

Using Identity Processes to Understand Persistent Inequality in Parenting

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Abstract

Despite growing acceptance of a “new fatherhood” urging fathers to be engaged in family life, men’s relative contributions to housework and child care have remained largely stagnant over the past twenty years. Using data from in-depth interviews, we describe how identity processes may contribute to this persistent inequality in parenting. We propose that the specificity of men’s identity standards for the father role is related to role-relevant behavior, and that the vague expectations many associate with “new fatherhood” both contribute to and result from men’s underinvolvement. Consistent with this proposal, we find that while all fathers face difficulty living up to expectations of “new fatherhood,” those with vague identity standards contribute less to carework and are less committed to the father identity, in part because they are less likely to experience self-discrepancy. We outline the implications of our results for future research in identity theory and for understanding inequality in households.

Keywords

family, identity processes, self and identity, inequality

Many Americans today believe that a “good father” must do more than simply provide for his family. Fathers themselves “want to have close relationships with their children, and place great value on being involved [and] emotionally engaged” (Day 2011:73). This is true across socioeconomic groups, with fathers of all classes embracing these ideals and citing the importance of “being there” as a core obligation of fatherhood (Edin and Nelson 2013; Harrington, Van Deusen, and Humbert 2011).¹

However, culture and conduct are not always well aligned (Swidler 2001). Despite widespread agreement on the changing expectations for fathers—expectations that began shifting more than thirty years ago (Hochschild [1989] 2003; Pleck 1987)—men’s behavior often falls short of these ideals. Recent headlines suggest men spend more time doing housework and taking care of children than in the past, but the absolute number of hours are small and still just half of

¹For middle- and upper-class men, these increased expectations are largely added onto an expectation for financial support, but poor men often draw on the emotionally engaged father as an alternative to providing (Edin and Nelson 2013; Harrington, Van Deusen, and Humbert 2011).

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women's contributions (Parker and Wang 2013). Even fathers who believe parents should share caregiving equally often report their partners provide more care (Harrington et al. 2011:23). In other words, expectations for fathers may be shifting, but their behavior is lagging behind (Wall and Arnold 2007).

Despite the "large and noteworthy gap between [fathers'] aspirations and reality" (Harrington et al. 2011:23), a majority of American men rate themselves as "very good" or "excellent" fathers (Parker and Wang 2013). How is this possible when individuals compare their role-relevant behavior to role expectations in order to determine how well they are performing in a particular role (Burke and Stets 2009)? Furthermore, what effect do these positive evaluations have on the division of labor in households?

Miller (2011) argues that men are able to retain a positive perception of themselves as fathers because of the fluidity in cultural expectations for fatherhood. Cultural movement across forms of fatherhood (from distant breadwinner, to role model, to "new father") has given men a variety of models to choose from, generating individualized and plural approaches to fatherhood (Miller 2011). This fluidity has advantages. For example, it allows many poor fathers—and others who are unable to provide financially for their families—to maintain a positive sense of self by engaging in alternative behaviors associated with fatherhood (e.g., caretaking, modeling values) (Edin and Nelson 2013). We argue this fluidity also has two consequential disadvantages.

First, fluidity in the fatherhood ideal may perpetuate inequality in households. Behavioral expectations for "new fathers" tend to be vague. A desire to "be there for his kids" or "do the best he can" (Edin and Nelson 2013) not only provides minimal direction for men but is a relatively easy

benchmark to meet. Both the father who cares for his children's every need while his wife works nights and the father who chooses to live with his children and their mother, despite refusing to change diapers or feed or bathe his children, could interpret their behavior as "being there." In other words, vague expectations may allow men to interpret consistency between their role performances and role expectations across a wide variety of actual contributions (Burke 1991; Burke and Stets 2009). Generally satisfied with their performance as fathers, men with vague expectations for themselves may not only be less involved in family life but also unlikely to adjust their behavior in the direction of increased involvement (Cantwell 2011; Hochschild [1989] 2003).

Second, vague expectations may negatively affect fathers' self-perceptions. Although men with vague expectations are able to contribute very little in their households without experiencing the negative emotion that arises from a lack of self-verification (Stets and Osborn 2008), they could also lose out on the opportunity to build efficacy-based self-esteem (Cast and Burke 2002). A man who has a clear idea about what is expected of fathers (e.g., "changing diapers," "picking the kids up from school") has an opportunity to feel competent and efficacious when engaging in those behaviors. Verifying a vague identity, on the other hand, generates little efficacy in the fatherhood role (Stets and Burke 2014). Therefore, fathers with vague standards may lack confidence in the role compared to those with more specific standards.

We explore these issues by examining identity processes among fathers using data from in-depth interviews, collected as part of the Time, Love, and Cash in Couples with Children (TLC3) study. Before presenting our results, we situate our study in recent research on both

fatherhood and sociological studies of identity.

BACKGROUND

Fatherhood

Social scientists have offered a number of explanations for men's lack of involvement in household labor and child care. Those most compatible with the identity approach we take point to the important influence of social context and constraints, competing expectations, and a shortage of role models. We briefly review these proposals and then outline how our focus on identity processes both complements and extends this work.

Social context and constraints are important for fathers' behavior. In a small study of low-income, nonresident fathers, Roy (2004:9) found that men simply do not know how to "do both employment and time with children," but other work shows that *employed* nonresident fathers are actually *more* involved with their children than their unemployed counterparts (Carlson and McLanahan 2000; Nelson 2004). This may be because fathers who were employed were more likely to feel "legitimate as fathers [because of the strong association between fatherhood and providing] and thus more comfortable visibly assuming other aspects of the father role" (Carlson and McLanahan 2000:12). In other words, fathers' access to economic, logistical, and psychological resources plays a major role in increasing their involvement (Carlson and McLanahan 2000; Edin and Nelson 2013; Nelson 2004).

Other researchers point to competing expectations, arguing that the "lag in fathers' desire for parenting and what they actually do" (Dermott 2008:19) stems from cultural conflict between conceptions of new fatherhood and traditional masculinity. For white middle-class fathers, increased paternal involvement

contradicts cultural stereotypes of masculinity and male identity (Russell and Radin 1983). Even for men of color, who have historically been more involved in child care, the competing expectations for the salient identities of man and father put men in a bind (LaRossa 1988).

Other work notes that despite cultural shifts, a lack of role models, especially among young fathers, is an enduring problem. Edin and Nelson (2013) found that poor men struggle to locate a tangible role model from their own experiences. This is an issue across social classes, particularly when looking for examples of new forms of fatherhood (Day 2011). Men infrequently reference their own father as a model to follow (Daly 1993), exacerbating the absence of concrete, specific role models for most fathers. At the same time, men's attitudes toward their own father and his parenting often still influence their conduct (Hochschild [1989] 2003; Pleck 1987), with many men aspiring to be the *opposite* of their father, or everything he was not (Edin and Nelson 2013).

While each of these accounts points to significant factors in shaping fathers' behavior, they have not been formulated in the context of a unifying theoretical framework. We argue that identity theory offers such a framework, incorporating social context and constraints, identity meanings, and significant others in a single dynamic model. This model not only clarifies the identity process and helps explain change in behavior over time but also offers a compelling connection between the self, resources, social interaction, and micro- to macro-level outcomes (Stets and Cast 2007).

Identity Approach

The self is an ongoing social process. Once people have adopted identities—a polite person, a student, or a Mets fan—and

internalized relevant identity meanings, they act to verify these identities in interactions, seeking to confirm their meanings of self. Self-verification is a process based on a cybernetic feedback loop. Actors adopt a particular identity, engage in identity-relevant behavior in social situations, and draw on reflected appraisals (Cooley 1902) and other feedback to evaluate their performances. Actors use this feedback to formulate perceptions of self in identity. If their self-perceptions match their identity standard, individuals experience self-verification and positive emotions that reinforce the previous behavior. If their self-perceptions diverge from the identity standard, they experience self-discrepancy, triggering negative emotions that should lead to either behavioral modification or abandoning the identity (Burke and Harrod 2005; Cast and Cantwell 2007; Higgins 1987). The larger the discrepancy, the more pronounced the response (Cantwell 2011; Stets and Osborn 2008). The process then begins again, either as the interaction continues or as the actor enters another setting.

Identity standards are a key component of this model. It is the comparison between identity standards and how one is perceived in the situation—and the experience of self-verification or self-discrepancy—that leads to the behavioral, cognitive, and affective outcomes of interest to social scientists. Despite their importance, current research does not fully consider how differences in identity standards may systematically shape such outcomes. One exception is Cantwell (2011), who measured identity dispersion among college students. Her results suggest that those with a wider dispersion of identity meanings along dimensions commonly associated with a student identity (e.g., studious, hardworking) perceived more flexibility in acceptable behavior in that role (Reitzes and Burke 1980). Those with a more limited range

of acceptable behaviors—in other words, individuals with less dispersion of their identity meanings—were less flexible and therefore experienced more intense emotion when underperforming on schoolwork and exhibited stronger behavioral reactions (e.g., increased studying time) to discrepancy than those with more dispersion.

We expect fatherhood is subject to similar processes and that the flexibility offered by a father's identity standard has important implications for his parenting behavior and related outcomes. We argue that specific identity standards—when expectations are well articulated, clear, and linked to particular behaviors—are akin to identity meanings with less dispersion and that vague definitions of fatherhood—for example, “being there” or “don't be a deadbeat”—are similar to more widely dispersed standards.² In other words, men with specific identity standards often move beyond principle-level meanings of fatherhood (e.g., being responsible and involved) to also provide the program-level standards of behavior associated with those meanings (e.g., knowing your children's schedule, bathing and feeding them) (Tsushima and Burke 1999).

We argue shifting definitions of fatherhood at the cultural level facilitate a flexible understanding of the role, influencing how fathers and others evaluate their performances (Dunning, Meyerowitz, and Holzberg 1989; Miller 2011). This flexibility contributes to the development of vague identity standards for the father role. This vagueness has negative consequences for fathers' behavior and related outcomes, perpetuating many men's lack

²Although we argue that dispersion and specificity work similarly, methodological differences demand different concepts. The quantitative semantic differentials Cantwell (2011) uses lend themselves to measuring dispersion in a way our qualitative data do not.

of involvement (Cast 2003). Before illustrating variation in identity meanings and the associated processes and outcomes, we briefly introduce our data and methods.

DATA AND METHODS

Our data come from the Time, Love, and Cash in Couples with Children study. Spearheaded by Paula England and Kathryn Edin (2008), this project team conducted in-depth, semistructured interviews with 75 couples, a subsample of those originally interviewed for the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (McLanahan et al. 2000).³ Although the Fragile Families data were collected in a number of large cities, the TLC3 couples all lived in one of three metropolitan areas: Chicago, Milwaukee, or New York.

Multiple waves of both individual and couple interviews began soon after the focal child was born (ca. 2000) and continued annually over the next four years. To qualify for the study, couples were romantically involved at Wave 1 (W1), with family incomes below \$75,000 (and often well below this benchmark). If couples broke up, the research team did their best to interview both parents as well as “social fathers” (i.e., men who were in relationships with the children’s biological mothers and raising the children as their own). Interviews covered a wide range of topics from relationship history to role models for parenting. Interviews typically occurred in the couple’s home and with the same interviewers over time—roughly annually—to help establish rapport. Most interviews lasted between two and three hours, and all were

recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Interviewers often included postscripts of interviews to provide impressions that might not have been apparent from the transcripts.

The Sample

We include 61 of the 75 couples in our study, omitting couples with fathers who dropped out of the focal child’s life or interviews soon after the initial wave and those with too much missing data, particularly on questions related to parenting.

The TLC3 study oversampled for unmarried couples and people of color (specifically black and Latino), and our sample reflects that (Table 1 offers descriptive statistics of our sample). Most of the parents were in their twenties, with fathers a couple years older, on average, than their partners. The majority were not first-time parents and had at least one additional child, either living in the home or with a previous partner. Household incomes varied significantly but were generally low, particularly for raising a family in an urban area. Our couples’ median household income was \$30,000.⁴ Fathers worked in a variety of fields (e.g., construction and trades, transportation, customer service), and many changed jobs during the study period. A significant minority was out of work or only working seasonally at some point during the interviews (13 percent in the first wave of the Fragile Families survey). Despite a widespread lack of financial and cultural resources, when men were asked to “Please think about how you feel about yourself as a father to [child]” in the Fragile Families interviews, the overwhelming majority rated themselves as “very good” or “excellent” fathers.

³With each couple linked to the Fragile Family survey with case numbers, we are able to supplement our interview data with some quantitative measures, including demographic information that was not apparent from interviews.

⁴In 2000, the median household income in the United States was \$42,148 (U.S. Census).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

		Household at Wave 1 (Focal Child's Birth)			
Marital status, percentage					
Married		38			
Unmarried		62			
Household income (in U.S. dollars)		\$31,941 (\$21,517)			
Number of other children in household		1.52 (1.34)			
		Mother		Father	
Age		25.49 (5.32)		27.46 (5.34)	
Racial identification, percentage					
White		20		15	
Black		51		47	
Hispanic/Latino		29		36	
Multiracial or other		—		2	
Education, percentage					
Didn't finish high school		21		29	
Diploma or equivalent		39		38	
Some college or technical/trade		36		25	
BA/BS or more		3		8	
Employment					
Currently employed, percentage		a		87	
Typical weekly hours (when working)		32 (15.56)		41 (13.57)	
Evaluation of self as mother/father, percentage					
		Year 3		Year 5	
Excellent		44		33	
Very good		39		41	
Good		10		13	
Not very good		—		2	
Don't know		—		2	
Not specified		7		17	

Note: Data taken from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, baseline ($n = 61$).

^aWave 1 of the Fragile Family Survey was conducted in the hospital after women gave birth, so it was assumed that women were not currently working. When queried, 84 percent of women expected to work for pay during the coming year.

To protect the anonymity of our couples, we use pseudonyms and modify some identifying characteristics when unimportant to the analysis and discussion.

Qualitative Analysis

We read all the available waves of interviews for each couple, created a cover sheet with pertinent information (e.g.,

children and their ages, marital status, living situation, occupation), and flagged sections in the transcripts that emerged as relevant to definitions of fatherhood (e.g., perceptions of parenting, role models, division of household labor and child care, and emotional and behavioral outcomes). The three authors met regularly to discuss cases and our reading of the transcripts to ensure we interpreted

each couple's situation similarly and to, over time, select relevant examples and quotes, generating a summary for each couple.

We worked together to classify the fathers on various dimensions (e.g., definitions of fatherhood, positive or negative views of self, involved or uninvolved fathers) and recorded these on electronic spreadsheets. By reading and rereading our summaries in various groupings, important patterns began to emerge. We used abductive analysis (Timmermans and Tavory 2012) to try to understand these patterns in light of existing theory. Although identity theory and its process model emerged as most relevant to our findings, the theory—as currently explicated—failed to fit our pattern of results. This prompted us to consider additional dimensions of identity processes (e.g., the specificity of identity standards) and the effect they might have on individuals and their behavior. We added these to our spreadsheets and revisited the data in this light.

In contrast to a quantitative study that seeks to make empirical generalizations about the population of fathers or to report the prevalence of particular behaviors, our qualitative analysis seeks to specify and illuminate the processes linking specificity of standards and parenting behavior (Small 2009). To illustrate the relationship between identity standards, behavior, and related outcomes in this brief article, we draw on a selection of fathers from the larger study (Lareau 2012). The Appendix not only includes demographic information about this subset of fathers but also our categorization of these men on dimensions of interest in this project (e.g., specificity of identity standards, contributions to carework, evaluations of self in role). While the appendix helps to make the patterns we found visible, we want to emphasize that it also simplifies the complex identity process we present here and presents broad

brush strokes where there is significant nuance.

It is also important to note that although the men whose voices we include reflect the diversity of our sample as detailed in Table 1, they are not meant to be a representative sample of the interviews we draw on or of poor fathers. In fact, it is impossible to know whether our sample is representative of poor fathers, let alone fathers in general. Therefore, in the spirit of qualitative inquiry, rather than report percentages or focus on numbers, we use the in-depth interviews to “provide a richly textured analysis of daily life . . . to advance theory” (Lareau 2012:675) about identity processes and effects based on patterns that emerged in our data. We situate these findings in what we know about men's contributions to carework and identity more broadly from quantitative research.

PERSONAL DEFINITIONS OF FATHERHOOD

There is wide variation in the type of fathers men in our sample aspire to be. Some want to “bring home the bacon” (Malcolm), others yearn to be good role models, and many eschew traditional expectations and want to be involved, like “Mr. Mom” (Reggie). A number articulate hybrids of the three “types” of fathers—breadwinner, role model, and new father—that have marked the past century (LaRossa 1988; Pleck 1987). Regardless of their primary focus, the overwhelming majority embraces some form of the “new father” model and expects to be present in their children's lives (Edin and Nelson 2013; Harrington et al. 2011). That said, men's ability to specify how they should be involved or what it means to be present varies substantially.

We interpret the degree of specificity (ranging from vague to specific) of the fathers' standards as akin to the

dispersion of standards covered in previous work (Cantwell 2011). Men with specific identity standards have well-articulated and clear expectations of themselves that are often linked to particular behaviors. For example, Lance believes that a father should be “equally involved with the babies” (W1) yet repeatedly refers to his standards for fatherhood as “old-fashioned.” Combining elements of the breadwinner role and new fatherhood, Lance creates a hybrid standard of fatherhood. Over the course of his interviews, he suggests that a good father must work full-time and make the money but also spend whatever time he can with the kids. He should “keep the mother satisfied so she don’t drive the kids crazy” (W2). He should show his son how to protect himself and teach him sports, put together toy sets (because Lance believes women aren’t mechanically inclined [W1]), and teach his son to use the toilet. He also believes it is a father’s duty to chase away his daughter’s boyfriends (W3). Like Lance, Jayden also rejects the idea that there are certain things a father should do for an infant and other things the mother should do. He says, “I think we both need to be involved in everything” (W1). In his interviews, Jayden articulates what everything is: specifying that fathers should feed, bathe, comfort, and teach their children, among other things. Throughout the interviews, both Lance and Jayden provide clear standards for how they, and other fathers, should be involved in family life.

However, the majority of men in our sample who embrace versions of “new fatherhood” had vague identity standards.⁵ When asked what it meant to be a good father, they generally said it was important to just “be there,” to “be around,” or to “spend time” with their

family and children. Common refrains were that being a father is “more than genetics” or “more than just providing financially,” but few could specify what this meant. Even when interviewers followed up, these men were unable to articulate tangible, behavioral expectations for themselves as fathers. Some fathers could provide an abstract, principle-level standard (Tsushima and Burke 1999) but were unable to imagine or articulate what this meant for their behavior as fathers. For example, Aaron repeatedly said in his interviews that it was his job as a father to be “responsible” and to “take care of his kids,” but when asked by an interviewer for specific examples of what he meant by “responsible,” Aaron was unable to clarify this vague claim, replying, “Just do what I’m supposed to do. That’s it.” (W2). Other fathers simply had no idea what fatherhood entails. When asked for characteristics of a good father, Trent responded, “I don’t know” (W2), and Matthew suggested it was a moving target: “I know today the definitions of the daddy have changed so much, huh?” (W2).

Such variation is important because these definitions (i.e., identity standards) occupy a central role in identity processes. Identity standards provide both a guide and a metric for identity-relevant behavior. Specific standards for fatherhood offer men tangible ways to enact the identity. When couched in “new fatherhood,” specific standards often involve contributions to child care and housework. Vague standards, on the other hand, offer little direction and may be met with a wide variety of behaviors. With more rigorous expectations for themselves, men with specific standards are more likely to perceive discrepancy between their self-perceptions and identity standards than fathers with more vague definitions (Cantwell 2011). This discrepancy, particularly in an identity that is difficult to

⁵Men whose definitions centered on breadwinning were much more likely to have specific standards for themselves.

discard given structural circumstances (Serpe 1987), prompts actors to make behavioral changes to work toward becoming the fathers they believe they should be. By investing more time and effort to live up to their expectations, fathers with specific standards generate confidence (e.g., positive emotion, efficacy) and commitment to the role while contributing to their households. They are able to do this, in part, because of the specific expectations they hold for themselves and the cyclical nature of identity processes.

In the next section, we describe this process in detail, demonstrating the implications of specificity for behavioral, cognitive, and affective outcomes of identity processes. In doing so, we also shed light on how specificity—or the lack thereof—contributes to the persistent gender gap in parenting.

EFFECTS OF SPECIFICITY

We find that specificity is related to three types of identity outcomes. First, men with specific definitions contribute more to the care of their children and management of their households, a *behavioral* outcome. Second, men with specific definitions—although as likely as men with vague definitions to evaluate themselves favorably—are more likely to experience self-discrepancy than those with vague definitions. However, because they have a well-developed standard to work toward and embrace the idea that fatherhood is a learning process, men with specific definitions are also able to interpret and respond to any gap between expectations and behavior more positively than men with vague definitions. These *cognitive* processes prompt men with specific standards to invest more in their identities as fathers. Third, this additional investment leads men with specific definitions to demonstrate higher levels of

commitment—both *affective* and *behavioral*—to the father identity and relevant relationships. We discuss each of these outcomes and their relationship to specificity in turn.

Contributions to Carework

Men with specific definitions tend to contribute more to carework—housework and child care—than men with vague definitions (see Appendix).⁶ For example, Richard has specific standards for fatherhood that are inspired by Dan Conner, the fictional father on the sitcom *Roseanne*. Dan took an active role with his children, and Richard strives to do the same. Richard defines a good father as someone who is firm but who also spends time with his kids, tries to understand and communicate with them, and who is willing to admit when he is wrong. He explains, “I’m not their friend, I’m their father. We can do friendly stuff and we can get along eye-to-eye. But when you want to go off the deep end, my job is to bring you back in to reality” (W3). He sees his approach to parenting as “active” and “family-oriented” (W2). To live up to this expectation, he spends a lot of time with his children: “When I sit and watch television, I usually have one or two on me. . . . When I go someplace, I never go anyplace alone . . . someone is going to go with me” (W2). In addition to the fun, friendly stuff that Richard does—taking his kids out for ice cream or rollerblading in the park—Richard takes pride in the central role he plays in his household: “family cook” (W1). Beyond cooking, Richard and his wife Ryanne share in responsibilities for the house and children. Richard is as

⁶This is not true among the small number of men in our sample whose specific identity standards center exclusively on breadwinning, as carework plays a minor role in their conceptions of fatherhood.

likely as Ryanne to change a diaper, wash dishes, or clean up the house.

Ron is another father with a specific definition of fatherhood. His is rooted in the belief that his family needs him and he should be there to guide his children and “pick them back up” if they make a mistake. “I need to help them with their homework, [to] know what is going on at school . . . what they’re doing, what they’re learning” (W2).

Ron believes that his family needs more from him than an income to flourish. He contrasts his approach with his father, who prioritized financial support:

[My father’s approach] was, “As long as I give you everything you need, that’s all I have to do.” My dad never went beyond that. He never worried about anything beyond that. I think that he had his job and that was his life . . . I never played with my dad. I never joked with him. We never played ball or went for a walk. We never did that. (W2)

In addition to playing and joking with his children and participating in fun family outings, Ron also contributes to the mundane tasks of parenthood. His wife, Brittany, who stays home and is the main caregiver, brags about Ron’s willingness to pitch in: “Even if he doesn’t feel like it, you know . . . he’ll come home from work [and] do whatever needs to be done with them” (W2). Ron is as likely to feed his sons and put them to bed as his wife is, and although Brittany regularly cooks, he is happy to do so if she would rather not. When men make the effort to translate the values of egalitarianism or involvement representative of “new fatherhood” into tangible, specific behavioral expectations, they make consistent contributions to housework and child care.

Men with vague expectations, on the other hand, fail to move beyond “being

there,” often leaving the day-to-day labor of parenting to their partners. Roberto sees the responsibilities of parenthood—both in caretaking and in financial provision—as equal. When asked to define fatherhood, Roberto emphasizes presence: “It isn’t just about paying the child support. It’s about being there with them, teaching them, talking to them, you know? . . . Do what the parents got to do” (W1). Even when Roberto is present, though, he is significantly less engaged with the baby than Rosaria. When asked what he does when the baby begins fussing, Roberto says, “First I’ll take her out of the bed and put her in our bed to make sure she’s all right. Then I’ll wake [Rosaria] up so she can change the diaper . . . I won’t change diapers. That ain’t me” (W1). Although Roberto will feed Trina a bottle or help out here and there, he admits that he leaves most of the care to Rosaria, and when interviewers ask the couple about specific caregiving tasks, it becomes clear that Roberto does very little:

Interviewer: Give her a bath?

Roberto: Oh, I . . .

Rosaria: Have you EVER given her a bath?

Roberto: No. I haven’t. No.

. . .

Rosaria: Brushing her hair. Making little ponytails, pigtails.

Roberto: No.

Interviewer: You don’t do her hair?

Roberto: No.

. . .

Interviewer: Okay. So like, in terms of like, changing diapers, who would you say does that more?

Rosaria: I do.

Telling of his lack of contributions at home, when asked if being a parent is harder than he thought, Roberto responds, “Don’t know” (Fragile Families W2).

Similarly, Manuel believes that “a good father [gives his] time. This is very important” (W2), but that “time” is not linked to any particular actions and is difficult to come by when Manuel is working six or seven days a week and coming home after his daughters are in bed. Without specific expectations for how one might spend that time or a specific amount of time (e.g., another father, Alex, specifies that he must spend at least one half hour each day with his children), Manuel has a difficult time living up to this vague expectation for himself. Randy is another father who believes that “a good dad is THERE” (W2) but is actually seldom around. Instead, Randy chooses to demonstrate his commitment to fatherhood by working hard and contributes very little to either housework or child care. Although men with vague standards claim to be involved in their children’s lives, when interviewers ask about the specific tasks of parenthood—bathing, changing, feeding, or playing with one’s children—these men feign ignorance or make excuses for their limited contributions.

Of course, Roberto, Manuel, and Randy had partners who were stay-at-home mothers and could take on the majority of household labor and child care. It is possible that increased experience with carework would have helped hone their standards. In other words, specific standards might not only influence involvement but also result from it (Cast 2003). This was certainly true for Garrett, a father who originally held a vague standard that a father should “be around for his child” (W2). Garrett’s definition became more concrete when he lost his job and began staying home full-time with his daughter. In later interviews, when describing why he is a good father, Garrett says, “I take care of her. Make sure she doesn’t get hurt. Feed her when she wants to get fed” (W3). Even though he is only bringing in disability, he

believes he is a good father because he understands and responds to his daughter’s every need. For Garrett, experience in the role offers a more nuanced vision of what it means to be a father. Unfortunately, we found men like Garrett were the exception and not the rule.

Because of precarious employment, a number of men in our sample had ample opportunities to contribute to their families and acquire new, more specific standards for fatherhood. Few did. Even if men acted as primary caregivers and engaged in more housework and child care than those working outside the home, they often described these day-to-day tasks as things they did because they had to (i.e., no one else was available) and not as integral to fatherhood (i.e., “being there” for your children). While Garrett’s definition of fatherhood was so radically changed by his experiences that he claims he would only take a third-shift job so he could continue caring for his daughter during the day, other men are happy to resume a less involved approach to parenting when given the chance.

Self-Discrepancy

Fathers compare their definitions of fatherhood with their actual behavior to determine whether or not they are good fathers. For example, Brandon evaluates himself as an exemplary father based on an identity standard that combines breadwinning and new fatherhood. He says that as a father, “I think it’s important for me to take care of the things that are going to keep us alive” (e.g., rent and electricity) (W1). But he also believes a father should be there and care for his own children:

Men are not known for taking care of their kids. Black men in general, we’re already given a bad strike on us when we have kids. We are

automatically labeled as deadbeat fathers. In my case, my perception of a good father is me, I think I'm a very good father. I'm there fully for my children. I can't imagine nobody else taking care of my kids . . . I just feel that if I want my kids to develop the way I want to, I need to be there for them. . . . A good father is just his physical presence and his physical showing of love and all that kind of stuff makes a good parent, you know what I'm saying. (W2).

Brandon believes he is a "very good father" because he is not a deadbeat and has not abandoned his children. He perceives consistency between his expectations for himself and his behavior. As long as there is alignment between the two, men evaluate themselves positively.

Men with vague identity standards benefit from their diffuse expectations in that they are able to perceive consistency across a range of behaviors. Consider Angelo, who believes that a good father is someone "who is trying to spend time with [his] family" (W2). Angelo judges that he is doing well as a father because even if he's not interacting with his son as much as he might like, they spend Saturdays together while his wife works. His wife, Paqui, explains:

I'd rather have Jesus play around the house by his father versus a babysitter. But he's okay, he's not too much in the way. He knows better. . . . He's four and he can pretty much play alone and it's okay. (W4)

Although Angelo is spending time at home with his son, Jesus is playing alone while Angelo works around the house. Morris also has a vague standard for being a good father, rooted in time, being there, and understanding (W2). Despite very limited involvement in carework, Morris believes he fulfills all three

aspects of this definition because he stuck around even when he was unsure if he was Jaleesa's biological father. Similarly, Jacob thinks that a father should be helpful and spend at least "a little bit of time" with his children (W2), so he evaluates himself positively because he occasionally changes or feeds his daughter (W3).

Not all men interpret their behavior and expectations as aligned. Fathers with specific identity standards, whose expectations for themselves are so well defined that it is clear when they fail to meet them, are much more likely to experience self-discrepancy than those with vague expectations. For example, Ron considers what he expects from himself as a father and his own behavior and worries that he spends too much time away from his family (W2). Jayden also sees himself falling short as a father, particularly in his struggle to be "stable enough to provide and support my family." Similarly, Ben has specific ideas about what a father should do with his children: take them to restaurants, teach them good manners, read to them, take them to museums, ensure they get fresh air (W2). As an involved father who is raising children he is proud of, Ben feels he is living up to his standard for himself in many ways. However, money is tight with Ben out of work for a medical condition, and he cannot always give his children the experiences he believes they should have. Ben admits that he is not a "perfect" father (W3) but thinks he is a "good" one (W2).

However, none of these fathers who perceive a gap between their specific expectations and reality are disheartened. They continue to give fatherhood their best effort every day. Like other men with specific definitions, occasionally falling short does not threaten Jayden's identity as a father because he views parenthood—for both men and women—as a constant learning process. He says, "I'm learning everyday how to be a better

father. . . . Parenthood is something that you really can't master, I don't think. Everyday you're learning something new" (W2). Jayden references his efforts to improve and his willingness to "take on the different obstacles of parenthood" as evidence he is a good dad (W3). Seen through this lens, mistakes or deficiencies in Jayden's parenting are not fatal flaws but opportunities for growth. Rather than abandoning the identity when he experiences self-discrepancy, Jayden and others draw on the specific standards they hold and expend additional effort toward successfully enacting the identity. In other words, although fathers with specific standards are more likely to perceive self-discrepancy, it appears to invigorate them. When the interviewer asks Richard if he thinks he is a good father, he replies,

Sometimes I don't. Sometimes I think I could be better. . . . If I thought I was a great dad, then I would probably be the worst dad in the world, so I think the doubt makes me stay on my toes. (W3)

These men appear to embrace the gap between the fathers they are and those they want to be.

Men with vague definitions, on the other hand, appear threatened by any disconnect rather than encouraged by it. Although self-discrepancy is less common among these men because they are able to interpret consistency across a range of performances, when it occurs, men with vague standards appear to judge themselves more harshly and experience more disappointment than men with specific definitions. For example, Razi believes a father should provide, although he does not specify how. During the second wave of interviews, he feels good about his performance in the role: "I mean as far as financially, yeah, I feel . . .

I think I'm in those shoes. So I think I am a good father." In Wave 3, however, when Razi loses his job and can no longer support his young family or think of other ways that he might provide for his family, he begins to feel like a bad father. Felix is also disappointed in himself as a father. He believes spending time together is a key component of fatherhood, but Felix sees his children so infrequently that his ex-girlfriend has to remind him of the last time that he took them out (W4). Similarly despondent, Matthew says, "Right now if I was to rate myself between a 1 and 5, I would give myself a 1.5, because I'm not always there as much as I need to be" (W3).

Self-discrepancy is likely less problematic for men with specific standards because even when there is room for improvement, their specific standards give them a targeted goal to strive for in the future. For example, Alex and his wife Alyson agree that a good father values time with his children more than making money, puts his family first by spending time with them and caring for them, and disciplines with love. Because Alex's identity standard is specific, he also realizes that he occasionally fails to meet it:

A good father would spend time with your kids, you know? And that's where most fathers including myself, fall short . . . sometimes I concentrate on getting money and working and working and working, and then next, you know, I neglect my kids sometimes. (W3)

When he notices himself falling short of his standards for himself as a father, Alex directs more attention toward his family. He feels like a better father for these efforts.

Effort—and a sense that one is trying—is key to seeing oneself as a good father. When men notice that they are not only

falling short but also that they are doing nothing to change that, their self-evaluations suffer. Oliverio tells an interviewer:

A good father? I'm not. (laughter) I am a little bit. [To be a good father], you have to take care of your kids, bring them to the park, play with them . . . you know, teach them how to talk, teach them a lot of things that I don't do. I don't . . . I don't teach him how to talk. I don't teach him. . . . I try to teach him how to go to the bathroom, but I don't do it. I don't know why. (W3)

Oliverio has tangible expectations for himself and acknowledges the gap between those expectations and his behavior, but he continues to call himself a bad father because he is unwilling or unable to push himself toward trying to close it. As Aaron said, a man is a good father "as long as [he is] trying . . . and has [his] heart in the right place" (W2). Realizing he is falling short and not doing something about it, Oliverio is unable to call himself a good father. Unless coupled with either effort or success, specific standards for fatherhood are not sufficient to generate positive conceptions of self.

Because most men in our sample either perceive consistency between their standards and performances or are able to cite their continuous efforts toward improvement, the majority—whether holding vague or specific standards—rate themselves as good or excellent fathers (see Table 1 and Appendix). Although men with specific standards perceive room for improvement, their self-evaluations hold steady or even improve over time as they work to live up to expectations. For example, in the first wave of Fragile Family surveys, Jayden reports that he is not satisfied with himself. Over time, however, Jayden grows more engaged in his son Kevan's care and seems to develop

more confidence in the role. By the third wave, he says, "A lot of guys look at me and probably think I'm lame, but I feel I'm far from lame. You know? I feel I'm cooler than any of them."

Fathers with vague expectations are much less likely to evaluate themselves more positively over time. In fact, these men tend to experience a decline in their self-evaluations between years three and five (see Appendix). With little to live up to and little involvement in family life, these men fail to generate positive self-concepts in parenting. As a result, many become complacent or completely disengaged, with a few even dropping out of the Fragile Families and TLC3 studies (e.g., Razi, Roberto, Matthew).

Commitment

Men with specific standards for fatherhood generate greater commitment to the identity as they work to live up to expectations and experience success (Collett and Avelis 2011). As noted previously, when Jayden pushes harder and puts in more effort, he fosters positive relationships with his partner and children and enhances his commitment to fatherhood. Commitment both increases fathers' sensitivity to self-discrepancy and influences their responses to perceptions of shortcomings.

Reggie has a very clear idea about what he wants to be as a father and is very committed to the identity. He is deeply affected when his partner signals that he is not living up to what is expected of a father. Rather than abandoning the identity, Reggie embraces the feedback and works harder to satisfy her expectations. By the fourth wave of the Fragile Families surveys, he reports he is an excellent father. Another father, Patricio, fears that he sometimes fails to live up to his expectation that he is emotionally

there for his children (e.g., able to communicate with his children, to talk openly with them). He admits that although he is committed to these standards, "it's hard, it's hard, very hard," especially because he did not have that type of relationship with his own father. However, he also says, "I think I'm doing pretty good . . . I'm determined 100 percent, 150 percent, that I want to do this this way" (W3). He continues to stay engaged with his family through the highs and lows.

Working toward a specific standard has positive effects on commitment even for men whose standards focus exclusively on providing financially. For example, Malcolm measures his success as a father by determining whether his son and daughter have everything they need. One of his dreams is to "Have a big house, you know they can play in the backyard and not have to worry about it" (W3). Although he has not reached that point yet, this specific goal encourages him to spend as much time as possible working and to prioritize money over all else. Malcolm admits he is incapable of handling the day-to-day needs of children or even knowing how to be involved in their lives, leaving his girlfriend Magda to do "100 percent" of the housework. Yet he sees himself as a good father because he successfully supports his family. Even if he is not as involved in family life as a father who not only has a specific standard but also embraces a new fatherhood, Malcolm generates commitment to the role by living up to his specific expectations for himself.

Sam also has specific expectations for himself as a father, though his are rooted in new fatherhood. He is able to articulate the specific ways that he lives up to his standards in his relationship with his young daughter: being able to make her laugh and smile, teaching her to throw things in the trash, and knowing her fears (W2). With these experiences, he develops

confidence in the role and a genuine commitment to being a father. When he and his wife separate and he moves in with his sister and her children, he desperately wants to remain involved in his family's life, and both he and his wife acknowledge his success in that regard (e.g., he continues to pick his daughters up from school every day) (W4).

A number of other fathers with specific standards also remained committed to their children and their identities as fathers despite rocky relationships. Garrett, whose definition became more developed over time, chose to stay married out of concern for his daughter rather than love for his wife. Ben, who felt his role was to provide rich cultural experiences for his children, remained dedicated to his family despite struggles in his marriage after his sister-in-law and her family move in. Although Kevin does not trust his partner and keeps his own apartment even while he and his son's mother are in a monogamous relationship because "anything can happen, you never know" (W2), he adores his children and is deeply involved in every aspect of their lives.

Fathers with vague standards whose relationships were strained or ended, on the other hand, signaled lower levels of commitment to their families or fatherhood by being less likely to remain involved. Roberto believes "a good father for me is to always be there for what the kid needs, you know? Just *be* there for your kids. That's what's good for me" (W3). He goes on to say that he cannot imagine what would happen to his daughter, Trina, if he and her mother broke up, "Cause she's real close to me, and I can't even stand [that thought]. I can't even think about not being there, you know?" (W3). Soon after this interview, Roberto cheats on his wife and leaves the family. When the interviewers ask his wife, Rosaria, if he will still be involved in their

children's lives if they get divorced, she says, "He's barely around now. So I don't know" (W4).

Similarly, when Aaron's ex-girlfriend Sheryl is asked to describe him after they split up, "OK, if you had to rate him as a dad, scale of 1 to 10, 10 was the best, and 1 was . . .," she interrupts and says, "Zero" (W4). When Manuel and Alicia break up, interviewers ask Alicia how she thinks they will share parenting responsibilities with the new living arrangement:

He never helped me when he was here. He never do anything like that—changing them, or . . . maybe like once or twice in their whole life. So, I don't think anything will be any different. Maybe he's gonna come and take them out to buy ice cream, to the park. And that's all he's gonna do. And hey, I'm fine. I mean, I'm used to it, so. (W4)

Although Manuel makes an effort to visit his children regularly after he moves out and spends time talking to the girls and playing with them, he struggles to develop an involved, meaningful approach to coparenting after his relationship with Alicia dissolves.

Striving to live up to their specific standards, men like Malcolm, Alex, and Jayden not only increase their commitment to their identities as fathers but also solidify their commitment to their families. These fathers are often in relationships marked by mutual love, strong bonds, and an expectation of a long life together as a family. Fathers with vague standards, on the other hand, tend to lose interest in the role or disengage from their families and their partners. This weakening of commitment appears to make their relationships more tenuous than those of men with specific standards and offers little opportunity for the development of more detailed definitions of fatherhood (Cast 2003).

DISCUSSION

Our findings provide support for the idea that the lack of a widely shared, specific cultural standard for fathers, as well as the flexibility afforded by prevailing ideas of contemporary fatherhood as "being there," is an important contributor to the gap between the culture and conduct of fatherhood and the related persistent inequality in parenting. Because the definition of fatherhood is in flux, there is no specific identity standard of fatherhood to live up to (Burke and Stets 2009), giving men little specific role direction. Unfortunately, men who simply decided to "be there"—in contrast to their own absent fathers or other men in their neighborhood—often failed to formulate specific standards for themselves. Saying "I will not be a deadbeat" or "I will not abandon my family" led to vague standards that could be satisfied with any number of behaviors. We find that these vague standards contribute to men's underinvolvement (Hochschild [1989] 2003).

Importantly, the consequences of specificity extend beyond behavior to self-perceptions and commitment. Living up to vague behavioral expectations may support one's position in a father role, but it does little to generate a self-concept built around that identity or to produce the positive cognitive and affective outcomes that come from living up to specific identity standards (Stets and Burke 2014). Men with specific standards are more likely to experience self-discrepancy than those with vague standards, but this discrepancy appears to motivate them to invest more in the identity (Cantwell 2011). This increases confidence and commitment. In other words, the division of labor in households is not the only thing that benefits from specific standards for fathers; men's self-concepts and relationships do as well.

Given the interconnectedness of the identity model, there are likely reciprocal

effects between standards and the outcomes that we focus on. Men like Garrett and Jayden, who are given the opportunity to serve as their children's primary caregivers, may cultivate more specific standards for fatherhood based on their experiences. Similarly, men may draw on their commitment to the identity in forming positive self-perceptions and emotions. Although we present the results in a particular order, we do not mean to rule out the interdependence of these concepts or the potential that the causal arrows point in a number of directions.

We make two important contributions in this article. First, we advance topics currently underdeveloped in identity theory: variation in identity standards and self-processes in role performances that lack clear behavioral rules. Second, we enhance the sociological study of inequality in households—a line of research dominated in recent years by large-scale, quantitative studies—by clarifying the identity-based mechanisms behind inequality in household labor. This approach adds important insight by connecting micro-interactional process to larger macro-structural outcomes (Ridgeway 2014).

Although theoretical development in identity theory typically occurs in quantitative work, we argue that the novel insights drawn from qualitative research not only isolate important processes but also pave the way for future theoretical work on the topic (Small 2009; Timmermans and Tavory 2012). We also realize that our data represent a rather particular population, poor fathers. Ideally, a study on fathers would include men from a wide range of social classes. However, we argue that the demographics of this sample (low-income fathers, many unmarried) have little bearing on the processes highlighted here. First, research shows that these men are as likely as those in other groups to value fatherhood and embrace ideas about “new fathers”

(Edin and Nelson 2013). Second, we are specifically interested in identity processes that operate across identities and social groups (Burke and Stets 2009). As such, we consider our findings applicable to fathers regardless of class background and an important contribution to the sociological studies of families and inequality. In our work, we demonstrate a key mechanism through which identity standards shape fathers' behavior: the specificity of one's identity meanings. Although we believe the processes should hold, future research should explore identity processes among fathers with more economic, cultural, or social resources.

Our results suggest a number of additional directions for future research. First, we hope that others attend to the specificity (or dispersion) of identity standards, not only evaluating other potential effects but also the sources of variation in identity standards. Second, future work should explore the causal connections between the components of the identity model. The model is well developed because of decades of research supporting it. It is important to note, however, the profound influence it has on the way that researchers think about identity in research and interpret their data. The experience of identity is complex, and social psychologists must attend to the nuances of the components of the model and the causal connections between them (Cast 2003). Finally, we hope that more family researchers consider the potential of social psychological theories like identity theory to illuminate inequality in families. Understanding the micro-level processes that sustain inequality is an important step in addressing it (Ridgeway 2014). Although many are keenly aware of the inequality inherent in the gendered division of parenting and child care, without disrupting the patterns seen here, it will likely persist.

Appendix. Information on Fathers Quoted in the Analysis

	Household Income ^a	Age ^a	Race ^a	Education ^a	Currently Working ^a	Identity Standard	Carework Contributions		Evaluation of Self as a Father ^b	
							Child Care	Housework	Year 3	Year 5
Aaron	\$29,015	25	Black	Less than high school	Yes	Vague	None	Little	Good	Good
Alex	\$62,500	31	Black	Some college/tech/trade	No	Specific	Majority	Some	Very good	Good
Angelo	\$2,960	27	Latino	Some college/tech/trade	Yes	Vague	Varies	Some	Excellent	Good
Ben	\$3,750	35	Black	High school/GED	No	Specific	Varies	Majority	Excellent	Excellent
Brandon	\$30,000	25	Black	Some college/tech/trade	Yes	Specific	Equal	Some	Excellent	Excellent
Felix	\$62,500	25	Latino	High school/GED	Yes	Vague	Little	Little	Good	Good
Garrett	\$17,500	35	Black	High school/GED	No	V-to-S	Varies	Varies	Excellent	Excellent
Jacob	\$17,500	24	Latino	Less than high school	Yes	Vague	Some	Little	Excellent	Excellent
Jayden	\$62,500	23	White	Some college/tech/trade	Yes	Specific	Equal	Some	Very good	Very good
Kevin	\$7,500	34	Black	Some college/tech/trade	No	Specific	Equal	Varies	Very good	Excellent
Lance	\$22,500	26	White	Some college/tech/trade	Yes	Specific	Equal	Some	Excellent	Excellent
Malcolm	\$30,000	23	Latino	Less than high school	Yes	Specific	None	None	Excellent	Good
Manuel	\$22,500	33	Latino	High school/GED	No	Vague	Little	Varies	Excellent	Very good
Matthew	\$30,000	26	Black	High school/GED	Yes	Vague	Little	Little	Excellent	Excellent
Morris	\$22,500	22	Black	High school/GED	Yes	Vague	Little	Little	Don't know	Very good
Oliverio	\$22,500	27	Latino	Less than high school	Yes	Specific	Varies	Varies	Good	Good
Randy	\$42,500	22	Latino	Some college/tech/trade	Yes	Vague	Little	Little	Very good	Very good
Razi	\$3,750	22	Black	High school/GED	Yes	Vague	Some	Little	Very good	Excellent
Reggie	\$7,500	28	Black	High school/GED	Yes	V-to-S	Equal	None ^c	Very good	Excellent
Richard	\$62,500	40	Black	Some college/tech/trade	Yes	Specific	Some	Equal	Very good	Very good
Roberto	\$22,500	20	Black/Latino	High school/GED	No	Vague	Little	Little	Very good	Very good
Ron	\$30,000	34	Latino	Some college/tech/trade	Yes	Specific	Little	Majority	Very good	Very good
Sam	\$42,500	32	Black	High school/GED	Yes	Specific	Some	Some	Very good	Excellent
Trent	\$22,500	25	Black	Less than high school	Yes	Vague	Little	None	Excellent	Good

Note: Carework coding: none (0%–1%), little (<15%), some (20%–35%), equal (40%–60%), majority (>65%). V-to-S: movement from vague to specific; a marked specification of standards over time.

^aAt Wave 1 of Fragile Families.

^bYear 3 is Wave 3 of Fragile Families, and Year 5 is Wave 4.

^cIn some cases, there were older children or live-in hired help who took care of the majority of housework.

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