.... I guess it's a good thing in a way. Kids feel like they don't need their dad or mom or this or that, but at the same time, you like to hear from them from time to time. (Duke)

Another father expressed a sense of loss in status and importance in his son's life. I like to be involved in things he is involved in, when we can build things together or fix his car or just to know that he kind of needs me too as much as I need him.... Yeah, I like to feel important to him. You know, I've been with him so long raising him up to this age; it's kind of hard.... He has his own friends and that's what he does. I think we're an afterthought. (Josh)

In summary, the main theme of Loss was expressed by the fathers in this study as regrets over early fathering, missing the child's presence, and loss of power and influence. In other words, an essential part of the experience of fatherhood at midlife for the participants was a sense of loss of the opportunity to parent differently, “missing them”, and feeling “not needed”.

In summary, fathers in this study expressed a profound sense of personal validation stemming from the satisfaction of successful father involvement. Satisfaction was accompanied by a sense of loss though the satisfaction far exceeded the regrets or

disappointments. Fathers expressed profound satisfaction with their children's personal and professional accomplishments, both what their children had done and who they had become. Fathers also experienced loss expressed as regrets over past parenting mistakes, missing the physical presence of their children, and loss of power and influence in the relationship. Overall, fathers in this study described substantially greater satisfaction than loss, which prompted a strong sense of personal validation of their fatherhood identity. This sense of validation supported their experience of *Generativity*, the third major theme explored in the next section.

*Generativity: Legacy and Despair*

[To] have the respect of the children and have them feel good about their dad... I think that is probably one of the most important things to me now at this time... because your children are your legacy and to me they represent all the good I ever did... To me, it's the biggest contribution you can make in life. (Duke)

A third major theme emerging from participants' descriptions pertained to perceptions regarding the legacy these fathers were passing on to future generations. Fathers expressed a strong desire to "pass on" their values to their children and a profound sense of fulfillment from their contribution to future generations through their children. In a similar vein, fathers expressed ongoing hopes and dreams for their children and grandchildren. The hope and optimism engendered by a sense of legacy was held in contrast to fathers' imaginations of what life would have been like without children and without the fulfillment that fatherhood brings. In this section I explore this bipolar theme of *Generativity* through the words of the participants.

## *Legacy*

### *Ongoing influence: "Passing on" values and commitments*

It kind of feels like when I'm gone I'll still be here through him [son] just like I am to my dad... It sounds kind of corny, doesn't it? ... I don't know how [else] to say it.

Just... somehow my influence will still be here on this earth after I'm gone. (Josh)

"Corny" or not, many fathers in this study expressed a strong sense of fulfillment around the experience of having their values and commitments perpetuated through their children. As Peter stated, "I really do believe that we were intended to raise our children to know what the values are and to encourage them to live those values." Daniel identified the desire to pass on his religious faith, "I think you try to pass on your value system, I think that's the most [important]... your faith, your [religious] belief." Some fathers expressed a desire to pass on perspectives gleaned from their own fathers.

My dad gave me perspective at the time when I needed it. And that experience has stuck with me ever since, so that is what I am trying to pass on to our kids....

Remember who they are, what they have done, what they are all about... and put that in a perspective and do the right thing. (Joe)

About my father... his parents were divorced early on and he believed in the, you know, the hard work ethic and this kind of thing. I think that's a lot of what we've hopefully passed on to our kids. (Daniel)

Fathers enjoyed seeing themselves, their family values and behaviors, reflected in their children's lives.

He [son] got a compliment on his job from some big wig in Washington D.C. who wrote a letter and said he was the sharpest security guard he has seen. [Son] said, "Well, I didn't do anything but keep my shoes shined." I used to make him shine his shoes like my daddy made me. That's just passed down... Always have clean, neat feet when you can... He does (laughing)... That's wonderful. I did something right... I instilled that in him.

He responds like I would. And that is kind of exciting to see that he would do the same thing or handle something the way I would handle it... It kind of feels like when I'm going I'll still be here through him just like I am to my dad. (Josh)

I guess the biggest thing they [adult children] have learned... is that they can do this... I think they learned that you can get by without having a whole lot of money and still get things done. Just... the example of the way [wife] and I chose to live our lifestyle I think has helped them in their lifestyle. (Peter)

Finally, one father described, only half jokingly, his consideration of the values that would be passed on when he selected his spouse.

When I met my wife, one of the things I realized about her and her family was... this [positive] family support system that they practiced.... one time I told [my wife], "The reason I married you was because of your mother (chuckling)." She's such an extraordinary person, so determined and caring in looking out for the family and so forth. I knew she would pass that on. (Charles)

Thus, fathers in this study described a number of ways in which they felt they would live on through their children. They described a strong sense of satisfaction in knowing that

their influence for good would continue into the future. Moreover, they expressed fulfillment in knowing that their contributions would lead to improvements in the next generation. This perception of generational progression constituted a second sub theme.

*Generational progression: "Improving on me"*

It's just kind of like... he's got part of me and he's got part of [my wife] and expands on both of us. That's kind of thrilling. (Josh)

Fathers described a sense of fulfillment that came from observing their adult children progress and improve on their fatherhood contributions.

My guess is that in time this will be the way that our kids deal with their kids and that will be passed along. And I think that culture provides soundness for not only the kids themselves but for society as a whole. It is one small building block that you contributed. (Charles)

I have taught him something, and I think he has taken part of me. He has [my] good mechanical ability and he's got [my wife's] intelligence, so he has done well. It's just kind of like you're making or molding this person, and he's got part of me and he's got part of [my wife] and expands on both of us. That's kind of thrilling...

That's good. (Josh)

One father expressed his desire for generational improvement as a desire to have his son avoid the embarrassments the father had endured.

My son gets mad at me now because I work on cars and things but I never would let him get that dirty. I guess I should've taught him, but I just didn't want that for him.

I was someplace at a dinner one night and I looked at my hands and I got



embarrassed. I didn't eat any more. I thought they were clean until you got in that nice light. I just didn't want that for him... I just wanted him to be what he is, extremely neat and clean. (Ron)

The desire for progression and improvement included participants' desires to improve on what they had received from their own fathers, to be an even better father.

I have just done what my father done for me and tried to expand on it. Kind of what I'd have liked for my dad to have done for me and didn't do, I've tried to do with Matthew. And I think maybe every generation does that... I hope Matthew will do that with his children. (Josh)

This father elaborated.

My father... would have tried to influence me away from something like [a music career] because at that point in time you can't make a living at music and he would have directed me into something else and tried to influence me... I tried to be open and let Matthew do what he wanted to do and help guide him and do everything I could do that he could succeed in his career choice. (Josh)

One father described this generational progression as eventually coming full circle pushing the father back into the dependent role.

I think... the child ultimately becomes the parent.... You will be dependent upon your children.... It's sort of the way of the world.... If you live long enough, you are going to be in that situation.... I think you raise your children when they are small to become independent because you know you're not going to be around.... I think then once [they] become independent, you are independent of one another. At some

point if you live long enough, you go back to where you are dependent upon your children. (Jacob)

Overall, fathers described an experience of generational progression as part of the experience of generativity. They expressed a desire to see their children embrace and build upon the legacy of values and commitments provided through their parenting. Their hope included aspirations for the futures of their adult children

*Aspirations: "Hopes and dreams"*

A third Legacy sub theme emerged pertaining to fathers' expressed hopes and dreams for their adult children. Father expressed continuing aspirations for their children regarding partners, careers, and life satisfaction. For example, in stating his ongoing concerns about his adult children's welfare, one father identified a multitude of aspirations for them.

You want to see them happy; you want to see them successful. You hope that they won't have major bad things fall their way, tragedies, difficult times.... You want them to have a full life but not a life that is unpleasant.... You want them to have the job they want. You want them to be able to do the things they want to do. You want them to lead the kind of life they want to lead. You want their marriage to be successful.... (Jacob)

Another father expressed similar aspirations for his children.

I guess with my youngest son, I hope that he finds the right girl to marry later on. He is dating a girl right now that my wife and I suspect they may get married. My

wife and her went shopping today. We are real pleased with her. We are kind of hoping he does ask her to marry him. (Duke)

Aspirations also included fathers' hopes about how they themselves would be perceived and remembered.

I am sure I could've done more for him, but I did the best I could as we went along. And I hope he's content with that. I don't know what he has to compare that with. I think all kids sit there and say, "I wish they were my parents." You know... maybe your parents were the best after all... I hope Matthew can say that about me. (Josh)

Though their children were grown, the fathers in this study expressed continuing aspirations for their future.

In summary, fathers in this study described a strong sense of fulfillment elicited by their sense of making a significant contribution to future generations. Their legacy included the passing on of their values and commitments through their children with the hope of generational improvement and ongoing aspirations for their children. This sense of generativity was an essential theme in the experience of fatherhood at midlife and can be contrasted to fathers' anticipation of despair if they had not been fathers.

### *Despair*

The experience of legacy was accompanied by allusions to the possibility of despair. While fathers did not explicitly claim to despair, they expressed a profound awareness that life would have less satisfying or meaningful without the experience of fatherhood. Unlike the regrets that accompanied fathers' experiences of satisfaction, reflections of despair were descriptions of loss and pain that might have been but was avoided through fatherhood. For

example, Josh explained, “[Being a father] has been a great experience. I would really be missing something if I had not had this opportunity.” Another father reflected,

I've heard kids have things to say about their parents that aren't too nice. I can't imagine that. Knowing your child does not love you or respect you or doesn't want anything to do with you.... To me, that would probably be really hard (Duke)

Fathers reminisced about unrealized dreams and what might have been had they not had children. For example, one father spoke of missed opportunities for an education.

Actually, I guess, I should have finished college. We got married, so that took care of that. After the baby was born I knew I couldn't go back so I didn't. I had an opportunity to go even later, but that would have interfered with raising them so I didn't do it.... It doesn't bother me that I didn't finish. (Ron)

Fathers expressed similar feelings about their grandchildren.

I can't imagine life without grandchildren... There is nothing like it. Any hobbies that you may have that you enjoy doing; you can just push those aside because grandchildren are rated at the top. (Duke)

This father also expressed fears about the future for their grandchildren

I wonder as time goes on and [the grandchildren] get older with the way times have changed, I wonder how it's going to be for them to educate themselves and how society will be when they are grown... because the world is changing. I worry about that a lot. (Duke)

### *Summary*

The experience of fatherhood at midlife can be thematically described as a process of *Accommodation* of Continuity and Change, *Validation* of Satisfaction and Loss, and *Generativity* through Legacy and Despair. These themes emerge from a ground of Relational Comparison as fathers at midlife compare their current experience as father with previous experiences with their children “when they were young”. Other comparisons include fathers’ references to their own fathers, to other fathers, and to their spouses.

Fathers at midlife describe still being the dad and still helping out while simultaneously accommodating children’s emerging adulthood. This accommodation involves letting go of parental responsibilities, negotiating new boundaries, and just being friends. The experience includes a sense of personal validation that emerges from growing satisfaction with the father-child relationship. This validation includes satisfaction with the accomplishments of one’s children as well as one’s own accomplishments and growth as a father. The satisfaction remains fulfilling even in the face of some losses and regrets. Finally, fatherhood at midlife includes the generativity that comes from the affirmation of the value of one’s contributions to future generations and the assurance of a kind of immortality; that one’s influence will live on through one’s children.

Fathers describe these experiences in comparison to other relational experiences. For example, comprehension of “still being the dad” requires a comparison of being the dad “then” with being the dad “now”. Midlife fathers’ descriptions of their growing appreciation for relationships emerge from a ground of comparison to their spouse’s

relational focus. Typical relational comparisons include comparisons with when children were younger, with own father, with other fathers, and with spouse. In the words of the participants, the experience of midlife fatherhood can be summarized as still being the dad while accommodating adult children's autonomy, celebrating fatherhood successes while acknowledging one's regrets and losses, and affirming one's contributions to future generations all in the context of other relationship experiences.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

Chapter 5 consists of a review of the findings as they relate to current research regarding the impact of father involvement on men's development. Phenomenological studies such as this provide a unique opportunity to assess the relevance of current research to the lived experience of the participants (Polkinghorne, 1989). The review of findings is followed by a discussion of the implications of the study for current understandings of fatherhood at midlife and for mental health work with midlife fathers. Next, a discussion of the limitations of the study including suggestions for future research is followed by the final summary and conclusions.

### *Review of Findings*

*Midlife fathers were "still the dad" after their children were grown.* Father involvement persisted as a central life focus for the midlife fathers in this study. If anything, fatherhood became even more valued by these men as their children grew up. These fathers reported feeling as close as or closer than ever to their children. They reported appreciating their children even more than when their children were younger. While researchers have suggested that mid-life challenges fathers to develop new identities less centered on fathering responsibilities (Robinson & Barret, 1986), the fathers in this study emphasized that their father-child relationships continued to be the central focus of their lives and a core part of their self-identity even in the midst of changes in their parental responsibilities. They emphasized the continuity of their title as "father". Thus, current research as applied to these fathers may not adequately describe the continuity and stability of father involvement for fathers at midlife.

*Fathers at midlife retained a significant sense of responsibility for their children's welfare even after they were grown.* Participants reported continuing to do fatherly things: to “help out” with advice, material support, and mundane daily activities. They expressed a deep commitment to their children and suggested that helping out was their duty, an ongoing responsibility that they willingly accepted. They felt like they still had a lot at stake in their children's lives and felt compelled to do what they could to help their children succeed. While they acknowledged limits to their responsibility and appeared alert to the possibility of children taking advantage of them, the overarching theme for these fathers was their ongoing commitment to continued involvement with their adult children. Such commitment has been theorized to be one of several factors comprising generative fatherhood (Dollahite et al., 1997).

*Midlife also provided fathers an opportunity to back off and just enjoy their relationships with their children.* Fathers in this study reported backing off, mellowing out, and just enjoying the relationship, a process described here as relinquishing parental responsibility. Fathers also described their need to accommodate new boundaries with their adult children and not butt in or overstep bounds. These experiences seem consistent with previous research assertions regarding the need to renegotiate the parental relationship at midlife (Robinson & Barret, 1986). However, the necessary changes did not appear to constitute a developmental crisis in the lives of these fathers. Rather, these fathers celebrated their children's emerging autonomy and enjoyed their newly found freedom from primary parental responsibilities.



*The accommodation of their child's autonomy led to meaningful personal learning and growth for these midlife fathers.* The fathers in this study described their success at accommodating their child's developmental changes as a source of profound satisfaction. They described a process of adapting to their child's growing autonomy by accommodating the needs of in-laws, providing enough but not too much material support, and helping out in ways that seemed developmentally appropriate. In the midst of these changes, fathers also maintained their identity as father. The process they described sounded similar to the adaptation process described by Jean Piaget. For Piaget, adaptation consisted of two processes; the *assimilation* of new experiences that fit the individual's current understanding of the world (schemata) and the *accommodation* of schemata to new experiences that did not fit current ways of understanding the world (Ginsburg & Opper, 1979; Singer & Revenson, 1997). The fathers in this study seemed to adapt to their child's adulthood by assimilating the aspects of father involvement that facilitated an ongoing father-child relationship while accommodating necessary changes in their involvement prompted by the child's maturity. This finding supports Piaget's assertion that the disequilibria that create the cognitive dissonance required for learning may occur at any point in the lifespan (Piaget, 1985).

*Midlife fathers experienced profound satisfaction associated with having successfully launched their children into adulthood.* Reflections upon their current experiences of fatherhood prompted these fathers to express pride not only in their children, but also in their own accomplishments as fathers. In many ways, midlife was an especially good time for fathers in this study as they felt free to more fully enjoy their

relationships with their children. Other researchers have also suggested that midlife may be a “prime” time for fathers (Nydegger & Mittness, 1996). Fathers also enjoyed vicarious success and satisfaction with their children’s accomplishments. It seemed that earlier involvement with their children’s development into adulthood brought the secondary gain of being able to share in their children’s successes. The satisfaction of these fathers was evident in their self-identity, social relationships, careers, and marriages.

*Midlife fathers expressed profound satisfaction with themselves.* Fathers in this study affirmed that fatherhood had impacted the way they perceived themselves. Fathers described a sense of profound satisfaction with both their children and themselves. They reported vicarious satisfaction from observing the success of their children, satisfaction from a sense of accomplishment through fatherhood, and a strong sense of personal growth through overcoming obstacles in fatherhood. Fathers in this study indicated that the experience of being a father continued to make a positive impact on their lives at midlife and that they would undoubtedly be much less satisfied if they had not continued to remain involved with their children.

*Fathers at midlife expressed a growing appreciation of relationships.* Participants’ descriptions supported research assertions that fatherhood impacts social relationships. Fathers in this study affirmed the importance of their relationship with their spouse. They also affirmed the contributions of family members and friends. Their general consensus seemed to be that they could not have been as successful as fathers without these social supports. As Ron sated, “It took two.” However, these men did not suggest that fatherhood

improved their social relationships. Rather, they tended to see their social relations as improving their capacity to father. This finding contributes a complementary perspective regarding the association of father involvement with improved social relationships. It affirms their interrelatedness of these two variables and suggests caution when predicting causality. It may be that not only do involved fathers have stronger social networks, but that stronger social networks contribute to better father involvement. This assertion has been supported in previous research.

*Father involvement seemed to enhance career satisfaction in fathers at midlife.*

Fathers referred occasionally to their careers as they discussed their midlife fatherhood experience. Generally, they suggested that their career experiences provided a base from which to offer advice or counsel to their children. For example, one attorney father provided professional advice to his attorney daughter. Another father advised his son regarding career opportunities in the father's profession. Only one father suggested that being a father had negatively impacted his career path when he reported that fatherhood had interfered with his plans for college. However, this father quickly added that at this point, he was happy with the choice he had made to go to work to provide for his children. Generally, these findings are consistent with Snarey (1993) who found no reduction in midlife career success associated with fatherhood. In fact, fatherhood appeared to give the careers for men in this study deeper meaning and purpose.

Previous research has also suggested that fathers struggle to balance the demands of work and family (Palkovitz, 2002b). Interestingly, the mid-life fathers in this study did not articulate this struggle in their descriptions of their current experience. While several fathers

suggested this had been a struggle when the children were younger, they did not describe this struggle as an ongoing aspect of fatherhood at mid-life. This evidence suggests that for these fathers the conflict between work and family demands became resolved or substantially less salient at mid-life. It seems likely that lessened parental responsibilities contributed to this change. However, it is still interesting that no father in this study identified freedom from work and family conflicts as a salient aspect of their experience of fatherhood. For these participants freedom from parental responsibilities was described as a factor that provided more time to enjoy children and grandchildren rather than time to pursue career goals. It appears that the priority for these fathers was their families and that any acquired freedom at mid-life was utilized to enhance family relations. This finding contradicts earlier research suggesting that fathers may use work to avoid family responsibilities (Hochschild, 1997, cited in Palkovitz, 2002).

*Father involvement appeared to enhance marital satisfaction for fathers at midlife.*

Fathers in this study frequently referred to fatherhood as a partnership with their spouses. They often saw fatherhood as parenting. Their father involvement appeared to contribute to their overall marital satisfaction. These descriptions were consistent with Snarey's (1993) findings that father involvement in childhood and adolescence contributed to greater marital success. Fathers acknowledged that their success as a father was dependent upon the support of their spouses. Several fathers described spousal relationships that were relatively free of significant conflict, especially around parenting issues. Other fathers described processes of negotiation with their spouses that created constructive resolution of the conflicts that did arise. Each father in this study described a deep appreciation of

his spouse's perspective and a willingness to accept the influence of his spouse in the daily operation of the family. These traits have been suggested to contribute significantly to marital satisfaction and stability (Gottman, 1998).

*Fathers at midlife looked back on their lives and experienced some regrets regarding their father involvement.* Fathers expressed a moderate sense of loss in the form of regrets about past parenting when the children were young. They wished they had spent more time with their children, been more patient and understanding, and more appreciative of the relatively short time they would have with their children as young kids. They also described missing their child's daily presence and a sense of feeling less important or vital to their child. This process of looking back and appraising one's life journey is evident in the literature describing theories of men's development.

For example, Levinson (Levinson, 1978) described the midlife task of reducing the tyranny of the Dream. This task consisted of reassessing previous hopes and aspirations in light of current achievements and possibilities and coming to terms with what seems realistically possible for the remainder of life. Fathers in this study expressed significant elements of self-appraisal regarding their performance as fathers. Participants typically reflected back as they discussed their current experience at mid-life to ascertain the value and success of their work as fathers. They evaluated their fathering when the child was younger based on the current outcome of the child. They assessed the likelihood that their children would carry with them the traditions and values of the family. They contemplated the stability of the father-child relationship and its ongoing significance for their lives. These patterns of self-appraisal seem similar to the process

described by Levinson. These men were letting go of their personal myths about fatherhood and affirming the realities of their daily experience. In the end, they described themselves as what Winnicott (1965) might call “good enough” fathers.

Being “good enough” seemed to release these fathers from the tyranny of the Dream, as the losses they described did not appear to cause significant emotional distress or post-parental distress. This finding seems congruent with previous research suggesting that only a small portion of fathers would be expected to experience pathology at this stage (Lewis et al., 1979). Evidence from this study suggests that concerns about post-parental distress in men may be generally unwarranted as fathers in this study reported significant satisfaction with the launching of their children, a sense of fulfillment rather than distress. Moreover, their ongoing identity as father suggests that the term “post-parental” may be misleading. While they acknowledged the loss of primary parental responsibility, there was no point at which men in this study stopped perceiving themselves primarily as fathers. In summary, the losses associated with being a father were easily overwhelmed by the benefits.

*Midlife fathers expressed a profound sense of generativity through their adult children.* Fathers in this study described their children as their most important contribution to future generations. They described the “passing on” of themselves through their children; passing on of values, lifestyle, and ways of doing things. They felt reassured to know that their children would carry on important values such as religious faith, hard work, a neat physical appearance, making do with available resources, and the importance of family ties. They felt that their adult children represented an improvement

or an expansion on their own contributions to the world just as they had improved on their own fathers. They maintained hopes and dreams for their children suggesting an ongoing building of the legacy. Through their children, these fathers gained reassurance that their lives would continue to have meaning and purpose on into their later years and even after their deaths. This need for *generativity*, the need to help establish and guide the next generation, has been long recognized as an important developmental milestone for men at midlife (Erikson, 1978; Snarey, 1993). The findings in this study generally support the importance of this developmental task.

However, the fathers in this study also gave evidence of other Eriksonian stages such as *intimacy/isolation* and *integrity/despair*. Fathers described how the absence of children from the home freed them to focus energy on reestablishing and developing greater intimacy with their spouses; a task normally ascribed to the *intimacy* stage. Fathers also anticipated greater fulfillment in life and the avoidance of despair through the ongoing development of their adult children. They indicated that it was their children that made their lives worthwhile, a task associated with the *integrity* stage. These findings suggest that the processes begun in earlier stages of development continued for these men at midlife even as they anticipated the developmental tasks that lay ahead. Certainly, midlife for these fathers was a time of further growth and development.

The involvement described by these fathers at midlife supported the relevance of value-based models of father involvement such as generative fatherhood (Dollahite et al., 1997). The fathers in this study defined fatherhood in terms of their ongoing commitment to the welfare of their children even as the children reached adulthood. They described a

willingness to adapt to their children's changing developmental needs and a willingness to provide appropriate supports. They described continuing sacrifice on their children's behalf when needed. They stayed connected and faithfully communicative with their children. Overall, these fathers described their experience of fatherhood at midlife in terms reminiscent of the ethical imperatives described by DolloHITE and colleagues as commitment, choosing creating, consecration, change, connecting, and communication. Thus, the generative model of fatherhood may provide a helpful framework for understanding fatherhood at midlife.

### *Implications*

*Fatherhood still matters for men at midlife.* Midlife fathers in this study continued to experience fatherhood as a salient and essential aspect of their lives even after their children had grown into adulthood. Researchers have noted that midlife and older men tend to be ignored in fatherhood research as though fatherhood no longer has significant meaning for them (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001). This study provides evidence that fatherhood still matters a great deal even in midlife. Father involvement provides an important mechanism by which men may meet their basic developmental needs of intimacy, generativity, and integrity. In short, fatherhood is a way that men may satisfy their need to make a significant contribution.

*The developmental benefits to men of being an involved father may persist into midlife.* The satisfaction expressed by fathers in this study suggests that the benefits that accrued to them through father involvement in children's younger years continue to be evident at midlife. Previous research has suggested potential benefits to fathers of father



involvement including a more positive self-identity, stronger social and family relationships, and better work behavior (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; Palkovitz, 2002b; Strauss & Goldberg, 1999). The findings in this study suggest that this impact continues into midlife. These men reported ongoing satisfaction with their children and themselves, their social and marriage relationships, and their careers. The general consensus from these fathers seemed to be that their lives would be dramatically less meaningful or fulfilling without their children. As one father articulated, “I don't know what I would do without him [son]” (Josh). Thus, the benefits to fathers of father involvement extend into midlife after the children are grown.

*The burdens and losses from involved fatherhood may also persist into midlife.*

For several fathers in this study, regrets from earlier years persisted into midlife. They typically reported wishing they had spent more time with their kids and had been able to better accommodate their developmental level at that time. For some fathers, grandchildren provided the opportunity to “do better” the second time around. Other fathers acknowledged there was “no going back” to undo or fix previous mistakes and they could not really make up for the time they had lost. Generally, these fathers successfully resolved the angst over these matters by acknowledging that overall, they had done well and their “good” had outweighed their “bad”.

However, this evidence suggests that midlife fathers who have been denied access to involvement with their children may be at greater risk for developmental arrest. As father involvement was perceived to play such a significant role in facilitating healthy development in the fathers in this study, it seem reasonable to conclude that fathers

without such experiences may be stymied in their development. For example, low-income non-resident fathers often encounter serious obstacles to father involvement (Coley, 2001). The evidence from this study suggests that these men may also encounter substantial difficulty in negotiating the developmental tasks of midlife. While the experience of contributing meaningfully to their children's lives brought tremendous satisfaction to the fathers in this study, the experience of being ineffective or socially blocked from meaningful father involvement may lead other midlife fathers toward chronic frustration and despair.

*Positive father involvement may provide an avenue of continued personal challenge and growth for men at midlife.* Mental health professionals working with men at midlife may benefit from recognizing the growth potential of facilitating meaningful relationships between midlife men and their adult children. Fathers in this study expressed a commitment to “breaking the cycle” of bad fathering they observed in the world around them. They were aware that being a good father enabled their children to be good parents. One father even suggested that good fathering might ensure that he received good parenting from his children when he became incapable of caring for himself in later years. Evidence from this study reaffirms the value of a systemic approach to men's mental health issues, especially the importance of healthy relationships with children.

Midlife may also be a time when men are uniquely open to therapeutic intervention. As part of their overall satisfaction with fatherhood, fathers in this study expressed a growing appreciation for the value of relationships. Typically, fathers

described themselves as having been more task-oriented earlier in life and having at midlife more appreciation for the relational orientation they perceived in their spouses. This change at midlife may be similar to the “push toward androgyny” described by Gutmann and colleagues (Gutmann, 1987; Gutmann & Huyck, 1994) in which midlife men move toward a more nurturing relational style while their spouses move toward greater independence. This emerging relational orientation may also make men at midlife more amenable to therapeutic interventions emphasizing improvements in relationships. In short, men at midlife may be more likely to value the contributions of individual and family therapy as well as other community-based interventions targeting improved family relations.

*Successful midlife fatherhood is a partnership and requires adequate social supports.* Fathers in this study acknowledged that much of their satisfaction with fatherhood at midlife was tied to the support and recognition they received from their spouse, children, and other friends and family members. One reason fathering still mattered to these participants was the fact that it mattered to other significant people in their lives, especially their spouses. This finding suggests the importance of a stable spousal relationship and/or other adequate social supports for fathers. The fathers in this study readily identified the support of others as a key factor to their ongoing successful father involvement. It seems reasonable that fathers with few social supports encouraging their involvement with their children might be less likely to reap the benefits of father involvement that accrue by midlife.

### *Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research*

This study was limited by the homogeneous nature of the sample. Given that father involvement has been shown to vary widely throughout history and across cultures, it seems probable that the experiential structure of midlife fatherhood may vary similarly. Future research could explore midlife fatherhood from a broader range of cultural and ethnic perspectives to determine if and how the basic thematic structure might change with diverse participants. Similarly, this study examined only fathers in intact marriages. The perspectives of midlife men who were non-resident fathers would provide a beneficial supplement to the findings of this study. Finally, the perspectives of alienated fathers may also contribute to the findings presented here. Coley (2001) has documented some of the obstacles facing low-income non-resident fathers who want to be more involved with their children. Understanding the experiences of midlife fathers who remain estranged from their children may provide important perspectives on the significance of obstructed father involvement for these men's development.

The findings in this study suggest the need for continuing development of current conceptualizations of father involvement to include more subjective expressions. Participant descriptions of father involvement included such non-observable behaviors as thinking about their children, observing them, perceiving their children doing things the way the fathers themselves would do them, talking to their spouses about the children, and dreaming about their children's future. These types of father involvement may be overlooked in typical research examining the impact of discrete father behaviors on child outcomes. Yet, this involvement was profoundly significant to the personal development

of the men in this study. Further research exploring the impact of these more subjectively meaningful expressions of father involvement on both child outcomes and men's development may provide greater insight into why fathers father. The fathers in this study fathered, in part, because it was important to their children and their spouses and both of those relationships mattered to them.

### *Conclusion*

This purpose of this study was to provide a thematic description of the experience of fatherhood for men at midlife with adult children. The thematic structure of fatherhood for the participants consisted of three major themes: *Accommodation: Continuity and Change, Validation: Satisfaction and Loss, and Generativity: Legacy and Despair*. These three themes were grounded in a context of *other relationships*: the relationships with children when they were young, relationship with spouse, relationship with own father, and other fathers. These relationships provided the context to which fathers referred to make sense of their current experience.

In the language of the participants, the experience of fatherhood at midlife consists essentially of still being the dad while accommodating one's children's evolving autonomy, celebrating fatherhood successes while acknowledging disappointments, and affirming the legacy that serves as a buffer against possible despair in later life. These themes occur in the context of other relationship experiences including relationships with the children when they were younger, with one's father, with other fathers, and with one's spouse.

Thus, the experience of fatherhood at midlife is essentially one of still being the dad and still helping out while simultaneously accommodating children's need for autonomy and freedom. This accommodation involves letting go of parental responsibilities, negotiating new boundaries, and just being friends. The experience includes profound satisfaction with the father-child relationship including satisfaction with the accomplishments of one's children as well as one's own accomplishments and growth as a father. This satisfaction remains fulfilling even in the face of some losses and regrets. Finally, fatherhood at midlife includes the affirmation of the value of one's contributions to future generations and the assurance of a kind of immortality; that one's influence will live on through one's children.

This thematic structure provides significant insights into the meaning of fatherhood for men at midlife. Father involvement continued to play a significant role for men at midlife and remains a central focus of daily life. It provides a central organizing theme for men's identities and continues to consume a major portion of their investment of time and resources. Fathers at midlife express abiding satisfaction with their father involvement even while acknowledging some loss and regret. Finally, fathers describe their father involvement as the most significant contribution of their lives. Overall, father involvement remains salient and profoundly meaningful for men at midlife long after the responsibilities of primary care and supervision are over.

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## **Appendices**



## **Appendix A: Results of Bracketing Interview**

The bracketing interview was conducted prior to data collection as a protection against investigator bias. The interviewer asked me the same question that I asked the participants in this study, “ Please take a moment to reflect on your experience of being the father of an adult child and when you're ready please begin by describing this experience to me.” It is important to note, however, that since I was not yet the father of an adult child (both children were still dependent) I described my experience of being the father of an adolescent (16) daughter. This description included my anticipatory experience of fathering her as she reaches adulthood.

Analysis of the bracketing interview revealed four major themes: Changes, Self-Appraisal, Accomplishment, and Loss. These themes seemed to emerge from a background of Past Experience. Descriptions of the main themes generally included references to past experiences; either when child was “little” or before children were born. In this section I describe these themes and illustrate with excerpts from the bracket interview transcript.

### *Ground: Past Father Experience*

The main themes emerged from a ground of past fatherhood experiences. These experiences included past experiences with my child when she was younger, past experiences with own father/mother, and experiences with other fathers. I typically referred to these experiences as a point of comparison to understand my current experience of fatherhood. For example, I referred to “when she was little” to describe changes in the relationship.

When she was really little anytime she wasn't at daycare she was in my supervision or Sharon's and somebody was kind of watching her like a hawk. And that feels okay, but it just changes things.... There is a sense that she really doesn't need me to protect her or to watch over her in the way that at least I think she did when she was younger.

I referred to past experiences with my own father and mother to describe my self-appraisal.

I went through a period of time where I really kind of resented [parents].... And I don't really want her to feel that way about me. I don't like that idea... I want to hope that maybe it was because my dad was a little too protective or too controlling and I had to do that to get away. I'm hoping with my daughter that she has enough independence

I was raised in a good family. I had some good models. It was fairly easy to be a good dad. It was something I always wanted. I remember as a teenager, I knew I wanted to have kids. I wanted to have somebody I could guide and direct and contribute to in some way. I don't think I said it that way at the time. I knew I wanted to be a father.

I referred to experiences with other fathers to describe the changes in self that occurred through fathering.

I remember one patient I worked with for over 1½ years who was my age. I was 36 and he was 36. He had stomach cancer and died. He had teenage kids. They were a little younger than mine. I thought, "Gees, what would it be like if I died? What has

my life been about?" And it got really clear that the only thing that really matters to me is leaving these two kids behind in my place.

I also referred to other parents as a part of the self-appraisal experience.

We have a family down the street from me that I respect. They are very conservative and have a lot of rules in their family.... I just can't imagine living like that. I wouldn't want to be doing that with my kids.

Thus, comparisons to past experiences of parenting seemed to be the context for understanding my fatherhood experience. Next, I explore the main themes revealed in my bracketing interview.

### *Changes*

The theme of Change consisted of two sub themes. These sub themes were changes in the father-child relationship and changes in the self. These sub themes and supporting quotes are explored next.

#### *Changes in relationship*

The first theme that emerged was a sense of change in the relationship with my daughter. I specifically noted feeling less ability and less need to protect her.

I used to feel a stronger need to protect her when she was little than I do now or at least the protection thesis has changed. She's driving. She has her own car. She is gone. She kind of goes where she wants to. We have appropriate limits and stuff, but she spends most of her time on her own and I don't see her or know how she is doing. Whereas when she was really little anytime she wasn't at daycare she was in my supervision or Sharon's and somebody was kind of watching her like a hawk.

And that feels okay, but it just changes things. There is a sense that she really doesn't need me to protect her or to watch over her in the way that at least I think she did when she was younger. I probably feel a need to protect her more than she sees it anyway. I know she can take care of herself for the most part. I know bad things can happen. She could have a car wreck. She could get hurt. But those are things that could happen to any adult at any time, and you can't stop it. So, it just changes the relationship and changes what it means for me to be a father. That protecting piece just isn't there like it used to be.

I also described having less clarity about my role as a father. This included wondering what my daughter needed from me and how to respond.

I keep asking myself what she needs for me to do as a father. What does she need from me? Because she doesn't need me to protect her and tell her what to do and guide her in day-to-day kinds of stuff like I used to.... I don't have to watch her. I don't have to guide her and tell her what to do each day or remind her what to do like we did when she was really little. I think what happens is I keep wandering around with her in that relationship trying to figure out how what she needs from me and when do I need to be there for her because sometimes it becomes clear she really doesn't need me.

I described changes in the closeness in our relationship.

It still feels like we're close but just in a different way. I really don't want her to need me like she did when she was three. That wouldn't feel good. I like the fact

that she is independent and that she has her own mind and that she makes good decisions.

It seemed to me that our relationship was more collegial.

It is still just as close, but it is just a different kind of closeness. She looks to me for guidance on things like career planning and what college to go to and the kind of car to buy. Our dream car is a fun topic. We talk about those kinds of things. It's more like being with another adult, almost like being with a friend at times. It is always clear that she is younger and still my daughter, but the relationship is a lot more adult to adult with moments of regression to parent-child, but they are really very fleeting, but it feels good. It feels like she is ready for that and I'm ready for that.

I also noted that I felt I could trust my maturing daughter to make good decisions and that this helped with letting her go.

I trust her a great deal. I guess that makes it easier to have her get older knowing that I can trust her and that when we let her go or she goes off she is not going to hurt somebody or hurt herself.

#### *Changes in self*

Apart from changes in the relationship, I also noted changes in myself that were experienced as part of fathering a maturing child such as increased self-esteem, confidence, and ability to keep things in perspective.

Every time I observe her I am just amazed at how well she turned out.... She is just really a wonderful kid, and that makes me feel good about who I am. Just the fact that I have really cool kids. It changes how I feel about myself. I think I have more confidence, more self-

esteem. It is like when things get screwed up... when things haven't gone like I wanted, they weren't as devastating as they would have been in an earlier part of my life before I had kids. I keep coming back... You know, I've got a great relationship with my kids. I have a great relationship with my wife.... When those things are in place, the rest is icing. It is okay.

That's a big piece is that [being a father] really helped put things into perspective. It helps you get your priorities, and I think that is a part of it. Having children put all the rest of life into perspective. All of a sudden the other things that seemed so important before children just are not nearly as important as I thought they were.

I described the change in perspective brought about by my commitment to fatherhood as a kind of religious experience.

It is really beyond words. In some ways, I could sit here and just kind of emote....

There is just some "umph" in the whole thing that just, "This is it." It is almost like a religious experience.... You just all of a sudden get this, "Yes, this is what life is about...." And it is a real transforming kind of experience. I think I have had several of those as a father. Holding my daughter when she was a baby or sitting with her at other times. Now even just talking to her and having one of these really deep conversations where I'm like, "God, when did she learn to think like that?" There is just so much more there than I ever imagined. It's like, "This is what it is all about.

I also described a sense of emerging maturity through fatherhood, a sense of personal growth.

I used to feel a little lower than men with teenagers because my kids were little, so I was kind of still a young father, but now I have a kid growing up and especially growing up well, I guess I'm feeling more like I really have become a grown man. Sometimes it kind of surprises me. Like, "How did I get this old and how did I get this far?"

One thing [fatherhood] has done is really helped me put other things into perspective. It has helped me feel more confident as the years have gone by. Initially, it was pretty scary, but as I see my kids grow up and do good, it has been relatively easy. I guess I always worried that fatherhood would be really hard.

### *Self-Appraisal*

Self-appraisal was another theme for my experience of fatherhood. This theme consisted of comparing my fathering with that of my own father and other fathers I had observed and trying to determine if I had done a good job as a father.

One thing to wrestle with all the time is if I've been too indulgent or not set enough... We have a family down the street from me that I respect. They are very conservative and have a lot of rules in their family. Of course, they have four kids, so it's a little different, but I mean, their kids are grounded for something every freaking week. Somebody has done something, gotten in trouble, and gotten grounded every time you turn around. I just can't imagine living like that. I wouldn't want to be doing that with my kids. Every week their grounded for this and grounded for that. We have never grounded our kids. So what does that mean?

I guess I'm trying to figure out if I'm okay. That's part of it. It's like, "Where do I fit in?" .... There are so many different models to fathering out there, so many different ways of doing it.

Self-appraisal included worries about failure as a father. I described my desire to avoid some of the pitfalls I experienced with my father.

You know what I'm worried about too is I think I'm worried that she will feel some of what I felt toward my parents when I was in my early 20s, which was... I went through a period of time where I really kind of resented them.... And I don't really want her to feel that way about me. I don't like that idea.... I want to hope that maybe it was because my dad was a little too protective or too controlling and I had to do that to get away. I'm hoping with my daughter that she has enough independence that she won't feel like she has to get mad and resentful to get some distance, but I don't know that....

The resulting experience was summed this way.

My parents think I'm too indulgent and my neighbors sure think I don't ground my kids enough.... I do wonder sometimes if it will come back to bite me as they get to be adults. I think that is where I'm going. Maybe I didn't train them in the right way somehow and they won't be adequately prepared and I won't know it until they are out there and it's too late. I think sometimes I worry about that. I don't worry about it a lot. It doesn't fit the data I'm getting so far, but I do think about it some.

### *Accomplishment*

A third theme was a strong sense of accomplishment and success as a father.



We are releasing a competent and contributing individual into the world. That is a good kind of feeling. ... I have a lot of pride for her. I think the doubts are about how much influence did I really have and how much credit can I really take. I don't want to get too arrogant about this... For all I know, she may have some serious trouble along the way yet. From what I know now, I just look at her and think, "Hey, I'm a pretty good dad." It seems to be working out okay.

It's like, "This is what it is all about. I contributed to bringing this into being. This is really cool. This person is really a great contribution...." Also being aware of what a sacred gift this person is.

For me, the sense of accomplishment seems enhanced by the change in perspective discussed earlier.

And it got really clear that the only thing that really matters to me is leaving these two kids behind in my place. If I can leave these two kids... To me, that is almost the immortal life.... Leaving two kids behind to replace me in a sense and to contribute... I know that this is my contribution to the world.

### *Loss*

A final theme that emerged from my bracketing interview was worry about potential loss. It was as though my recognition of the sacred giftedness of children triggered an awareness of the possibility of great loss.

My daughter took my son to [local city] to shop for his birthday a few weeks back.... They really had a good time together, but all I could think about the whole

day was the only two people I really care about in the whole world are running around out there in a car together. If something happens to them, everything is gone. I would just have to fight the stuff back and just go do something because it is just the horror of that whole idea because I know it happens.

I also described a sense of lost power or letting go of my fantasies about the power I may have had, especially the power to protect. This seemed to emerge as my daughter became more independent.

It is just not being able to protect her, not being able to take care of her or finding the limits of that, letting her go in that sense. It's not like I have to let her go because she is a prisoner and so I need to open the cage. I don't like that term, but it's more me letting go of my own fantasies about what I can do to take care of her and how much power I have with her and letting go of the power piece. I really can't control her or make sure everything works out for her.

That sense of vulnerability and knowing that I really probably cannot protect them all the time is hard to cope with. As much as I want to, I am just not able. I guess that becomes more the case when they become adults.

I also experienced loss associated with the role changes described earlier.

I keep asking myself what she needs for me to do as a father. What does she need from me? Because she doesn't need me to protect her and tell her what to do and guide her in day-to-day kinds of stuff like I used to.

I experienced regret over the loss of time for reaching unfulfilled goals in fathering.

We were not able to go and do things and buy the kinds of things that I thought I might at midlife.... They've not suffered by any means.... I kind of thought there would be a little more splurging, and it has been tough to come by. I feel like I need to make that up somehow. ... I wonder if that is part of why I'm not looking forward to [launching of child], because it's coming too quickly. If I could get graduated and licensed and get into a career for a few years to give her a few of those things before she left then it would feel okay. I feel like she is gone now before I had a chance to make it up. [Time] is gone. I mean, she is going to graduate from high school before I finish my degree. It's just that the time is gone.

In summary, my bracketing interview revealed four main themes: Change (including changes in the relationship and changes in the self), Self-Appraisal, Accomplishment, and Loss. These four themes emerged from a ground of past fathering experiences including fathering of my child when younger, fathering received from my own father, and parenting observed in other fathers and mothers. These themes were carefully set aside when I interviewed the participants for this study.

## **Appendix B: Informed Consent Statement**

### **The Meaning of Fatherhood at Mid-Life**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

You are invited to participate in a research study examining the experience of fatherhood for mid-life fathers with adult children. The purpose of this study is to describe middle aged fathers' perspectives on their experience of being a father and the meaning of that experience for them. Previous fatherhood research has focused on young fathers with dependent children and this study will provide researchers with the perspectives of mid-life fathers. This study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the researcher's doctoral dissertation.

#### **PARTICIPANT INVOLVEMENT**

Your participation will involve providing an in-depth interview with the researcher about any aspect of your fatherhood experiences that you determine to be meaningful. The researcher will ask you open-ended questions in a relaxed, informal style designed to help you recall and talk about your experiences. You may decline to answer any question and will be encouraged to share only material you choose to share. The interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes.

The interview will be audio taped and written notes may be taken. The tape may be stopped or erased at any time at your request. The audiotape will be professionally transcribed and all personal identifiers will be removed. Following the completion of the transcription of your interview, the audiotape will be erased. Every reasonable effort will be made to hide your identity.

#### **RISKS/BENEFITS**

There are no foreseeable personal risks or benefits to your participation in this study beyond those involved in normal meaningful conversations. No information you share will be used with the intent to harm or to help you. The primary benefits of this study will be to researchers and others seeking a better understanding of the experience of fatherhood for mid-life men.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

The information in the study records will be kept strictly confidential. The researcher will analyze the transcripts with assistance from a group of colleagues who will be bound by the same rules of confidentiality as the researcher. All transcripts, audiotapes, and related data will be stored securely and will be made available only to persons conducting the

study unless you specifically give permission in writing to do otherwise. The audiotapes will be erased following completion of the transcriptions. The principal researcher will securely maintain the transcriptions with all personal identifiers removed. The completed consent forms will be maintained in a secure location at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville for three years and then destroyed. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link any participant to the study.

### **CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, (or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study,) you may contact: T. Paul McAnear at (865) 974 2196 or UT Student Counseling Services Center, 900 Volunteer Blvd. Knoxville, TN.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the Research Compliance Office of the Office of Research at (865) 974-3466.

### **PARTICIPATION**

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at anytime without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed you data will be returned to you or destroyed.

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### **CONSENT**

My signature below signifies that I have read and understand the above information, have received a copy of this form, and agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### **Appendix C: Transcriber's Pledge of Confidentiality**

As the transcribing typist of this research project, I understand that I will be hearing tapes of confidential interviews. The information on these tapes has been revealed by research participants who participated in this project on good faith that their interviews would remain strictly confidential. I understand that I have a responsibility to honor this confidentiality agreement. I hereby agree not to share any information on these tapes with anyone except the primary researcher of this project. Any violation of this agreement would constitute a serious breach of ethical standards, and I pledge not to do so.

Transcribing Typist

Date

## **Appendix D: Sample Protocol**

**If you could reflect a minute on your experience of being a father in mid life. What I mean by that is just thinking about being the father of adult children and describe whatever comes to mind.**

I guess the first thing that comes to mind is even though the kids are grown and moved out on their own, to me they are still my kids and my feelings towards them do not change. I guess some of the financial responsibilities do not change either. Like most kids, you don't hear from them unless they are wanting something (laugh). The feelings do not really change that much.

**Tell me more about the feelings that do not change.**

Well, the love for your children never changes whether they are 36 or 3 years old. Those feelings are still the same. I did not quite understand that, but my mother is 89 years old and every time I go to visit her she always talks to me like I'm still a little boy. I understand where she is coming from. For me, even though the kids are moved out and I do not see them everyday, the feelings have not changed at all.

**Can you talk more about the love that you have for your kids?**

It is an unconditional love. The way I feel about them will never change. There is nothing that could make me change. My wife feels the same way. If we're not talking to them over the phone, we are talking about them at home. That is the center of our conversation and I guess the center of our little world too. My wife and I, we enjoy a lot of things just the two of us, but we still look forward to seeing the kids and particularly the grandkids. That's a big part of our lives. I can't imagine people not having grandchildren. I highly recommend it.

**So, they are still the center of your world even at this point?**

Oh, yeah.

**Can you say some more about that?**

Well, I still even though my oldest son is 36 years old I still concern myself with how well he is doing and what he might be doing any particular time during a day that I think about him. I am concerned that I want him to be a good father himself. I hope I have trained him to be a good father. I think a person is who they are raised to be pretty much. I know I grew up in a real good home with loving parents. I think that is one of the most important things there is in life.

**So even at this point in life you still think about him and wonder how he is doing and want to make sure he does well as a father.**

When he and his wife first got married, my oldest son, I used to concern myself with if they had enough money. Both of them were still going to school. When they first got married since I had lost my oldest son in an accident, my daughter-in-law became a big part of my life. She is a big part of our lives. She is like the daughter we never had. I believe he has been very fortunate there.

**So you continue to be close to the wife of your deceased son?**

No, my daughter-in-law.

**The wife of your other son.**

Yeah. It is nothing unusual for my daughter-in-law to call me at work and say, "Hi, Dad. I was just thinking about you and thought I would give you a call. I love you. I'll see you later."

**She calls you, "Dad".**

Yeah. Her parents divorced when she was small and she grew up not knowing him very well. I guess she kind of adopted me and I kind of adopted her.

**So as your son got older and married, part of what has happened in midlife is you have actually adopted his wife as a daughter.**

She has always called me, "Dad". I have to think about it in terms of a daughter-in-law a lot of times rather than the daughter. She really is a daughter-in-law but she feels like a daughter. When they bought their first home, my son, David, they did not have quite enough money for the down payment for the house. David was reluctant. He did not want to ask me to borrow some money or ask me for any money. My daughter-in-law, she did not care to. That made me feel good that she did not have a problem with that.

**It felt good that she would ask.**

Yeah. Some people might have looked at it in another way, but I felt like she felt like the relationship between us was good enough that she did not mind to ask for it.

**So at this point in life, you still have helped them financially at times. How does that feel to do that?**

It feels good because maybe as a parent I expect a lot out of myself. Like I said before, that feeling never changes for me. I like still being an active part of the family. They have done



well and they have moved on and bought them a really nice house on the lake. Maybe dad has helped in a lot of ways to get them there, I don't know. They have done well, and I am real proud of them.

**They have done well and you feel like you may have contributed to that in some way?**

Yeah, it gives you a good feeling.

**What feels good about that, to see your kids succeed and do well?**

Well, I think that should be very parent's dream, to do better than you did, not only financially but to start their own family and be happy. They are involved in the church in the community. My son has started teaching a Sunday School class now. He has done well in his career. He will probably make lieutenant within the next year. He is growing in his career and in his life. He is maturing and has made a real fine man. Both my boys have.

**So as you sit and think about fatherhood at this point, some of what comes up is just watching your kids do well, to be accomplished financially and in their careers.**

You sit and think about all the bumps along the way. They sure were worth it.

**Can you say more about that?**

Like I said before, I experienced a divorce many years ago. I had two boys. I got custody of my boys. To reflect back on the bad times and then to look at how things have turned out, it makes me very proud.

**It's good to see how things turned out.**

Maybe you have to see some bad times to appreciate the good ones. My youngest son, he is doing just exactly what he wants to do. It is not necessarily what dad wanted him to do. I thought he would have made a real good engineer, but he preferred to do this and has been quite successful at it. He makes good money. He is single and he likes to travel. Of course one day he may get tired of that. He has a goal in life of maybe within the next five years opening his own business. Diesel engines is what he likes to do. He thinks in another five years he will be able to open a big garage around the Knoxville area. He is a good business minded guy. He is conservative and I think he will do real good.

**So you sit and look at all the accomplishments your kids have made. Can you talk more about your experience with seeing them do well?**

I guess experiencing in seeing them do well is another thing I admire about them is watching them grow from little boys into manhood and becoming a man and being a responsible man, the oldest one particularly as a parent. Sitting back and watching them

mature...Seeing them getting older of course reminds me that I am getting older too. When you can see some of yourself in your kids when getting older, you don't mind it so bad.

**Seeing yourself in your kids makes being older not so bad.**

Yeah, my daughter-in-law reminds me almost every time I'm around her that my oldest son is just like me. She can see our mannerisms are a lot alike. He is left handed and I'm left handed. We are about the same size and wear the same size shoes and clothes. She says, "I can always look to you and I'll know what David will be like when he grows up." I think when your kids are small - usually when you're young you are struggling to make ends meet - you make sure they have what they need. As they get older, it does not change that much. You still are concerned that they have everything they need and things are going well with them. They are comfortable in their marriage and happy.

**You're saying your concern for their welfare has not changed.**

I don't think so. Even though I know my daughter-in-law has a really good job. I know they are financially secure. I still concern myself with what if one gets real bad sick or something like that. Just because you're young doesn't keep you from getting sick or out of work.

**So at this point you still concern yourself with their welfare.**

That never changes. Since I have gotten older and the kids have moved out, I tend to have a little time to do some of the things I didn't have time to do when the kids were smaller. That gives me a little chance to do some of those things. My wife and I, we like to get out on the weekends and take little day trips and so forth. We enjoy raising horses. We raise a few horses on our farm. I have a Harley Davidson that I like to get out and ride. Both the boys have Harley's. We work towards the three of us getting together for a ride once in a while. With one living in Nashville, it makes it a little harder to get together. We enjoy the time together. We usually go get the grandchildren about once a month and bring them up for the weekend.

**They are in Nashville?**

Yeah. We always enjoy those times. We spoil them and take them back home.

**Tell me about your experience of being a grandfather.**

It is almost the same as being a father. In many ways, I guess it could be better. I don't know if that is possible. Being a grandfather, you are older and more mature and you see things a different way. If the grandkids get a little rowdy in the house it does not bother you as much. When my first grandchild was born, it was just one of the best days I have ever had.

**A very special day.**

Yes, it was. We always had boys at our house and my brother also. Then we had a granddaughter, and that was a very special day too. I can't imagine life without grandchildren. Unfortunately, a lot of people do not have grandchildren. There is nothing like it. Any hobbies that you may have that you enjoy doing, you can just push those aside because grandchildren are rated at the top.

**So they have become the center of your life too?**

Oh yes. In maybe in a little bit different way, maybe because they're little and your concern for them is a little different than it is for your older kids who are grown.

**Can you talk about that some?**

About the concern with the grandchildren?

**Yeah, how it's different.**

The fact I guess that they're small. I wonder as time goes on and they get older with the way times have changed, I wonder how it's going to be for them to educate themselves and how society will be when they are grown.

**You kind of worry about what kind of world they are going to grow up in.**

I do because the world is changing. I worry about that a lot. When I was younger, things were simpler. It seems like 20 or 30 years ago, we still had problems but they weren't problems like you see today in society. There are so many things kids can get into than there was 25 or 30 years ago. Good kids from good families, they have problems too along with the kids from families who weren't.

**It sounds like even though you sit back and see your adult kids really doing well, you also find yourself worrying some about your grandkids.**

Yeah.

**About how things are going to go for them.**

I know as parents, my son and daughter-in-law do an excellent job. I know they will be steered in the right direction, but I have seen changes transpire over the last few years that are of concern for any parent or grandparent.

**Anything else that comes to mind as far as your experience of being a father at this point in life?**

One thing I have noticed when I am together with my two other sons when we are doing something together whether riding motorcycles or just going fishing or something, I guess this is a good thing, they kind of forget that I am pushing 60 years old. They think I can keep up with them, and they think of me as just another one of the guys rather than the old man. I guess that's a good thing in a way.

**You guess it's a good thing in a way. It sounds like you're also saying that it is hard in a way.**

Yeah. Sometimes it's not easy for a 58-year-old man to keep up with a 25-year-old and 35-year-old.

**What is that experience like for you to be out with them and struggle to keep up?**

Well, it's good because they know I'm their dad but they don't think of me in terms of getting old.

**It feels good that they don't think of you as getting old.**

For the most part, I can keep up with them pretty good. I put on a few pounds through the winter. Last spring we went down for a couple of days with my oldest son. He likes to go for little jogs around the neighborhood. I went with him, and I could pretty much keep up with him pretty good.

**Okay, you're saying that it feels good that they would still treat you as a younger man, treat you like one of them?**

I felt the same way toward my dad. He was always a strong man. He died when he was 84. He was always a strong and vigorous man. He never did age in my eyes. He and I would take off and do things together, and he never did seem older to me. He just kind of stayed the same age. I know as my mother has gotten older, she is 89 now, seeing her deteriorate saddens me when I go visit her. I'm glad in my boys eyes I have not started deteriorating. I know it will happen, but I'm glad it hasn't started happening yet.

**It feels good to still be able to keep up with them and not be so old that you're deteriorating.**

Right. Sxxx Jxxxxx, my boss, he and I have talked along those lines before. He is always telling me, "When I look across the desk at you, I don't see you as the age you actually are. You're not that much younger than my own father." I said, "Well, I guess that is a

compliment." (Laugh). I want to stay as young as my health will let me. I've been very fortunate. I'm healthy and have otherwise had a healthy family.

**It's nice to be able to share that kind of thing with your kids. What else stands out as far as the experience of being a father of adult children at midlife?**

Well, I guess with my youngest son, I hope that he finds the right girl to marry later on. He is dating a girl right now that my wife and I suspect they may get married. My wife and her went shopping today. We are real pleased with her. We are kindly hoping he does ask her to marry him. They seem to get along real well. She seems to like coming up to the house. They just hit it off really well and they get along real good. We're hoping that will work out. We believe it will. That is another thing, my wife tells me I am always looking for another special daughter-in-law like what we have. She says our chances of being that fortunate twice are pretty slim. I said, "Well, maybe not. You have to be optimistic about these things." (Laugh).

**So one daughter-in-law is so wonderful, it is going to be hard to meet that again.**

That's what my wife says.

**You're not so sure?**

No.

**You're also saying that part of the experience of being a father at this point is looking at and thinking about who your son is going to marry.**

Yeah. I think for me being a father at my age now, being a father-in-law is very important to me too because I like the closeness of a family. I think a daughter-in-law ought to be able to come to her father-in-law and ask him or tell him most anything she could her own father.

**So being a father-in-law is real important?**

Yes, it is very important. It's important to have good communication with your daughter-in-laws because they're the mothers of your grandchildren. Maybe some parents do not think about that. I know for me, when my wife and I got married, my wife's mother was such a special person. She's dead now. My wife has a lot of her same qualities. Some of those qualities are what attracted me to her. My mother-in-law was probably one of the sweetest ladies I ever met. Any time I was around her, she never failed to tell me how much she loved me just like one of her children. Maybe some of her rubbed off on me. She was a very special lady.

**Your mother-in-law was really important to you.**

Oh yeah.

**Are you saying you want to be important as a father-in-law too?**

Yeah.

**The women who marry your sons.**

I think that love and respect is very important. A few months ago we were visiting the kids in Nashville, and my wife, my daughter-in-law, and my granddaughter were all out in the yard doing something. My son says, "Right there are three most important women in my life." I said, "Well, they are me too." (Laugh). Since my wife raised him also, and he looks to her as a mother.

**What was that experience like for you to have him say that?**

That was a good thing to hear. Of course, I knew how he felt. He loves my wife very much. She loves him. The two boys are actually half brothers, but there was never any difference between the boys. My oldest son, once in a while - you know when you're 36 years old you like to talk to your mom about a problem you may have- that's where he goes. He has driven all the way from Nashville - I don't know if he had a day off - to meet up with her to have lunch. My first wife missed out on a whole lot of things.

**It sounds like it.**

That is very unfortunate, but her loss was my wife's gain. Particularly with a boy, I know it is very important for him to think highly of his mother. I know David has always had a special relationship with my wife. The word "stepmother" has never been used at our house. My wife never cared for that word. She always introduced David as her son. Most people, unless they know us well, don't even know the difference. Being a stepparent does not always have to be a negative thing. There are a lot of positive things there.

**It sure sounds like it was the case in your situation. She was not the traditional stepmother. It was a really good relationship.**

Oh yeah. I had a very bad marriage the first time, so maybe that helped me to recognize something special when she came along. Maybe I wouldn't have recognized otherwise.

**You're saying that one really bad marriage helps you appreciate the good one?**

I think so.

**It's also interesting that as you think about your experience of being a father in midlife that some of those old disappointments come back up to you. It sounds like you're looking over that and seeing how well you have survived it. The kids have survived it. It has come out all right.**

Yeah. It's a good feeling when you think you have done a pretty good job.

**Look at what you have overcome.**

Yeah. I know when I first went to work for Mxxx (local manufacturing firm), there was six months when I did not see my kids. My wife came over for a visit after I had been there three months. She made sure the kids would send me things and we would communicate back and forth on the phone and letters and stuff. Life at home never really missed a beat. That was before my youngest son was born. My wife had both of the boys. They always thought she was the greatest. Actually when we got married, they were in the wedding. They dressed up in suits.

**So they were part of your relationship from the start.**

Yeah. I guess to boast about a little about how you feel like your kids have done, I don't guess that's a bad thing. I don't go around telling everybody that, but that's how I feel.

**I want to hear how you really feel.**

That's pretty much how I feel about it. When I look back, I recognize some of the mistakes I have made. All parents make mistakes and see things after and maybe wish they had done some things different. There were times when I was probably a little tougher on my two older boys than I should've been. I guess as I got older I mellowed a little more, and when the youngest one came along, dad wasn't quite as tough as he was with the two older boys. I have heard other parents say the same thing and as they got older and had younger kids, they mellowed a little bit more with those.

**So part of what you do is look back on differences in the way you raised the boys and how you mellowed out as you got a little older. What's that like for you now as you think about it?**

Some of the things I think about maybe were with the older boys. I wished I hadn't been as harsh at times. Maybe some of that harshness was probably some anger from my first marriage. I was pretty bitter at the time. Sometimes bitterness and bad feelings, you don't rid yourself of them quick enough. My wife now plays a big part in getting me through those times. She was a great healer too, I guess you could say. When things seem pretty bad, she has always had the ability to have a different picture. She has this way of showing you that things are not really all that bad and as a matter of fact are pretty good. She's been a big inspiration to me.

**So as you sit here and think about fatherhood now, you look back and have a few regrets but you also have the sense of your wife being able to help you through that and feeling good about that.**

And like I said, my wife has been a big part of that healing process for me several years ago. My wife and I grew up in church, and that was always a big part of our lives. Sometimes she has had to remind me of that. Sometimes I tend to get off the trail a little bit, but she brings me back. She is a very strong person in a very gentle way.

**Can you tell me some more about the experience and wishing you had done something differently?**

I think when I was younger and striving to make ends meet and make sure the family had what we needed, there were times when I was a little tougher on older boys when there clearly was not a need to be. I saw that after a few years. I could sense that after the boys got out of being teenagers. With the two older ones, I tended to take a tougher approach a lot of times rather than letting my wife do more of the disciplining. I regret some of that now, but you can't go back and change the past. All you can do is work harder in the present and future.

**You have regrets but you can't go back and change it so work harder...**

Work harder on what is going on today. I have a feeling a lot of people who experience a bad divorced probably have had some of those same feelings too. My wife played a big part in helping me have a different outlook. She showed me the way of thinking about things. My wife very seldom had to discipline one of the kids. They thought so much of her they did not misbehave very much (laugh). She had this way of taking them on a little guilt trip to where they didn't misbehave very much for her. When you have three boys, even one of them is smaller and the two older ones are within 18 months of each other, you're a parent and a referee and a little bit of everything. The two older boys always looked out for their younger brother.

**It sounds like you're saying part of your experience is the experience of being healed.**

Yeah.

**You went through some pretty difficult things.**

Yeah. Knowing that you have been healed from certain things is a good feeling. I guess it's kind of like having some sort of sickness and .

**Having been sick and hurt but gotten through it and actually being in good shape now.**



And have the respect of the children and have them feel good about their dad. I always felt good about my dad. He was a good man.

**Say more about your experience of having your kids feel good about you.**

I think that is probably one of the most important things to me now at this time in their life. I've heard kids have things to say about their parents that aren't too nice. I can't imagine that. Knowing your child does not love you or respect you or doesn't want anything to do with you. Unfortunately in this society, there is a lot of that now. To me, that would probably be really hard because your children are your legacy and to me they represent all the good I ever did.

**Your children represent all the good you ever did. Can you say more about that?**

I think one makes enough mistakes in life that your children represent - I don't have the words to put it. To me, it's the biggest contribution you can make in life.

**Hard to put it into words. That's the biggest thing... is having your kids respect you.**

Knowing they have done well and you're proud of them. I know the day will come when... Well, they're actually there. They don't really need me other than just know that I'm around.

**Can you say more about that, the experience of not really being needed?**

I guess that is kind of two fold. It's good to know the kids are off on their own and they don't really need your support, but at the same time it can make things a little bit lonely for you too. If I don't hear from somebody, either my daughter-in-law or my son or my youngest son, if I don't hear from them every few days it kind of aggravates you because it looks like the kids would call. My wife will say, "Well, why don't you call them?" I guess it's a good thing in a way. Kids feel like they don't need their dad or mom or this or that, but at the same time, you like to hear from them from time to time. I guess for the most part, kids tend to not call unless they need something.

**That's something you said early on. They don't tend to call unless they need something.**

Some friends of ours who my wife and I run around with some have kids who are about the same age as ours. They are always saying the same thing. "The kids called last night. They needed something." I guess that's pretty much standard for people my age when the kids are grown. They're either looking for a baby sitter or something.

**I think I understand what you're saying. It's good that they are on their own. They don't need you much. But it's bad because the only time they call is when they need something.**

Yeah (laugh). Of course in their mind that's not the way it is, but it sure is the way it seems.

**I guess one thing I'm trying to clarify is that is your experience sometimes, not just a joke.**

Yeah. Every once in a while one of the kids will call and say, "Just wanted to check on you and see how you are doing."

**What's that like?**

Well, I like to hear that. I like for them to call just to check on us and see how we're doing. Of course, my oldest son with two children, that keeps him pretty busy. Since the second child was born, they don't call as often as they did. We call them, but we try not to call when they are trying to give the kids baths and put them in bed. Sometimes timing is a factor when you're trying to have a conversation. That's pretty much all I can think of right now. That's pretty much what comes to mind about being a father at this stage in my life.

**Well, I appreciate your time. This has been really helpful.**

I don't know about that, but I've enjoyed it. Sometimes it's good to reminisce and take a little inventory, know where you're at and where you're going.

## **Appendix E: Sample Participant Validation Summary**

### **“Peter’s” Experience of Being the Father of Adult Children**

#### **Loss**

2. It was emotionally hard to see my first child leave for college, the “first cutting” of the apron strings. Letting go of the second child was easier. Yet, each child leaving home has been a significant loss for me.

#### **Role Persistence: Continue to relate like I used too. Still “Dad”**

3. I continue to influence my adult children’s behavior by telling them directly when I think they are doing something wrong. I offer my advice even if they resist it if I believe my advice will help correct a situation they are struggling with.

4. I have a special bond with my adult daughters whom I still desire to protect. They still playfully compete for my affection

5. I also have a good relationship with my adult sons and my interactions with them vary to accommodate their lifestyle and needs, e.g., lunch w/ James and home projects w/ John.

8. Even though they are adults now, my children know they can count on me if needed. I am someone they can fall back on. (9) Being someone they can rely on is a mixed experience.

a. I love it when I am truly needed and appreciated. I will usually exceed my children’s expectations when fulfilling a worthy request.

b. I resent it if I feel I am being taken advantage of, especially if I feel like they are trying to dump their problems on me or don’t appreciate my efforts.

10. I make an effort to let my adult children know and to let the people around them know that I remain willing to fight for them and protect them.

13. I feel more like the father of my adult children than I do the grandchildren. I find myself less tolerant than my wife of our grandchildren. I tend to see my grandchildren as someone else's responsibility for correction and I am careful not to interfere. I am more likely to correct my adult children than the grandchildren.

**Generativity: Leaving a legacy, Sense of accomplishment**

6. I revel in my children's achievements and realize that my biggest contribution has been to teach them that they "can do this". I am aware that I have passed on important values to them.

- a. I have helped them develop into self-reliant, capable people.
- b. I have taught them to distinguish between wants and needs.
- c. I have taught them to succeed on the resources they have.

**Centrality of fatherhood role to identity**

7. My adult children remain high on my priority list, second only to my wife.

- a. I expend extra, creative effort to stay involved in their lives (stockings to Baghdad, backwards letters, etc.)
- b. I am always thinking of them still, even while on an anniversary cruise.
- c. I still worry about them and come close to tears when I think of them in danger.

11. My adult children are still a part of me. I still feel closely tied to them "mentally and emotionally". I don't know what I'd do without them.

12. I still feel a strong need to keep track of them and know where they are and what they are doing, even the oldest daughter who has been out of the house "forever".

**Past as point of reference**

1. To understand my current experience of being the father of adult children, you need to understand my past experience of being their father when they were younger.

- a. I was a non-traditional father, the primary caregiver for my children in their early childhood. I was a house husband.
- b. I became a house husband after leaving the military. I became aware while I was in the military that I really missed being away from my kids and I resigned the military in order to be more available to them.
- c. My role as the primary caregiver was verified when the children came to me first (as opposed to Mom) for care when they were hurt.

d. My children and I built our home together with our own hands, literally and figuratively.

e. I was the parent who communicated with the school and addressed behavior problems there or at home.

f. I was a firm and consistent disciplinarian. I actively sought to correctly mold and shape my children's behavior.

## **Appendix F: Research Team Member's Pledge of Confidentiality**

As a member of this project's research team, I understand that I will be reading transcriptions of confidential interviews. The information in these transcriptions has been revealed by research participants who participated in this project on good faith that their interviews would remain strictly confidential. I understand that I have a responsibility to honor this confidentiality agreement. I hereby agree not to share any information in these transcriptions with anyone except the primary researcher of this project, his/her doctoral chair, or other members of this research team. Any violation of this agreement would constitute a serious breach of ethical standards, and I pledge not to do so.

Research Team Member

Date

## **Vita**

T. Paul McAnear was born in Lubbock, TX and raised in Tennessee and North Carolina. Paul graduated from Charles D. Owen High School in Swannanoa, NC in 1973. He completed his Bachelor of Arts in Religion in 1977 from Oklahoma Baptist University in Shawnee, OK and graduated from The Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, KY in 1980 with a Master of Divinity. Following seminary, Paul pursued Clinical Pastoral Education at Baptist Medical Center of Oklahoma City.

After completion of clinical training, Paul served for a few years as associate pastor before returning to chaplaincy and pastoral counseling at The Baptist Medical Center of Oklahoma. Paul later served as Director of Pastoral Care at Regional West Medical Center in Scottsbluff, NE for six years.

Following nearly twenty years in professional ministry, Paul took a sabbatical and became househusband for his wife and two small children for two years. He then began his doctoral work in Counseling Psychology at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville where he will graduate in August, 2004 with the degree, Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology. Following graduation, Paul plans to conduct individual, group, and family therapy in a community mental health setting.