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# Papa May Have: An Intimate Examination of Fatherhood in Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn

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Princeton, NJ : Princeton University

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**PAPA MAY HAVE**

**An Intimate Examination of Fatherhood in Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn**

**Aasha M. Abdill**

**A DISSERTATION**

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## **Abstract**

Recent academic attention to fatherhood emphasizes the concept of “new fathering,” a modification in the fathering identity which includes a focus on nurturing and emotional attachment to the child. This study presents the landscape of what fathering looks like and feels like in a longtime low-income black community as ideologies of masculinity, fatherhood and family are rapidly changing. In addition to the social and structural disadvantages which often operate in low-income urban communities and disproportionately affect black men, such as high rates of unemployment and incarceration, local interactions are influencing the behaviors of fathers with their children. Based on findings and insights from four years of fieldwork in an urban neighborhood, this dissertation details the day to day obstacles and strategies of black men with children as they try to reconcile contradictions in beliefs about what makes a good father, what makes one a man, and how aspects of each should be displayed.

In the streets and playgrounds of present day Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, men push strollers. Men wear little pink carriers with babies bundled in them over their hoodies and basketball shorts. As documented by classic and contemporary ethnographies, men continue to hang out in front of public housing buildings and corner stores, but now tugging at one of their legs one can often find a toddler. Black men's fathering behaviors are occurring more within the sight of the public's eye influenced, in part, by changing social norms of gender roles in the family.

Shifting mainstream norms of fathering and family forms are influencing the beliefs and behaviors of fathers residing in low-income communities. Many men of urban communities are uncovering potential benefits of loosening translations of fatherhood. Nonetheless, their behaviors and involvement are vulnerable to what is verbally and non-verbally communicated by

family, peers, community members, local organizations and the public media. Organizations, including Head Start and schools, may be able to take advantage of burgeoning roles of fatherhood in the inner city. A deeper understanding of black men in their pursuits to be family men may be a key to supporting their engagement with their children and enhancing their involvement over the long-term.

## Acknowledgements

*In memory of my father, for all the times he was there.*

*Dedicated to my mother, for all the times he wasn't.*

The title of this dissertation, *Papa May Have*, comes from the song "God Bless the Child" by Billie Holiday. The song conveys the insecure and uncertain futures of children growing up with parents with limited means. The context of limited means, both money and networks, forms the basis in which this entire dissertation is situated; from research questions to design, analysis and writing. For the purposes of this publication, the song's phrase *Papa May Have* refers to the trials, tribulations, triumphs and transitions that black fathers have experienced, much of which have gone largely unseen and unrecognized. *Papa May Have* also alludes to what may have been if the opportunities afforded by society were as plentiful as its expectations and its judgments.

To the participants of my study,

Thank you for opening up your worlds to me. It is my sincerest intention to present it here with the utmost respect and integrity.

To the fathers of Bed Stuy and similar communities all over the globe,

See yourselves through the eyes of your children. There is no truer measuring stick.

To Michael,

For being part of the vanguard. Bali and Mari couldn't be luckier.

To my siblings and my extended family-- kin and non-kin,

I heard it said that siblings are modified versions of each other. For seven mirrors who have always understood my virtues and faults, perhaps because you share them, I appreciate every push and pull as we journey through our *aMazes*. To Yomi, for being up to any conversation from the most grounded to the most philosophical. To Tanya, Stephanie and Sofya, thank you for the writing dates, especially on days when getting one sentence on the page felt like a miracle. To all of my extended family and friends, thank you for your cheers and your check-ins, but most importantly your attempts to hide the glazed over looks in your eyes whenever I started to use sociological jargon.

To my advisers and colleagues,

Big or small, your time, support and counsel meant more along this journey than you will ever know. To my committee advisor, Mitch Duneier, your ethnography seminar during my second year changed my graduate school course. You introduced me to a methodology that could answer the sociological questions most meaningful to me in a way that allowed me to put the knowledge and experience of the community I was studying front and center. For this, and your constant encouragement, my deepest gratitude. To Paul DiMaggio and King-To Yeung, thank you for seeing the book in my dissertation and using your comments to push me closer to that goal.

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### Introduction



At the center of the Bedford Stuyvesant community is the New Bed Stuy Boxing Center, which has been there ever since I can remember. Although I have peered into its dark interior many times, I have never gone inside. To the eyes of a child, it always seemed private and a little dangerous—a place where only men entered. Above the boxing center is a childcare center. Every day little feet run to the entrance at the side of the building to go upstairs to school. Although the boxing and the childcare centers could not be physically closer, the two worlds are socially far apart. Or, so we once thought. This dissertation is a re-examination of the distance between two social worlds. One world consists of low-income black men, solitary figures connected only to each other, the other, of low-income black children, “fatherless” offspring connected primarily to their single mothers.



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Over the last fifty years statistical trends on family structure have corroborated the view that few children in low-income black communities live with their fathers. Indeed, the percentage of children living with fathers has steadily declined since the 1980s (Coles, 2009), and though this trend crosses racial and socio-economic lines, low-income black biological fathers are much less likely to live with their children (Eggebeen, 2002) than are other fathers. Thus, a snapshot of a low-income black community flooded with fathers accompanied by their children seems paradoxical. Nonetheless, in Bed Stuy, a walk around the community will reveal such a picture on any given day in the year of 2014.

Paternal residence is only one way of measuring paternal involvement, and one whose flaws and limitations have often been noted in the scholarship (Mott, 1990; Coles, 2010). Although black fathers are much more likely to be non-resident than white or Hispanic fathers, they visit their children more often and maintain involvement longer than do white fathers (King, 1994; Coley and Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Huang 2006). There is also some evidence that within the category of married men, black fathers are more likely to be involved in child-caring duties and household chores than their white counterparts (Landry 1994; Ahmeduzzaman & Roopnarine 1992)

Despite the growing body of evidence in scholarly literature that black men are as likely, and in some cases more likely, to be involved with their children when controlling for residence, there is limited public knowledge of this. In December 2013, a report published by the Center for Disease Control based on data from 2006 to 2010 found that involvement of fathers in various child caretaking activities was similar across races. In certain types of activities, rates for black fathers rose above those of white and Hispanic fathers. Although the report's leading author

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played down the higher levels of involvement among black men<sup>1</sup>, many newspaper articles and blogs zoomed in on the racial implications of the findings, pointing out that they defied stereotypes. Comments posted by readers in response to the findings were a mixed bag, but many expressed surprise, disbelief and suspicion of the findings. A considerable number of people stated that the study was long overdue and had proven what they already knew from personal experience.<sup>2</sup>

Why this huge disjuncture between what scholars in the field of family have known for at least a decade and what the average US citizen believes to be true? And, what explains the variations in people's perception of the validity of this study? An immediate explanation lies in the role of the media in producing long-standing stereotypical images of largely absentee, deadbeat, and lazy black fathers (Cole, 2012; Edin & Nelson, 2013). Another explanation may lie in the uncertainty as to whether black fathers have always been as involved with their children as are fathers of other races, or if their involvement has recently increased. This gap in knowledge can be attributed to the fact that academic study of fathers is of fairly recent origin (Goldberg, Tan & Thorsen, 2009). Measures of involvement also vary, making it difficult to assess the degree to which fathers' relationships with children have actually grown deeper or

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<sup>1</sup> Tanner, L. (2013), "Dads' involvement in hands-on parenting has increased, CDC survey says," in Huffington Post. Retrieved online from <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/> on March 21, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Articles and blogs about the CDC study include: (All retrieved on March 21, 2014)  
Culp-Ressler, Tara (2014, January 6). The Myth of the Absent Black Father. Retrieved from [www.thinkprogress.org](http://www.thinkprogress.org)  
KultureKritic.com (2014, January 26). Study: Black Fathers Are The Most Involved Dads In America. Retrieved from <http://www.kulturekritic.com/>  
Alpert Reyes, E. (2013, December 20). Survey finds dads defy stereotypes about black fatherhood: By most measures, report says, black fathers are at least as involved with their kids as other men in similar living situations. Retrieved from <http://articles.latimes.com/>

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whether cultural change has simply prompted more public attention to emotional attachments between father and child.

While we now know that residence is a poor construct for measuring involvement, many older scholarly works which significantly influenced the discourse on the fathers of black families, relied on the non-residential status of black men as confirmation of the absence of father-child relationships in black communities. Based on residential data from the 1960s, Moynihan (1965) predicted that if black men were not given employment opportunities, their families would be forced to assume a matriarchal structure that would contribute to a "tangle of pathology."

In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well. There is, presumably, no special reason why a society in which males are dominant in family relationships is to be preferred to matriarchal arrangement. However, it is clearly a disadvantage for a minority group to be operating on one principle, while the great majority of the population, and the one with the most advantages to begin with, is operating on another. This is the present situation of the Negro. Ours is a society which presumes male leadership and reward it. A subculture, such as that of the Negro American, in which this is not the pattern, is placed at a distinct disadvantage. (p. 29)

Obviously, not every instance of social pathology afflicting the Negro community can be traced to the weakness of the family structure...Nonetheless, at the center of the tangle of pathology is the weakness of the family structure. Once or twice removed, it will be found to be the aberrant, inadequate, or anti-social behavior that it did not establish, but now serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation.(p. 30)

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While the report's ultimate argument may have rested on a structural framework, it adhered to the period's prevailing cultural logic with regard to masculine roles in the household. The structure that sustained neighborhood poverty may have been to blame for the outcomes predicted by Moynihan, but the key cultural mechanism by which he implied that they would impose their effect did not have to be written in stone.

Even at a time when women had long since entered the labor market, Moynihan, like much of American society, could still not envision a world in which the father's contribution to the family was not fundamentally economic in kind. This American *doxa* left black men in an especially precarious position. The division of labor in American families left little room for decoupling gender from household roles. Given the ideological assumption that fathers were, first and foremost, employed men, how could black families survive, let alone overcome the consequences of poverty? Constrained by hegemonic masculine ideology, men were generally not encouraged to take on familial roles deemed feminine, such as nurturer and caretaker. Yet, structural conditions compelled black women to assume the role of economic provider. Thus, black men were left without a role to play in their families. They were structurally locked out of the breadwinning role, this was Moynihan's cautionary tale. Qualitative studies of the black community documented how men who could not perform the breadwinner role abandoned all roles or offered negligible support to their families (Clark 1965; Rainwater 1970; Liebow 1967). In addition to being locked out of employment opportunities, a less explicit consequence was that roles of a primarily domestic nature were also untenable. Unemployed black men could not contribute to their families in a socially acceptable manner.

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The inability of many black men to assume the role of provider in the household may have pushed many to the edge of the household unit but these relationships were not always completely severed. Just as black men have been forced to teeter at the edge of society but have managed to exist both inside and outside mainstream culture, so too many of them have learned to teeter at the edge of their families. We have learned a little about the various strategies that black men adopt in their roles as workers (Newman, 1999; Sullivan 1992; Williams & Kornblum 1985; Williams 1981) and students (Ferguson, 2000, Fordam & Ogbu, 1986). We have learned a lot about their strategies with women (Liebow, 1967; Stack, 1974; Anderson, 1990; Anderson, 1999, Hannerz, 1969). We have paid relatively little attention to the varying strategies they employ in their families and with their children. The lack of attention to black men as fathers and family men may have much to do with the irregular presence of non-residential fathers in the lives of their children as well as the privacy of family life.

Much of what we know about black men has come from qualitative work. There is a rich tradition of ethnographic studies on families in urban black communities. Many classic studies identified fathers as largely absent or peripheral to tasks such as child caretaking and household work (Liebow, 1967; Clark, 1965; Martin & Martin, 1980, Hannerz 1969, Rainwater, 1970). *Tally's Corner* (Liebow 1967) documented in detail fathers who had abandoned their roles. His chapter "Fathers without children" depicted the average relationship between fathers and their children as severed.

"Looking at the spectrum as a whole, the modal father-child relationship for these street-corner men seems to be one in which the father is separated from the child, acknowledges his paternity, admits to financial support irregularly, if at all, and then only on demand or

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request. His contacts with child are infrequent, irregular, and of short (minutes or hours) duration." (p. 78)

Many ethnographers mention fathers as being around "sporadically," but do not elaborate in detail on sporadic fathering relationships<sup>3</sup>. *All Our Kin* (Stack, 1974), offers a version of the sporadic relationship between men and their children. Like Liebow, Carol Stack found that the father's relationship to the child was secondary to that which it had with its mother. Unlike Liebow, Stack gives men and their kin more credit for their caretaking role, and presents a harmonious picture of mothers who see the fathers of their children as friends, whom they recruit for help when necessary<sup>4</sup>. Yet, her ethnography does not discuss what happens when fathers are seen by mothers not as friends, but as enemies. The men and women of *the Flats* both accept the peripheral nature of men to their families as well as the second-degree relationship between fathers and their children.

In addition to their sporadic presence in the household, the image of the disinterested black father can be largely attributed to a failure to distinguish and understand the relationship between two distinct faces of fatherhood, public and private, which men in the black community employ in order to reconcile norms with structural realities. Valentine (1978) points out that men actively hid with their family's assistance contributing to the perception of men being absent from households.

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<sup>3</sup> For example: Sheena's father in T. Williams and W. Kornblum *Uptown Kids: Struggle and Hope in the Projects* (1994); and Latoya's father, Alvin, in K. Newman's *No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City* (1999). Many of the teenagers' fathers in Sullivan's "Projectville" (1989) are described as not being around regularly.

<sup>4</sup> Kornblum (1985) also presents fathers largely as helpers recruited by teenage mothers.

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A feature of family organization that is often cited as especially characteristic of Black people and Black Communities is the female-headed household. In Blackston we found such households not to be very common. For reasons related to welfare eligibility, such households are often over-reported to welfare workers and other official collectors of statistics. Work, welfare, and hustling must be combined in order to secure a minimum level of income for poor Black families. Welfare is not available legally to mother and children who have an employed or employable male in the household. Therefore men in Blackston avoid being reported to welfare departments and are often working, hustling, avoiding the draft, or anxious to avoid official scrutiny for a multitude of reasons make up an especially large proportion of the "missing" men reported by the census analysts, the Urban League and others interested in Black community statistics. (p124)

Behind closed doors cloaked behind the privacy of family life, a man and woman negotiate their responsibilities in the family. Financial provision, childcare management, and household chores are all subject to bargaining, and are influenced both by practical necessity and beliefs regarding family roles. Families whose economic circumstances do not enable them to follow the proscribed roles that they value are forced to eschew these principles and negotiate roles that suit their practical needs. This ongoing and often contentious process of negotiation is not easily witnessed by those outside of the family. If privately negotiated roles do not match public expectations, an option is to hide private roles from public eyes. Liebow alludes to how paternal behaviors may go unseen, "Since father and child are seldom together outside the home, it is in the home that casual gestures bespeaking paternal warmth and tenderness are most likely to occur" (p. 80).

Portrayals of black men as distant from families and separate from their children were easily confirmed for ethnographers by the urban landscape. Seeing them hanging on the corner

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or in front of buildings, classic and contemporary ethnographers documented black men as they frequently existed in public, painting simple pictures of them either on their own or with other men. As Elliott Liebow observed, however, there is a wide range of relationships between a man and his biological children:

The spectrum of father-child relationships is a broad one, ranging from complete ignorance of the child existence to continuous, day-by-day contact between father and child. The emotional content of the relationships ranges from what, to the outside observer, may seem on the father's part callous indifference or worse, all the way to hinted private intimacies whose intensity can only be guessed at. (p73)

Fathers are often split into different categories based on whether or not they adhere to mainstream or local cultural values (Anderson, 1990; Hannerz, 1969). When efforts made by street fathers to care for their children are granted attention, their involvement is presented as elusive or deceptive. Responsible actions must be solicited or demanded by mothers or maternal kin because fathers generally do not desire to do them. If a man volunteers to help it is due to some ulterior motive, such as sex or money from the mother (Anderson, 1990, Anderson, 1999). Yet, men who embrace fatherhood despite structural conditions and those who reject it may not be two separate populations at all. Instead, they may belong to the same population, but are simply being looked at from different perspectives or at different times of the fathering life cycle. It also may reflect the unwillingness for black men to display their private life in front of public eyes. For example, Venkatesh, (2008) portrays the Robert Taylor homes in Chicago as a place where “two-thirds of the community were women raising children” (p. 146). Venkatesh's descriptions of the public landscape—similar to those of communities studied in the past—



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consist primarily, one of women with children and men alone or with other men.<sup>5</sup> His descriptions of gang men, arguably the most *street* of street personas, include no anecdotes about fathers with children. Venkatesh does mention how protective one of his major informants, J.T., was of his private relationships with girlfriends and children, and how important his children's wellbeing was to him.

As much as J.T. seemed to trust me and let me inside his world, he was fiercely protective of his private life. Except for benign occasions like a birthday party, he generally kept me away from girlfriends and his children, and he often gave me blatantly contradictory information about his family life. I once tried asking why he was so evasive on that front, he just shut me down with a hard look (p. 68).

He also became obsessed with saving money for his mother and his children in case something happened to him. He even began selling off some of his cars and expensive jewelry (p. 252).

While many ethnographies often presented a community landscape in which fathers and children were seldom seen together, some do not note the father's absence as such, but the absence of anecdotes about fathers with their children does so implicitly (Wacquant, 2004, Venkatesh, 2008, Duneier, 1992). The absence of portrayals of men with children, however, may simply reflect the research questions investigated. Nonetheless, the presented landscape of a black urban community usually confirmed a dearth of father-child relations among local residents. As Anderson (1990) noted, "To visit certain streets of Northton is to see a proliferation

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<sup>5</sup> Venkatesh does use non-gender specific language in one case in which he is speaking specifically about escorting: "From inside the car, I watch as parents gingerly stepped out of the high-rise lobby, kids in tow, trying to get to school and out of the unforgiving lake win (p.. 117). But, in other instances he specifies them as women with children.

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of small children and women, with fathers and husbands largely absent or playing their roles part time" (p. 129). A similar setting is portrayed in *Germantown* (Anderson, 1999). "The summer streets are populated by these children and sometimes their mothers, grandmothers, older sisters, and female cousins" (28). Even when a public demonstration of being connected to a child is available, a man is likely to hide small acts of domestic responsibility, such as buying diapers and baby formula, yet relish acts that showcase his ability to provide.

A self conscious young man may be spied on the street carrying a box of Pampers, the name used generically for all disposable diapers, or cans of Similac--baby formula--on the way to see his child and its mother. As the child ages a bond may develop, and the young man may take a boy for a haircut or shopping for shoes or clothes. He may give the women token amounts of money. Such support symbolizes a father providing for his child ( Anderson, 1990 p. 131).

Fast forward to 2013 and Edin and Nelson's depiction of fathers in urban settings is eerily similar with the exception of one telling detail; nowadays Pampers are also publically laudable to these men. "When children are young, Pampers and sneaks are a public statement that a man seeks to 'do the right thing' with regard to his child" (p. 117). Local understanding of doing "the right thing" appears to have shifted, influencing those behaviors that men feel it necessary to hide or promote. This shift is altering what local residents can observe about fathers in the urban setting. The sons of the fathers depicted in classic ethnographies of the 60s, 70s and even 80s have now grown up and themselves become fathers. Over the course of nearly half a century, much has changed in our thoughts on gender and gender roles. While what we know about black fathers is increasing, there is still much left to uncover. At the margins of American society, black men residing in urban communities are still attempting to reconcile local and mainstream

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values (Massey & Denton, 1993; Gans, 1995). An up-to-date ethnography of the lives of low-income black men that focuses on their role as fathers is needed in the sociological literature.

Recent attempts to zero in on the roles of African-American men in the lives of their children focus on relatively small subsets of black men, such as single custodial fathers or married fathers who remain the heads of their households (Coles, 2009; Connor and White, 2006). However, such studies reflect the lived experiences of few fathers in low-income urban communities. Hamer (2001) addresses the non-residential circumstances of many black fathers, but her study, like the ones on married men and single custodial fathers, does so outside of a community context, and thus fails to take into account important ecological explanations for fathering behaviors and strategies among black men. Community studies are appropriate for situating black fathers and their relationships with their children within an ecological framework that allows us to understand these relationships within the dynamic environment that they inhabit.

There are three recent community-based studies which offer close examinations of lives and experiences of low-income fathers: Maureen Waller's (2002) study on black and white low-income fathers in Trenton, NJ; Edin, Tach and Mincy's (2009) study on black, white and Puerto Rican low-income fathers in Philadelphia, PA; and Edin and Nelson's (2013) study on black and white low income fathers in Camden, NJ and Philadelphia, PA. For each study, I will present a close examination of its contributions to the understanding of low-income fatherhood in present day as well as present the need for my research to address existing gaps in the literature.

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### Waller (2002)

Based on interviews with 29 fathers and 36 mothers in Trenton, New Jersey , Waller (2002) presents an insightful look at fathering beliefs and practices among low-income unmarried families in *My baby's father*. Her research makes three significant contributions to the sociological study of low-income fathers. First, her methodological decision to include the voices of both mothers and fathers enables her to investigate gender differences and the ways in which both parents account for the obstacles and agency of men in the caretaking of children. Second, she provides evidence that contradicts the assumption that low-income parents have unconventional family values that oppose mainstream ones. She finds instead that they have a wide repertoire of values and beliefs about family and family roles that include both traditional and non-traditional elements. While Waller does not yet develop the concept of cultural repertoire in this book (Waller 2009), the beginnings of the idea are already perceptible. She also illustrates how the informal practices of low-income parents interact with welfare and child-support policy as they existed in the early 1990s.

Waller compares and contrasts the accounts of mothers and fathers. This, in fact, is the methodological strength of her research. Through this sort of triangulation she is able to reveal in detail how men and women differ in their accounts of paternal involvement. In her study, mothers were more likely to blame the inadequate involvement and caretaking of the father on his lack of effort, while fathers often referenced "natural differences" to explain their lesser ability to care for a child. Waller's evaluations of insufficient father involvement are also based on various standards; the mothers compared fathers' caretaking practices to their own, while fathers compared them to those of other men. When it comes to evaluating effort, gender

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differences have significant implications in communities where the common perception of paternal involvement is fairly pessimistic. Indeed, the negative view of fathers among low-income parents is documented in Waller's book. Given that the interviews that informed her study took place in the early 1990s, new ideas about the father's role, which by then included nurturing, may have affected the meaning of "natural differences" in the fathers' reports of their ability to be good caretakers.

While the mothers and fathers interviewed differed in their evaluations of men's involvement in child caretaking, they did share values when it came to the roles fathers ought to play in the household. Both sides placed value on the traditional breadwinning role though they did not believe that it determined whether or not a man was a good father. Instead, they defined a good father as someone who makes an effort to "be there" for his child. Taking into account the mismatch between structural realities and mainstream ideals, Waller shows how low-income men and women hold multiple values that are influenced by those communicated to them via mainstream and local culture. She also demonstrates how welfare and child-support policies conflict with these values. For example, child support, which emphasizes the financial aspect of fatherhood, does not place the same emphasis as families do on fathers "being there" for their children.

Waller's careful contrast of male and female accounts leads her to conclude:

This research indicates that the problem of paternal absence and non-support was not that most fathers lacked a sense of obligation to their children. Rather, economic instability, antagonistic relationships between parents, and child support, welfare, and visitations rules interacted to undermine a father's involvement with his children. Furthermore, fathers' beliefs about gender provide cultural justification for their absence (139).

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Unlike earlier studies, which focus primarily on mothers' accounts, Waller's research forces the reader to engage directly in the father's experiences and beliefs but within the context of the actions of the mother and the state. She thus sets up a strong foundation from which to extend beyond the constraints of a methodology based on interviews of unrelated mothers and fathers. An ethnographic investigation would be better suited to address the dynamic and interactional nature of fatherhood as it plays out in low-income communities and might also address some of the questions raised by a reader in response to Waller's findings.

Although a wide cultural repertoire regarding fatherhood may exist among low-income parents, what determines which sets of beliefs and values will get drawn upon? The transaction of beliefs about fatherhood in a low-income community influences both the actions of fathers and the receptions of those actions by kin and neighbors. Waller describes the importance of recognition as a reciprocal process. While paternity tests prove biological fatherhood, it is the reciprocity of recognition that makes men be recognized as fathers by their children, the children's mother, and the larger community. As she notes, "parents described social fatherhood as a reciprocal process, not only did fathers have the option of recognizing their children, but these children and their mothers had the option of acknowledging them" (110).

Negative beliefs about low-income fatherhood can permeate the community and thus affect the perceptions and inclinations of individuals to act as fathers or recognize men as fathers. Waller documents the deeply negative impression parents have of fathers in the communities in her study. This was especially the case for African-American women. Of the twenty black women Waller interviewed, only one held a favorable opinion of the average Trenton father. Interestingly, this general view did not match the more positive evaluation each mother gave of

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her own child's father. Waller notes that African-American women were much more likely to speak negatively about fathers with their female friends than they were in private conversations with her. It is important to understand how the negative perception of fathers and its transaction within the community affect men's behavior and efforts, especially as new norms of fatherhood, family, and gender expand those that already exist in the cultural repertoires of low-income families.

Waller asserts that a new model of fatherhood that allows fathers to embrace both traditional and contemporary aspects of fatherhood is now available. This model, she writes, “provides ways for low-income unmarried men to accept responsibility for their children and derive a sense of honor from fulfilling their responsibilities” (68). Yet while her claim may hold for low-income fathers who can provide, it fails to account for men who clearly have no way of fulfilling the breadwinning component of the traditional father role. If – as Waller finds – breadwinning is still highly valued, how can men who cannot provide feel like providers and project this image to others, especially to the mothers of their children?

Waller does discuss how both women and men place less emphasis on the breadwinning aspect of fatherhood than on the father's effort to “be there.” “Fathers were expected to provide in-kind or monetary support according to their ability, but they were evaluated primarily on their effort to do” (68). But, any evaluation of effort is subjective and highly influenced by the feelings of the mother and father towards each other. It is important to understand how this belief is applied in reality. How do both the woman and the man feel and act when the father routinely comes to see his child empty-handed in circumstances where money is very much needed? Possibly a result of the interview method, Waller is unable to investigate how

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evaluations and actions develop and change over the life-cycle of romantic relationships. She spends little time discussing how dynamic and divergent romantic interests may influence the behavior of fathers or mothers on evaluations of paternal involvement. Generally speaking, Waller views maternal gatekeeping as a consequence of a mother's evaluation of the father's fitness to be involved with his child and does not address the possibility that this evaluation may be influenced by romantic feelings.

A final point regarding Waller's valuable study: though she tries to point out racial differences when they exist, the small size of her sample compels her to analyze her findings as a whole without paying adequate attention to differences in context which may be significantly influenced by race. Nonetheless, the implications of race are present throughout the book. In her introduction, for example, she points out that white, low-income fathers were the most difficult to recruit as study subjects.

Given the complications involved in interviewing low-income African American fathers, it is ironic that white fathers--a group more integrated into the mainstream economy and housing market--were the most difficult group to reach. Like unmarried white mothers, white fathers of children on welfare usually reside in mixed-income, suburban communities in New Jersey. In these neighborhoods, men rarely hang out on the street, in part because the majority of white men hold jobs" (16).

Waller also notices that compared to her white respondents, her black respondents seemed to have more in common as a group. These observations may not be unrelated to each other. The greater uniformity in the values and beliefs of the black respondents may be influenced by the frequency with which men hang out and exchange ideas and information on the streets of segregated urban neighborhoods. They may also reflect the commonality of



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circumstances in the black community. As Waller notes, "African American parents, compared with white parents, seem more easily able to imagine how an unmarried father can be actively involved with his child, perhaps because non-marital childbearing is more common in African American communities" (52). I will add that their ability to do so may also reflect the higher number of African-American women who have children with multiple fathers. Significant differences in circumstances and family forms between white and black low-income families cannot be ignored in any research attempting to understand the beliefs and informal practices of fatherhood in low-income families.

Despite the limitations of her methodology, Waller admirably succeeds in providing "a useful account of which beliefs prevail in low-income communities, how parents express their beliefs through informal practices, and how these beliefs and practices interact with public policy and conflict with the assumptions and regulations of the child support systems"(1). Her research offers the sociological study of low-income fathers a solid ground for an investigation into how various beliefs get enacted and transacted in low-income communities and their implications for inner-city fatherhood. Twenty years after Waller's interviews, new norms for fatherhood, family forms, and gender are pervading the cultural repertoires of low-income fathers and their families. A detailed ethnographic study on how low-income fatherhood may be responding to these changes is both timely and necessary.

### **Edin, Tach and Mincy (2009)**

Edin, Tach and Mincy (2009) use quantitative data from "The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study" along with qualitative data from intensive interviews with 165 fathers in high-

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poverty communities in Philadelphia in order to investigate nuances of paternal involvement among low-income men. Their quantitative investigation documents four significant variations in paternal involvement by race.

First, African-American children are significantly less likely than white or Hispanic children to live with their fathers. Consequently, non-residence makes it difficult for African-American fathers to experience "automatic" fatherhood, defined as "a situation where there are few, if any, impediments to frequent father-child contact" (159).

Second, African-American fathers are more likely than Hispanic and white fathers to maintain romantic relationships with the mother outside of a coresidential union. Due to racial differences in residential status, "Black fathers must work harder to maintain similar levels of intensive and regular contact, which they do" (159).

Third, upon termination of coresidence, decline in paternal involvement over time is less steep among African American men than among white and Hispanic men. The authors suspect that this lesser decline reflects the finding that unmarried African-American couples with children are more likely to live apart while being romantically involved. "In sum, African American fathers accomplish their overall rates of involvement mainly through negotiated visitation, while white and Hispanic fathers are more likely to achieve high rates of involvement through coresidence" (161).

Fourth, while among white couples the father's subsequent relationships are more strongly correlated with a decline in paternal involvement than are those of the mother, a different pattern exists among Hispanic and African-American couples. Among African Americans, the father's declining involvement in a child's life is more strongly associated with

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the mother's than the fathers' entry into new relationships. "This gendered pattern suggests a willingness on the part of the father to remain involved regardless of his other familial commitments, but less willingness on the part of the mother to facilitate the involvement once she establishes a new family" (161).

After documenting these racial patterns, Edin, Tach and Mincy move on to qualitative data to "explore the mechanisms that underlie the strong statistical associations between both men's behaviors and men and women's transition into subsequent relationships." They present life narratives of three men from their study as intimate representations of a relatively large sample of 165 low-income fathers. The qualitative interviews provide evidence that the low-income fathers in their study place a high value on their roles as fathers, reject the "package deal" notion that a father's relationship to a child is contingent on the mother, and hold inconsistent beliefs about the importance of biological ties in the enactment of fatherhood.

In addition to exploring the beliefs of these low-income fathers, the authors also discuss the ways in which changing relationships can affect paternal involvement in the long term. Subsequent relationships increase the transaction costs of staying involved with children after a breakup because obligations to new families constrain a father's resources and time. Furthermore, securing the cooperation of all parties involved – including that of new partners – may be complicated by sexual jealousy. This point about the influence of new partners is valuable as it shows how paternal involvement can be shaped not only by the mother and father's behaviors and beliefs, but also by the behaviors and beliefs of other kin and non-kin relationships.

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The article's three representative cases illustrate some of their findings and themes. All three anecdotes express the salience of fatherhood and the rejection of the package deal. Nonetheless, conclusions regarding a father's decision to prioritize new family members as a consequence of new obligations is not apparent. For example, the authors assert that "faced with real limitations of resources and time, fathers often found that if they wanted to play the father role to their full satisfaction, the new relationship required most of the resources they had to invest" (169). This quote seems to imply the concept of "selective fathering" as it appears in Edin and Nelson (2013). Yet, there is little indication in any of the three cases that Edin, Tach and Mincy use to represent the larger sample to support this idea. On the contrary, each anecdote shows the father's determination to maintain ties with his children. Based on the anecdotes offered, dwindling involvement appears to be more the consequence of the mother's gatekeeping behaviors than the father's conscious decision to prioritize new relationships. Perhaps, the cases the authors chose to highlight were not representative of their larger sample. Or, since their analysis was based solely on the father's voice, perhaps the fathers blamed the mother unfairly in order to cover up inadequate efforts of involvement. Regardless, Edin, Tach and Mincy do not speak sufficiently in their discussion about the influence of gatekeeping behaviors in the outcomes illustrated by their anecdotes— a rather strange omission given the way it pervades all three stories. Their quantitative analysis also highlights a mother's influence on long-term father involvement. Their findings suggest that a decline in father involvement is caused by a mother's desire to enact a package deal with a new partner.

While the quantitative data Edin, Tach and Mincy compiled does reveal racial nuances and confirm earlier evidence that African-American fathers are more resistant to the "package

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deal," their qualitative rendering fails to offer any new insight into why racial variations exist or the mechanisms through which race becomes significant. For example, if African-American men engage in higher rates of paternal involvement after break-up, is this because they are more effective in negotiating strategies regarding visitations, or because African-American women are less likely to gatekeep? Such questions are critical if we are to move beyond noting racial differences in the enactment of fatherhood to understanding why differences exist and persist. Since their sample was relatively large and made up of equivalent numbers of African American, white, and Puerto Rican fathers (Philadelphia's dominant Hispanic group) the decision not to focus on the diverse contexts due to racial variation is notable.

Edin, Tach and Mincy summarize their research with two major points:

Thus, while the conventional wisdom might assume that unmarried fathers are uninvolved because they are eager to evade responsibility for their progeny, our results suggest a very different story. This analysis suggests that declining rates of father involvement are primarily due to unmarried women's and men's eagerness to enact a cultural ideal of parenting that views it as a package deal.

They also confirm Mincy and Pouncy's (2007) claim that the "baby father" role in African American communities is growing more institutionalized. "African American fathers are therefore more likely to remain in regular contact with their children even after entering into relationships with new partners and having children with them" (171). Yet, their two conclusions reveal an interesting distinction. A focused investigation on the mechanisms through which race shapes such a distinct experience for low-income African-American fathers is critical as non-residential fathering becomes more common across both race and class lines. While African-American fathers have long been typecast as "hit and run" fathers, they are well ahead of

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their peers in maintaining involvement in "non-intact" families. Understanding their strategies in this particular context would be useful to policy interventions as noted by Mincy and Pouncy (2007) preliminary analysis of data drawn from the New Orleans portion of the Louisiana Fragile Family Study.

First, the “magic moment” associated with father involvement lasts much longer than the period in which the parents will feel a romantic commitment to each other. Therefore, the time frame for services that maintain the father’s involvement with the child is much longer than the time frame for providing family strengthening services to couples. (24)

### **Edin and Nelson (2013)**

In *Doing the Best I Can*, Edin and Nelson draw on the stories of 110 – 55 black and 55 white –low-income men to render the meaning and experiences of fatherhood in two inner-city neighborhoods, Camden, New Jersey and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Edin and Nelson's study was prompted by their original inquiry: "Is it true that these [low income] fathers simply don't care about the children they conceive" (p. 16)? Edin and Nelson chronicle the lives of the study participants in seven empirical chapters, describing the experiences of these men as they journey through the phases of courtship, conception, birth, and fatherhood. As Edin and Nelson never intend to go beyond interviews, their work lays the groundwork for an ethnographic approach to their broader question "what does fatherhood mean in the lives of low-income, inner city men?"

Each chapter holds a central finding. Chapter 1 finds that it is the combination of tenuous relationships and lack of active condom use which create unplanned children. Chapter 2 reveals that despite the unexpected pregnancies, low-income men are happy to become fathers evoking

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initial desires to work towards the ideal family type. Chapter 3 discusses how the men are unable to stop doing "stupid shit" in order to commit fully to their women and provide stable families for their children. So, low-income fathers unwittingly try to forge direct relationships with their children without committing to the mothers. Chapter 4 shows that the fathers cannot live up to the traditional father ideal that they value so instead they develop a "doing the best I can" ethos, which enables them to deal cognitively with their failure to resemble Ward Cleaver, the ideal father figure in the 1960s television program, *Leave it to Beaver*. Consequently, these men redefine fatherhood in such a way as to value their role as a moral guide, friend, or "uncle" and thus privilege quality time with kids rather than consistency as an authoritative figure and breadwinner (Chapter 5). Unfortunately, these redefinitions are inadequate for mothers and institutions, so fathers ultimately do not succeed in enacting the "new package deal," a family form that de-emphasizes the relationship with the mother while seeking a direct relationship with the child. Instead, fathers embrace what Edin and Nelson define as a radical redefinition of family life where the father-child bond is prioritized over the parental tie. However, implementing this new model is difficult and due to a lack in the "emotional mettle" needed to persevere, the low-income fathers leave and try again by fathering a child with another woman (Chapter 6). Chapter 7 reveals that after much trial and error, some men do succeed at remaining involved as fathers and are able to gain the title of being a good dad. Chapter 8 concludes that serial and selective fathering among low-income men lowers the bar of fatherhood since a man can gain the "whole fatherhood experience" with one child while leaving the raising of his unselected kids to the mothers, an arrangement that the authors lament is "a poor bargain for American women and children."

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To provide the data for their study, Edin and Nelson resided part-time in the communities for two years gaining access to men who would have been difficult to reach through standard interview recruitment protocols. Their findings are informed mainly by interviews and informal conversations about the men's accounts of their past and present lives. Edin and Nelson are able to provide insight into the thoughts and justifications low-income men express regarding their fatherhood experiences. Their research strategy creates an important space for researchers who wish to fill in the details on how thoughts and justifications associate with the day-to-day experiences and behaviors of the subjects. This is important material to fill in, because the way in which someone perceives and explains his or her intentions prior to or after an action can vary tremendously from the act itself. One strategy ethnographers employ to compare intentions and actions is by observing their subjects and making comparisons between what participants say to what they actually do.

Edin and Nelson accurately point out that women's accounts overshadow sociological perspectives of inner city fatherhood. Yet, they swing the pendulum too far to the other extreme. Part of what limits our understanding of fatherhood in the inner city arises from thinking of the stories of low-income fathers as *his* versus *hers* rather than as perspectives that require juxtaposition. Edin and Nelson's study is based almost exclusively on the voices of the fathers in the community. This leaves some readers wishing for an understanding that is not limited to the author's and the father's perspectives. For example, there is an unsettling assertion on page 102. "But there is seldom anyone in the larger community who is really "for" this young couple and works to ensure their survival." This is a serious indictment of the families and community members in Camden and Philadelphia, and their research strategy presents them with little



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opportunity to present evidence to support or justify it. This creates an opening for researchers who wish to exploit the advantage of access to the larger community population to investigate the role of the community in the survival of emergent families.

The methodological decision to exclude the voices and experience of women zooms the lens of culpability of broken families squarely on the fathers, with little context of female agency within the maternal domain of childrearing. Edin and Nelson assert that low-income fathers set themselves up for failure by exhibiting three "flaws" which concede their rights to their children from conception. First, they engage in an undefined relationship that is "more than casual" but "not really serious"; Second, they leave birth control up to the woman, and third, they leave the decision to undergo an abortion up to her as well. Fathers should therefore not complain when their rights to their children are not respected in the future. "When couples break up, as they usually do, and he wants some say in parenting, he will frequently complain that his ex-partner acts like she 'owns the child.' But how can he really protest that she's in the driver's seat when he is the one who put her there in the first place?" (p. 69). While flaws 1 and 2 can be identified as liabilities of both low-income men and women, with flaw 3 one wonders about the true culpability of men. The extent of a man's influence on whether or not a pregnancy is brought to term depends on the mother. While one can argue ethically and morally that a father "should" have a say, physically the decision is hers.

Edin and Nelson's research focuses overwhelmingly on the characteristics of fathers as they seek to explain why some men manage to stay involved and others do not.

We devoted the first part of this chapter to detailing common barriers to father involvement, as well as the factors that facilitate dad's ability to stay involved. These factors are dynamic and multifaceted; at any given time it is the alignment between the

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father's and the mother's circumstances and attitudes, as well as the child's that often makes or breaks his ability to be involved. But while understanding these barriers and facilitators may be necessary, it is not sufficient. Some, like Ritchie and Holloway [fathers in their study], manage to rise above in the face of tremendous difficulties, while others' good intentions are easily thwarted. We've argued here for the importance of father's commitment and their psychological resources--by the latter we mean the emotional mettle to carry on when staying involved becomes difficult and even painful (p. 177).

Edin and Nelson offer Ritchie and Holloway as examples of men with higher levels of emotional strength which enables them to overcome obstacles, including the attempts of their children's mothers to keep them away from their children. While Edin and Nelson are careful to mention that their study does not intend to analyze individual characteristics or contexts, emotional mettle is indeed a psychological – albeit a social psychological – individual-level characteristic. The concept of emotional mettle is interesting but begs the inquiry of what barriers and facilitators affects a low-income father's emotional mettle?

Father involvement is a dynamic process and our perspective of these men is influenced by whether we couch their actions in terms of perseverance or persistence. The former requires success, ignores process, and downplays obstacles. One cannot be said to have persevered despite the strongest of efforts if one does not succeed. While we do hope that higher numbers of low-income fathers will persevere, greater attention to the way in which persistence is shaped and defined by the actions of fathers and by the inner city environment that surrounds them is critical. It also leads us to different sociological inquiries with different conclusions. For Edin and Nelson, a father who does not persevere in his existing relationship and instead moves on to try all over again with a new partner and new child is flawed in his character. Yet, are selective

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and serial fathering really character flaws endemic to low-income fathers? Or, can the decision to try fatherhood multiple times be considered a decision shaped by limited opportunities to overcome the barriers of enacting fatherhood with a particular child as a non-resident father? What determines whether a father will persist in a barrier-ridden environment? Without intimate knowledge of the day-to-day experiences of fatherhood, it is difficult to answer these questions.

According to Edin and Nelson, one of the most significant barriers to long-term father involvement for low-income fathers is an unwitting belief in their ability to successfully enact "the new package deal," defined as the commitment to the child without the commitment to his or her mother. They refer to this as a "profound form of self-deception" (p. 102) and cite research that shows dramatic declines in paternal involvement after a relationship break-up to demonstrate that the new package deal is not a workable solution. Edin, Tach and Mincy's (2009) data, however, indicate that the father's involvement usually declines after a mother enters a new relationship. There is no similar tendency when a father enters a new relationship. So, though a man may find it challenging to stay in contact with his child if he seeks to enact the new package deal, the problem may not necessarily lie in the relationship model itself.

This points to an underlying bias of the research toward viewing marriage and commitment as the appropriate family structure most suited for a meaningfully involved father. This bias is also apparent in Edin, Tach and Mincy (2009) as well. At a time when fathers are increasingly residing outside the child's primary residence and non-intact family structures are gradually becoming the new norm for families across racial and socio-economic lines, this stance seems antiquated. As family norms change in America, it is becoming increasingly important to move discussions beyond implications wrought with normative underpinnings that

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value particular family forms. While it is crucial for us to understand how family forms shape the outcome of children within the context of race and class, clinging to past family formations because they worked for past definitions of fatherhood and notions of family may be limiting our ability to understand how meaningful fatherhood can exist outside the ideal family form.

Once we consider trends in household structures and loosen our normative values of ideal family forms, there is space in the literature to inquire, what is the context in which children can be raised successfully within the new package deal model? Although the authors dismiss the new package deal, theoretically the idea that a child's relationship to the father should be direct and not secondary to his relationship to the mother may make more sense in new fatherhood models emphasizing nurturing relationships between man and child.

Edin and Nelson's rejection of the new package deal as a worthwhile family model may be partly explained by how it ultimately gets enacted by low-income men. Unlike their middle class counterparts, lower-income men who take on this new package deal do not assume both traditional and new father tasks.

In the end, though, these men's bold attempt to refashion fatherhood often fails because it is too bold and too out of synch with what mothers and the wider culture demands. While middle-class men have moved at least somewhat toward androgyny in the domestic sphere, taking on both traditional and some new father tasks simultaneously, lower-class fathers have tried to bargain for a wholesale reversal of gender norms, and--ironically--their partners and wider culture often judge them as "deadbeats" precisely because of it. The combination of 'approach' (embracing fatherhood's softer side) and "avoid" (assigning the traditional responsibilities mostly to the mother) is part of what propagates father failure. The new package deal--which men hold to like religion--is the new father ideology taken to its extreme. (225)

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Edin and Nelson are writing about fathers, who despite their desires to fulfill the traditional role of breadwinning, must function within the domestic sphere. Unlike, their middle class counterparts they are less likely to have the options to choose from traditional and new father tasks. With inadequate employment, they are obliged to the domestic sphere. But, are lower class fathers actually bargaining for wholesale reversal of gender norms or simply rationalizing their circumstances? And, are they in fact avoiding and assigning traditional responsibilities to the mother or trying to deal with the dissonance between their circumstances and their beliefs? Edin and Nelson point out in the chapter entitled "Ward Cleaver" that many low-income men firmly believe that the ideal of breadwinning is central to the traditional American father ideal.

Research suggests that race may play a role in the successful enactment of new package deal models. Black men have higher rates of involvement in non-intact families than do white and Hispanic fathers in similar circumstances. Yet, the context of race in the circumstances, behavior, and implications of fatherhood among inner city men is not prioritized in Edin and Nelson's research. Edin and Nelson assert, "This is not a book about race; though we note racial difference when they occur, they are more in degree than in kind. In this narrative, where black and white men live in more similar contexts than in most places, racial differences are far outweighed by shared social class" (17). Some might question this claim given what we know about the African-American family in America, and its unique characteristics, such as extended kinship ties and an inclination towards matriarchy, all of which have consequences for father behavior and long term involvement, especially in this era of new fatherhood. Additionally, the rampant historical racial stereotyping of black men and black families fashions a unique context for fatherhood in black communities.

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Edin and Nelson open their book with a discussion of two pivotal media moments that cemented the stereotypical image of the absent father in the public mind: Moynihan's 1965 report, *The Negro Family: A Call to National Action*, and the 1986 CBS special report of two decades later, *The Vanishing Family: Crisis in Black America*. The crisis of absentee fathers in black communities, which Moynihan brought to the attention of the American public, received even more pointed criticism in the Bill Moyer report. Showcased here was Timothy McSeed, an archetype of the deadbeat dad – an unemployed black man with a criminal record who had fathered six children by four different mothers and stated on national television: "Well, the majority of the mothers are on welfare; what I'm not doing the government does." The report, which caused public outrage, influenced the enactment of many laws that tightened child support collection from men and curtailed welfare benefits for women. Edin and Nelson describe public reactions to Timothy McSeed. After watching the show, for example, they tell of how one viewer "drove past a young black couple and found himself reacting with violent emotion" (p. 3). While it is important to understand the implications of class on fathering behaviors, the negative images of black men as deadbeat fathers should lead to an analytical framework that pays significant attention to race. Moreover, a father's involvement with his child is influenced by the support and responses he receives from kin, neighbors, organizations and institutions. Such responses from his immediate environment are affected by race in addition to class.

Although Edin and Nelson do point out distinctions between their white and black respondents, they miss certain key issues because race does not play a central role in their analytical lens. For example, in Chapter 1 they discuss why men do not take an active stance to avoid having children by wearing a condom or ensuring that the woman is on the pill. This lack

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of active avoidance, which they interpret as feelings of a "fatherhood pull" or desire for children, becomes a grey area, in which children are "semi-planned," that is, neither clearly intended nor clearly unintended. Distinct from the semi-planned pregnancies, is another category, which Edin and Nelson label "just not thinking." They do not offer a clear analytical distinction between "semi-planned" and "just not thinking" except to note that some of the men who are not thinking may occasionally use condoms.

The data in Table 3 (*Level of pregnancy intentionality*) of their Appendix show no difference by race in the two categories where fathers were actively intending children or actively not intending children. Much of the difference between black and white fathers' pregnancy intentions occur in the mid-range categories of "semi-planned" and "just not thinking" categories. More of their black respondents fell in the "just not thinking" category while more of the white respondents fell in the "semi-planned" category. Edin and Nelson neither point out nor discuss the potential causes or implications of these racial differences. It is difficult to know whether the difference lies in how the men were coded into these two categories, or if there actually was a cultural difference in the retroactive rationalization of pregnancies that were not planned. Why are white low-income men more likely to assert what appears to be some sort of agency in planning? Is this real or simply a difference in cultural language?

Another example of where an analysis by race would have been helpful lies in their discussion of the consequences of serial parenting. In 2010, a separate study found that 59% of African-American mothers have children by multiple fathers<sup>6</sup> as compared to 22% of white

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<sup>6</sup> The study's author, Cassandra Dorius, a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, presented her findings at the Population Association of America using data of 4000 women from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth.

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mothers. It is important to understand the implications of the prevalence of family structures in black and white families. Such differences may have a significant impact on the relationships of fathers to their children. For instance, higher levels of involvement of black fathers in non-intact families may be influenced by their community's greater tolerance for a circumstance which is more prevalent. Similarly, perhaps consequences of serial parenting might also be mitigated due to the experience of the community. This also points to the need to understand the role that extended family and community members play in the involvement of fathers in general.

In their introduction, Edin and Nelson surmise that:

By examining the unfolding stories of these men's lives beginning at courtship, and moving through conception, birth, and beyond, we come to see that the "hit and run" image of unwed fatherhood Moyers created by showcasing Timothy McSeed is a caricature and not an accurate rendering--a caricature that obscures more than it reveals. Some readers will argue that our portrayal is no more sympathetic, or less disturbing, than Moyers's. Other will find seeds of hope in these stories albeit mixed with a strong dose of disheartening reality. But getting the story right is critical if we hope to craft policies to improve the lives of inner city men and women and, of course, their children (18).

The methodological decision not to embed the behaviors of fathers within the families and communities they reside in and their de-emphasis of the agency of women leave us with a scholarly representation of low-income men that falls short of the authors' intentions. It is clear at times, that Edin and Nelson understand the value of the alignment of maternal and paternal voices (p. 173), as well as the importance of community context (p. 6). Yet, while they declare the necessity of both to true comprehension of unmarried fatherhood, they fall short of their own stated goals. At first glance, the title "Doing the Best I Can" suggests a study that offers insight



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into the persistence of low-income fathers despite the overwhelming barriers to their long-term involvement with their children. After a careful reading of the book, the phrase "Doing the Best I Can" comes across as a lame excuse of the sort that Timothy McSeed would utter rather than an earnest declaration.

### **Race and place in understanding fatherhood in low-income communities**

Both Waller (2002) and Edin and Nelson (2013) attempt to address characteristics of low-income men in urban communities at the neighborhood level. As an analytical strategy, both dismiss race as a core part of their methodological framework. While understanding the implications of class on fathering behavior is important, ubiquitous negative images of black men as deadbeat fathers call for an analytic framework that will pay significant attention to race. Edin, Tach and Mincy (2009) clearly show the existence of racial differences, but, we are left with questions regarding thru which mechanisms race becomes significant. Answering these questions demands a research strategy that prioritizes the unique context of the urban black community on fatherhood. In discussions of fatherhood, race is central to understanding the behaviors and strategies of black low-income men, who must overcome obstacles created not only by a lack of resources but also by negative assessments of their intentions based on the stigma of their skin color.

Moreover, a father's involvement with his child is influenced by support and responses from kin, neighbors, organizations, and institutions. In addition to social and structural disadvantages, such as high rates of unemployment and incarceration, that may operate in impoverished neighborhoods, local relationships in an urban community context are important

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for investigating how fathering values, beliefs and norms are transmitted through networks of family, friends, and neighbors. Within macro levels of the structural condition of poverty, lie other forces that influence a man's choice to stay or leave. Poor neighborhoods, in particular, are often socially isolated (Klinenberg 2002; Wilson, 1987), yet local relations, interactions, and conversations often occur in the public domain due to the over-crowded conditions of urban living (Suttles, 1970). Life and conversation, especially of black men, are often pushed to street corners, parks, and tertiary places such as bars, *bodegas* and barbershops (Oldenburg, 1999), enabling the diffusion of ideas and allowing viewpoints to be easily exchanged and behaviors easily witnessed. The social isolation of a community coupled with opportunities for public discourse may encourage certain ideas and values, such as that of the male caretaker, to spread and strengthen. This is especially poignant at a time when mainstream norms regarding family forms and gender roles are changing. New definitions of fatherhood roles may benefit low-income families, but whether these new ideas catch-on within isolated communities will determine the future of urban fatherhood.

Although there is some indication that black fathers may be better at navigating the challenges of living away from the home and maintaining involvement with children, non-residence is a formidable barrier to sustaining an emotional attachment between father and child that often begins at the "magic moment" (McLanahan et al., 2003) of a child's birth. Since biological fathers today are far less likely than biological mothers to reside with their children, defining a father's role becomes that much more difficult. Residential status may appear to be a simple measurable construct but proves to be more complex due to frequently changing household compositions—the results of divorce or separation—over the course of a child's life.

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Measuring residential status among poor families with unmarried parents poses additional challenges as men often divide their time between multiple residences (unpublished data cited by Coley, 2001). Additionally, household composition may not always be reported truthfully in low-income households due to fears about eligibility for welfare and other benefits. A study of urban African-American families found a 23% discrepancy rate between daughters and mothers' reports of the residency status of the father or father figure (unpublished data cited by Coley, 2001).

Fathering relationships within households in which male residence is frequently in transition or undocumented are worthy of specialized studies. Unemployed men, regardless of residential status, may also struggle to define their roles as fathers if their contributions are not largely economic. Partners of unemployed men may struggle with this role definition as well. An inability to balance actual roles with ideologies may negatively affect romantic relationships and, ultimately, household stability. The challenge of mapping out a fathering role for someone unemployed or not living with his child may impact the intimacy and longevity of his relationship with that child.

Since male unemployment and non-residence are now more common than ever, understanding these relationships is important to figuring out what factors and circumstances are beneficial for the productive rearing of a child outside of the traditional American family structure. Black families have operated with unemployed and non-resident fathers longer than has the typical American family, and may thus be able to shed light on the implications and strategies for raising children without an employed or resident father. For example, although paternal involvement generally drops sharply after a partner relationships end, such a decline is

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less dramatic among African-American fathers (Edin, Tach & Mincy 2009). Researchers claim that these trends suggest that the fathering role outside of marriage may be more strongly institutionalized in the black community, and that black fathers may have better coping mechanisms or models in place to deal with non-residential fatherhood.

This dissertation is a re-examination of the families in an urban black community using the father as its lens. The privacy of family life within often isolated, urban communities coupled with the marginalized position black men have occupied in their families have limited our knowledge of black men in their struggle to be family men despite economic and cultural constraints. This study situates both the obstacles and strategies of fathers within their day-to-day interactions with their children, partners, kin and extended kin, friends and neighbors as well as community organizations and institutions.

In the wake of changing social norms about fatherhood and family structures, wider cultural repertoires about fatherhood may now exist among low-income parents. This study investigates how the values, beliefs, and norms of fatherhood are transmitted within an urban community context. In addition to exchanges between neighbors, interactions between people and local organizations need to be understood as nodes in networks that can influence the diffusion of values, beliefs, and norms across a community. I focus on the meso level of the ecological framework and aim to increase knowledge of how community-level interactions in low-income neighborhoods influence the fathering behaviors of black men. This dissertation explores how kin, neighbors and community organizations can shape the roles of fathers, especially in the wake of conflicting beliefs around a man's place in his family.

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Although I narrow my lens to black fathers and their relationships with their children, I rely on this population to generate knowledge about fathering in general at a time when structural constraints such as unemployment and/or non-residence in the child's household occur more frequently across America. Although the trend of female-headed families hit poor black communities first and hardest, a crisis once deemed solely a black one, has gradually become an American one. The number of children living in households without a father has increased dramatically across racial and socio-economic lines (Eggebeen, 2002). The growing trend of fathers not living with their children may arguably be one of the factors driving the surge of research in the areas of fatherhood and fathering practices over the last 20 years. Modern American society has gradually come to grips with the realization that its families are less likely to assume the traditional nuclear form, that is, with employed fathers and stay-at-home mothers. Instead, families are taking on ever more complex and variable forms such as single parent households, blended step-families, and gay partnerships (Stacey, 1990). Family forms have also become more mutable, often varying in structure over the course of a child's life.

Along with changes in contemporary family structures, swift and rampant changes in gender norms, influenced in part by feminist and gay rights movements, have become more common. Both academics and lay people have begun to challenge once widely held assumptions about gender and gender roles, such as mother- and fatherhood. Recent academic attention on fatherhood emphasizes the concept of "new fathering," a modification in fathering identity that includes a focus on emotional attachment to the child in addition to breadwinning (Dermott, 2003).

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This dissertation investigates the past and current understanding of father involvement of black men within the framework of the private and public faces of fathering in a black urban community that is now being influenced by shifting family norms. While past portrayals of the public landscape of urban black neighborhoods largely confirm men without children, this ethnography set in Bedford Stuyvesant, in Brooklyn, New York, paints a completely different community scene. In it, men and children can frequently be found together. Black men's connection to their children is occurring more in the sight of the public's eye. While it may be easy to dismiss, downplay or misconstrue the actions of one exceptional incidence of a black man with his child in public, abundant occurrences may compel observers to pay more attention to the variations of urban fatherhood in and outside of the household. The major research questions addressed here are as follows:

- How have public displays of father involvement changed over the last decade?  
Over the last generation?
- How do low-income black men father? What are their strategies and approaches?  
What influences their engagement?
- What roles do organizations and institutions play in father involvement and  
fathering practices?

### Overview of the Dissertation

#### Chapter 2- *Men with children: The changing landscape of urban fatherhood*

This chapter describes public displays of men with children in Bed Stuy and the influence these have on both fathers and the larger community. New norms of fatherhood and their implication

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on public and private fathering behaviors of black fathers are discussed. This chapter also introduces the concept of escorting as a way of measuring the public display of fathering over a ten-year period at a community head-start. Finally it discusses the connection between escorting and other public displays of fathering to less observable fathering behaviors in the home.

### Chapter 3- *In and out: Poses and performances of black fathers*

This chapter explains the gap between publically observable fathering behaviors in Bed Stuy and what residents actually notice. It also discusses how fathers reconcile the contradicting norms of manliness versus fatherhood and how their strategies are influenced by peers and the media, particularly hip-hop and reality television.

### Chapter 4- *Something between all and nothing: Strategies for keeping hold of family*

This chapter focuses on the strategies men employ to secure a solid and central place in their family and particularly a direct relationship with their child. These include navigating fluctuating household composition, managing relations with the mother of the child, and dealing with the burden and emasculation of an income inadequate for supporting children.

### Chapter 5- *The black maternal garden: The maternal domain within the context of extended kinship and fictive kinship*

This chapter discusses at length the implications of extended family kinship in the black community on father involvement. The significant role that maternal and paternal mothers play in a father's involvement is closely examined.

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### Chapter 6- *A woman's world: Finding a place in the urban matriarchal village*

This chapter shows how local organizations shape father involvement. It also describes how the individual beliefs of community members can steer organizations in ways that foster or inhibit father involvement.

### Chapter 7- *Conclusion*

The final chapter summarizes the main findings and insights of all the chapters and discusses the broader implications of contemporary fatherhood for black men, their families, and society in general.

### Methods

In order to understand the daily lives of black fathers residing in Bed Stuy and their attempts to navigate institutions and personal relationships, I employ primarily an ethnographic approach, supplemented by quantitative analysis of administrative and survey data from a local Head Start. My methodological concern here is to use the best approach for gaining in-depth understanding of the everyday lives of black fathers over a prolonged period.

Ethnography is well suited for studying the context in which black men navigate their fathering roles beyond the limited definitions of father involvement, such as financial provision and a tabulated amount of time spent with a child. Moving beyond data drawn from interviews, ethnography leads to a deeper understanding of the day-to-day successes and failures of fathers' involvement in their children's lives. Such an understanding extends beyond what men (or their partners) say, by juxtaposing what they say with what they do and how they do it. Ethnography



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also examines micro-level behavior on a day-to-day level over a substantial period of time (Goffman, 1959). Through its methods I can amass details about interactions between fathers and children and extrapolate meaning that will raise academic literature to a level that goes beyond the sheer documentation of the existence of father and child interactions within low-income minority communities.

Given that this methodology is based primarily on participant observation and immersion in the field, one may believe that the lack of detailed documentation on father-child relationships in urban ethnography simply reflects the lack of these bonds in the everyday lives of these men. It is also possible that the research questions it has asked thus far have not required any examination of father-child relationships, and thus fathering practices among black men have been overlooked and subsequently downplayed in analyses and write-ups.

### *Field Site*

I have chosen Bedford Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, New York, as my field site. Fewer than 40 years ago this community was labeled “the largest ghetto in the country” (Stein 1975, as cited by Echanove, 2003). Now it has become a historical-cultural haven for young middle class professionals of diverse ethnicities, rising property values, and declining crime rates. From its indigent past, Bed Stuy has changed dramatically but not necessarily uniformly. According to the 2010 Census data, the neighborhood is 60 percent black, down dramatically from 75 percent only a decade ago (Roberts, 2011). Much of the new gentry is white.

Yet despite this influx, concentrated poverty and its corollaries of high crime rates, poor health outcomes, and unstable housing conditions are still a significant problem. According to a published report entitled “Concentrated Poverty in New York City” (2012), the concentrated

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poverty rate—the proportion of people in a specific geographic area who live in extreme poverty—in Bed Stuy rose from 2006 to 2010—one of only eight communities in New York City to experience this. As new neighbors and businesses move in, primarily around the neighborhood's perimeters and close to subway transportation, many of the community's natives find themselves mired in poverty. According to a 2002 Urban Institute Report, Bed Stuy has the highest prison and jail admission rate as well as the highest parent incarceration rate in Brooklyn. Urban ghetto conditions of high poverty and high crime exist on a block-by-block basis with clusters usually forming around public housing:

In the precinct's muster room, a street map was pocked with colored pins marking the past year's most serious crimes: homicides of any stripe plus all shootings, with or without fatalities. Of some 75 pins, 45 were clustered in the map's southeast corner, near Atlantic and Saratoga, and another ten or so around the Roosevelt Houses, in the north-central part of the precinct. But in the south-central quadrangle of 25 square blocks most coveted by the new gentry, there were but two pins. (Coplon, 2005)

The process of choosing Bed Stuy as my dissertation field site was gradual. I am personally familiar with Bedford Stuyvesant as I was raised in the neighborhood from birth. I grew up in the Roosevelt Houses mentioned in the above excerpt. In 2006, my family and I, looking to find a place of our own in Bed Stuy, ended up moving to a bordering community where housing was cheaper. We moved to Ocean Hill, a few blocks away from Atlantic and Saratoga Avenues, also mentioned in the aforementioned report. Ocean Hill is the name given to a small community nestled between Bedford Stuyvesant and Brownsville, yet most longtime residents as well as older real estate listings consider it a subsection of Brownsville. In the past decade, Ocean Hill has gradually become less associated with Brownsville, a trend that seems to mirror Bedford Stuyvesant's renaissance. Many newer Ocean Hill residents looking for lower

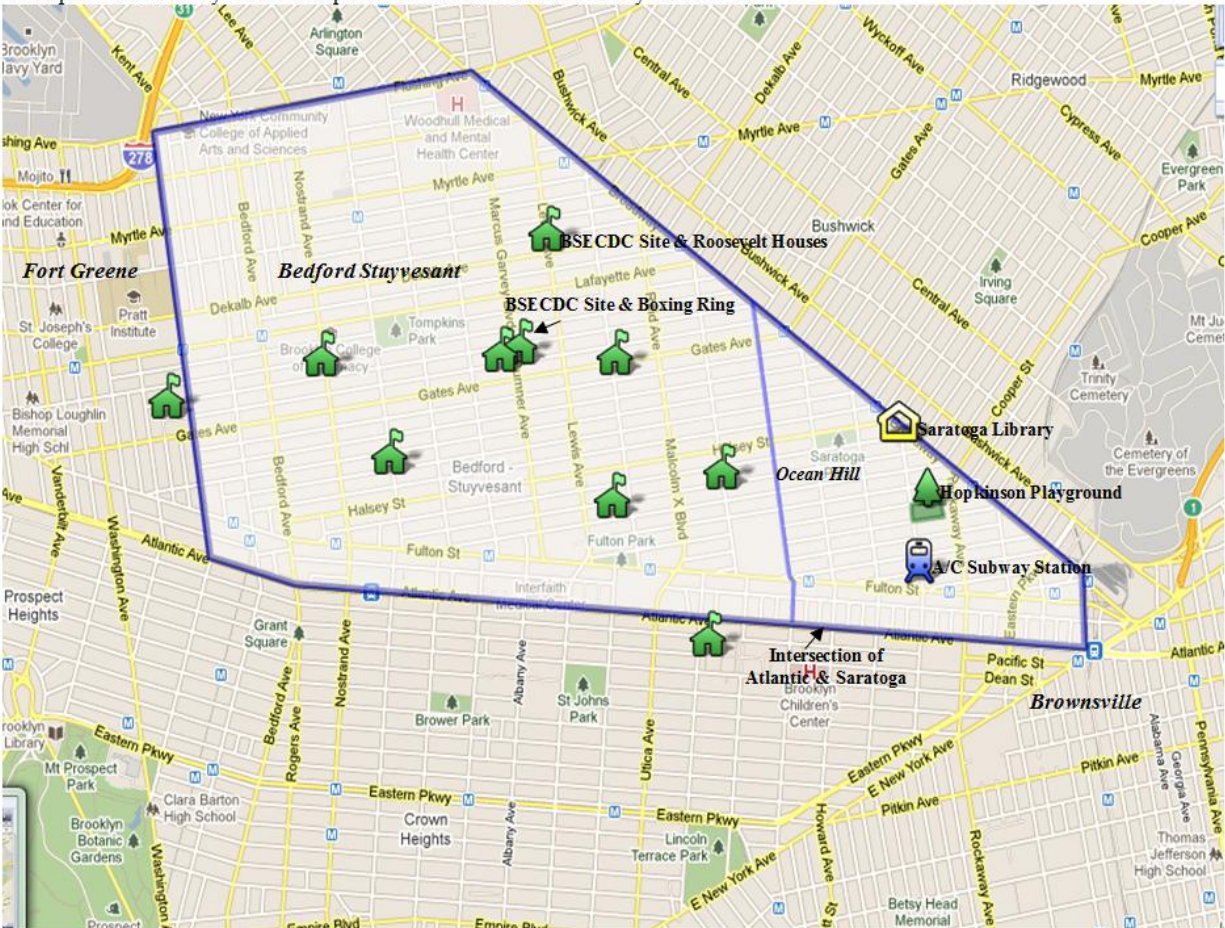
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rents and mortgages consider themselves residents of Bedford Stuyvesant. Nowadays, the news media, real-estate developers, and community boards often refer to Ocean Hill as Bedford Stuyvesant in order to avoid having it seen as neighboring Brownsville, still a symbol of urban blight due to high crime and poverty rates. However, Ocean Hill cannot claim to have been swept up in the borough's recent renaissance, at least not to the extent of its fortunate neighbor. Properties are less preserved than those in nearby Bedford Stuyvesant. Charming cafes, art and clothing boutiques, and charming dive bars do not pop up as frequently. Many of its lots are still empty and have not been replaced by modern condominiums. Yet for the purpose of this dissertation and aligned with current geographical boundaries, Ocean Hill is considered part of the Bed Stuy community.

Since a major focus of my dissertation is concerned with exploring how unemployment interacts with the role of the traditional financial provider, Bed Stuy as a neighborhood in transition allows me to investigate black men with different economic opportunities who still reside in the same neighborhood. Bedford Stuyvesant is home to a strong black middle class, much of which has lived there for decades. The area's gentrification also permits an investigation of the clash of cultural norms with local belief and behaviors.

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A map of Bedford Stuyvesant with points of interest mentioned in my dissertation



### *Social position in the field*

My intellectual pursuit of the extent of change in fatherhood ideas and behaviors in Bed Stuy is in some ways as personal as it is professional. My mother worked, my father did not, at least not consistently or in the formal labor market. Whenever my dad was living with us, he would take us to the park, especially during the summer months. We would get there well before noon and seldom come home until the summer sun had left the darkening sky. Going to the park with my dad meant being there all day. While we played, he never minded us too much as he

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hung out with the other men, playing spades or dominoes. Unless we came up to him crying, hungry or bleeding, we were usually off on our own.

If we fast-forward two decades, my husband is the primary caretaker. Like my father, he does not work a traditional job. Unlike my father, his household contributions are not as sporadic. He gets the children ready for school in the morning, takes them there and to their doctor appointments. Being both a product of and now a factor in the daddy-(sort-of) at-home, mommy-at-work equation makes me very sensitive to the perceptions of this formula as it is applied to families residing in low-income black communities. In many ways I share a background with the participants of my study. I am of the same or similar race and class of the majority of the families in my study. While my background may allow me to relate and understand many of the circumstances of the families in my study, it may also put me at a disadvantage as it may prevent me from questioning familiar perceptions or practices due to a shared experience. Notes and questions by colleagues of different backgrounds have enabled me to check my assumptions and interpretations.

Although I may come from a lower-class background, I am currently a graduate student at an elite institution. Several times the mark of “doing research for Princeton University” separated me from my participants more than my background connected me. People, especially those who knew I attended Princeton and who have a sense of the status of the school, were initially very careful to use terms dealing with race and poverty in ways I found awkward. I often had to tell them more than once that I have lived in Bed Stuy most of my life. When I did so, I was usually met with surprise. These nearly polar differences of “black and from Bed Stuy” and “Ph.D. candidate at Princeton” placed me in what often felt like a nether-world. Many of the

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experiences that my participants told me about were ones to which I could relate directly, however, they explained them to me as if I could not.

This was only part of my experience. In general, my personal history allowed me to establish connections with staff and families, especially as they got to know me and recognized the similarity of our experiences. People easily let their guard down and forgot about my academic pursuits. Being a parent of two children also helped as children have a way of connecting adults. My status as a mother may also have influenced my questions and analyses of the experiences of fathers. Throughout the course of my study, I have been extremely aware of the advantages and disadvantages of my gender, race, class background and current class status to my work. My conflicting social positions have at times served as internal checks and balances for my analysis and writing. The blessing and curse of W.E.B. DuBois's concept of double consciousness haunted me frequently, and I constantly journaled in order to manage my experience. While DuBois focused specifically on race, my sense of double consciousness was a consequence of both my race and class background. Although class is more easily hidden from the outside world than race, it is not as easily hidden from one's consciousness.

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness— an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (DuBois, 1907 p. 3).

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### *Data Collection*

In 2009, as a part of coursework for an ethnography seminar, I began doing participant observation in a neighborhood playground, Hopkinson Playground, down the block from where I was living. I often observed many fathers with their children in the playground during the day. As a mother, I regularly took my two young children there and was struck by the number of fathers I saw. I also started noticing fathers with their children elsewhere — just out and about the community, in the libraries, on the buses and trains, on the corners, and in the streets. However, I could not pinpoint whether this was a new phenomenon or whether I was simply noticing it because I was becoming an ethnographer. I asked family, friends and neighbors as well as the fathers themselves and received various answers. Men with children around the neighborhood seem to be a recent development. Based on time-use studies, the time the average American father spends with children has generally increased (Pleck 1997; Sandberg & Hoeffferth 2001). And, black men who reside with their children are more likely to escort their children daily to and from activities than are other fathers (Jones & Mosher, 2013).

In an attempt find out whether fathers were more frequently escorting children around the community—something that could have explained, at least in part, the noticeable public presence of men with children—I did a phone survey to all the child-care centers in Bedford Stuyvesant/Ocean Hill. Thanks to this phone survey in February 2011, I began cultivating a relationship with the largest of these organizations, Bedford Stuyvesant Early Childhood Development Center (BSECDC). BSECDC operates thirteen child-care centers in Bedford Stuyvesant that served 577 children and their families in 2012. The first year, I worked as an unpaid volunteer with their *Father Initiative Program*, working from their locations 1-3 days

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per week. In year two and beyond, I became a paid researcher and evaluator consultant for the larger organization and worked at their sites 4-5 days per week.

Bedford Stuyvesant Early Childhood Development Center (BSECDC) is a funded Administration for Children's Services (ACS) that has gone through much organizational change over the last couple of years. Founded in 1967, Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation (BSRC), the nation's first community development corporation, added BSECDC to its portfolio of programs and assumed control over all of the organization's financial matters. A new Executive Director was appointed at BSECDC, while the CEO of BSRC officially chairs its new board.

Most of the personnel turnaround occurred at the senior management and board level. Direct service staffing remained relatively unchanged. Most of BSECDC's line staff live in Bed Stuy and share some of the needs and circumstances of the children and families they serve. BSECDC's volunteers and interns are commonly sent there by various welfare and community service programs. Sixty-eight of the 119 current staff members have or have had a child of their own enrolled in the program. Four hundred and thirteen out of 450 volunteers have or have had a child enrolled in the program. ACS funded centers require that most of the youth attending them live in households that are below the federal poverty line.

While conducting my study, I attended various father and family programs, sat in on classrooms with teachers, and hung out in site lobbies as families came either to pick up or drop off their small children. In nice weather, I often went to the park near whatever site I was visiting that day. I observed interactions between fathers and their children, fathers and their partners, fathers and staff members. I also focused on staff interactions. During these observations, I



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seldom asked any direct questions. Whenever I was closely involved, I waited to record my observations afterwards. However, if I was a distant bystander, I recorded interactions into my phone's voice recorder or took notes as they were occurring.

After speaking with the coordinator of the Fatherhood Initiative (an Administration for Children Services mandated initiative) about my interest in learning more about the population of fathers in Bedford Stuyvesant, we realized that my interests concurred with his desire to know whether they were addressing the needs of fathers. I drafted a short survey that took anywhere from 20 to 50 minutes to administer, depending on the responsiveness of the subject. I, or the coordinator, solicited the men as they signed their children in or out of the site. Most fathers obliged upon first solicitation. Others gradually gave in the second or third time around. We hung around during drop off and pick up hours for two weeks at the first site and one week at the second. Responses to the survey questions as well as notes on observed interactions between fathers and their children helped me create the questions and strategies that I used for interviewing staff and family members of children at the Head Start in 2012-2013.

As I met the fathers, I told them that I was doing research on the father experience in Bedford Stuyvesant. Those who were interested arranged a time to come in and do an interview with me after signing a consent form. These semi-formal interviews lasted from 90 minutes to three hours. At the end of the interview, I explained to each father that I was around and that he could determine the extent of our ongoing relationship.

From February to June 2013 I interviewed the teachers at the Head Start. The purpose of these interviews was twofold. First, I wanted to get their general opinions on paternal involvement over the course of their tenure at the organization. Secondly, I wished to gather

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specific data regarding their recollection of fathers escorting class participants for the past ten years. I recorded the subjects as they recalled families; many told stories as they completed the forms. In addition to teachers, I interviewed other staff members such as cooks, custodians, and family workers, most of whom had been with the agency for ten years or more.

My original desire to pursue this study stemmed from my wish to know whether or not fathers in Bedford Stuyvesant and similar communities were more likely now than in the past to be involved in child caretaking. The more visible presence of men with children around the community seemed to suggest so. Yet, while the daily act of taking children to and from activities is associated with co-residence or reflects the consistent presence of a father in his child's life, the relationship of escorting to other father involvement indicators is unclear. Escorting has been presented as a measure of meaningful father involvement but the strength of this exact measure to positive childhood outcomes is unclear.<sup>7</sup> Although I could not find a direct answer to my original question regarding levels of father involvement over time, my data did allow me to measure escorting patterns of Head Start families over the last decade. I used old rosters dating back to 2002 in order to create a worksheet in which teachers could assess the family escorting patterns of each child. I interviewed 46 teachers, and obtained information on the escorting behaviors of fathers of 350 children—on average— each year over the last eleven years. These interviews were recorded to capture anecdotal information.

In order to provide a larger community context for the escorting data and to capture general community perceptions of the trend, I conducted surveys of family members who

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<sup>7</sup> Jones and Mosher (2013) do say that in their report they included the measures they did due to their relationship to positive childhood outcomes.

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escorted children to and from the Head Start over the 2012-2013 school year. As they came in either to pick up or drop off their children, I engaged them in 15-30-minute surveys. These allowed me to capture the voices and experiences of mothers and other family members. It also allowed me to gauge the involvement of fathers who did not serve as escorts. While I surveyed people, they often shared additional details about their lives with me. I took notes of these open-ended conversations.

My dissertation includes multiple sources of data in order to achieve the greatest variation and avoid one potential disadvantage of ethnographic work, namely, that of becoming too engaged with select people or groups and thus narrowing the lens of the researcher (Duneier, 2011). During pick up and drop off, I remained at site locations, but during the more quiet hours between 10am to 2:30pm, I conducted longer interviews, met with fathers who were part of my study, hung out in parks and libraries, and generally took note of the interactions that I observed while walking around the neighborhood, often from site to site. For the last four years I have done intensive observation in Bedford Stuyvesant both inside and outside the confines of BSECDC. While my data collection focused on the families of the Head Start, it also captured and incorporated the experiences of other community members whom I met at parks, stores, subway stations, and simply around the neighborhood. Below is an outline of the multiple sources of data that I collected for my dissertation.

- *Participant Observation:* Fathers and their children were observed in public locations throughout the community, at sites including but not limited to playgrounds, libraries, corner stores, and the subway. Observations were also made within the sites of the Head

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Start. Notes were often written or recorded while observations were occurring. In instances where this was not possible, notes were written or recorded later that day.

- *Ethnographic Participants:* Ten men were extensively followed in ethnographic fashion so that I could gain in-depth understanding of their daily lives. I was in regular contact with them for 1 to 4 years and met their children and family members. They and their family members are identified by pseudonyms throughout the dissertation.
- *Long Interviews-Case Histories:* In addition to the data I amassed on my ethnographic participants, I collected case histories for seven men. For various reasons, I was unable to maintain relationships with these men beyond the 2-4 hour-long interview sessions in which I captured their life histories. They too are identified by pseudonyms in the dissertation.
- *Short Interviews:* Short interviews lasting 20-60 minutes were conducted with 34 fathers who were escorts for children at the Head Start. Most of these interviews included the child. These men are not identified by name in the dissertation.
- *Employee Interviews-* 66 employees of BSECDC were interviewed. 46 were teachers and 20 were additional staff, including custodians, cooks, family workers, and administrative staff. Three of these staff members were interviewed extensively about their life histories. They are identified as Ms. O, Ms. M, and Mr. S. One staff member served as an ethnographic participant after I met her family and followed her for over three years. She is identified as Ms. W.
- *Teacher Recollection of Escort Surveys:* I created the rosters using old copies of administrative forms that had once been sent to city government agencies. I located these

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forms in cardboard boxes in closets among the various sites. Using these forms I constructed rosters with the names of the enrolled children according to year, center, and classroom. I used individual names from the roster to interview teachers on the frequency of fathers escorting each child from 2002- 2013. Forty-six out of 51 teachers participated in this survey, offering data on the escorts of approximately 350 children each year.

- *Escort Surveys:* 194 escorts were surveyed as they came to pick up or drop off children enrolled at the Head Start. These escorts included fathers, mothers, and other family members of the children. Surveys lasted 15-30 minutes and focused on perceptions of father engagement in the neighborhood and on the father of the child being escorted.

### Men with Children: The changing landscape of urban fatherhood

A few times a week, in search of sunshine, fresh air and relief from the indoor antics of two children, I, not wanting to trouble myself with the preparation needed to go far, head with them to a neighborhood playground down the block. We exit our building and wave to the ill-tempered dog and old man who repairs cars in a small makeshift garage next door. Heading down the block, we pass a recently built row of two-family houses and cross the street. Here my two little ones quickly yank their hands from mine and run down the block alongside the ten-foot high, wrought-iron fence that separates the playground, which extends about three-quarters of a city block, from the sidewalk. As my children reach the gate and disappear into the playground, my slower gait places me before a group of nine or so older gentlemen who sit on folded chairs, crates, and boxes outside the park's entrance. On most days we engage in thirty-second pleasantries on how we are feeling, weather, or some behavior of my children as they run by. Today is different. I need their perspective. Five years of regular trips to this park—three strictly as a mom and neighbor, two as an ethnographer—has led me to try to confirm my personal observation that the number of young black men taking care of children seems to be pretty high.

I ask them if they have noticed more fathers with their children in the park. Do they agree that they have been seeing more fathers in the park?

Older man 1: Oh, yes. I see a lot of mens with children. Mothers of course. But men now, too. Before you just used to see the children. No parents. Parents stayed home. But you can't really do that no more. With all the shootings, you know. So the adults be out here. The mens too.

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Older man 2: Cause years ago, oh boy, how can I put it? Most of the mothers had problems with the fathers, the fathers not there with them and everything, so, and now I just see fathers, they get active with their kids and everything, you know, they do a lot of things. Like if you go to places for the kids. I see a lot of fathers, they come they take their kids. Like to the Brooklyn Museum, you know, different things. But, that's what I used to do with my kids. I got five kids of my own.

Three blocks away from Hopkinson Playground is a child-care center. I go in to talk to the Executive Director. She is a short young woman in her early to mid-thirties. I tell her about my dissertation and ask her if there are many involved fathers at the center. She immediately says no. "Not really, maybe a few here and there." "Well," I say, "what about the escorts, have you been seeing more escorts who are fathers than in years past?" She tells me that she has been in her position for only four years, and that not many fathers accompany their children. "Mainly moms."

There is a brief pause as I take notes. When I look up she is looking at me with a puzzled expression on her face. "Why do think there are more fathers?" she asks. I tell her that I live in the neighborhood and I have been seeing more fathers in the park than I remember seeing earlier on. "Well maybe at the parks, but not here. Not at school." We talk some more about my dissertation. Although very nice about it, she questions my hunch. I ask her to spend the next week looking for fathers whom I might be able to interview and tell her that I will call her next Wednesday. She shrugs her shoulders dismissively and says okay. "Good luck with your school," she tells me as she walks me out of her office.

As promised, I call to check in with her. I ask her if there were any fathers who might be interested in participating in my study. "Oh, I didn't get a chance to talk with them, but you

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were right. There are *a lot* of fathers. I never noticed it before.” She seems excited and much more interested in my dissertation than when we had first met. “I have been looking around too, like around here, and I am seeing more dads.” “Really? That’s great. About what percentage?” Oh, I don’t know, I didn’t think about it like that.” She begins to ask me more questions about my dissertation and whether I will share the results. We end our twenty-minute conversation. “Please let me know if there are any fathers interested in participating in my study,” I ask. She replies, “Yeah. Of course. I’ll let you know.” When I checked in with her the following week, she said that she doesn’t get a chance to talk to the fathers, “They are in and out,” but she welcomes me to come in and talk to them myself.

By this time, I had pulled together a list of child-care centers in the neighborhood from the nyc.gov website. I decided to call around to see if other directors of child-care agencies were noticing an uptick in the involvement of fathers. During most of the calls, the directors spoke to me a bit but were pretty convinced that their father population was as small as it has always been with one noticeable exception. When I called the Bedford Stuyvesant Early Childhood Development Center I was directed to Mr. S, the coordinator of the Father Initiative program. He was the first male director to whom I had so far spoken. “Oh yeah. Yes. Of course. I’ve been saying that for years.” He tells me to come in and that I should volunteer. “We need someone like you. Someone good at that data stuff.” Thus began my three-year relationship with the largest Head Start in Bed Stuy.

Within a week we began to greet and survey the fathers as they came in either to drop off or pick up their children. While I needed to seek participants for my study, Mr. S needed to find out how the agency could better serve its population of fathers. We hung out in the lobby during



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drop off and pick up times. When a male escort came in, Mr. S or I would solicit him. Many fathers obliged on the first solicitation. When fathers said no, it was often a soft no like “How about tomorrow?” “I’m running late.” “Oh, nah, not today.” Many gradually gave in the second or third time around, however. Fathers were much more likely to say yes when Mr. S asked. Mr. S was more easily able to turn a soft no into an hesitant “Ai-ight.”

It was quickly clear that there were many father escorts at Mr. S’s site. Women still made up the majority of escorts, but the proportion of men coming in was not much lower. We surveyed thirty-four fathers in seven days over the course of three weeks. An additional seventeen signed up to speak at another time. That year, 105 children were enrolled at the site; of these, an estimated 49% (51/105) had an escort who was male. Women were still a visible majority, but I noticed that the number of escorts exceeded the number of children because fathers often came in with mothers or over the course of the week I saw both mom and dad. Seeing only the mother for some children over the course of the three weeks was more common than seeing only the father. As I began to ask fathers to participate in my survey, some of them were very wary. Nonetheless, most expressed interest in my topic of study, saying “Yeah, man we don’t get no credit.” But this sentiment was almost always followed by “but, there *are* a lot of deadbeats out there.”

For the most part, many of the employees recognized the increased presence of fathers with children around the neighborhood, but many of them were dubious about whether or not this meant anything.

FamilyWorker: I think we’re seeing more fathers now because before, my God, you couldn’t get a father to come to a meeting. Now I have fathers that come religiously. Mothers was the one that had to do everything. The last, I say, couple years I see a change.

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Fathers are more into the kid's lives than before. I don't know for a reason. They stepping up to their responsibilities.

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Teacher 1: And now, I see 'em, maybe one or two dropping off a kid but that was very seldom. But now, I say here alone we have so many fathers coming in here getting these kids, bringing 'em. We have, we have a lot of male volunteer participation.

Teacher 2: You know, I agree with her strongly on that. There are more fathers having to like to flip that role 'cause traditionally like before it was mostly mothers.

Teacher 1: That's what I tell you.

Teacher 2: That's why the father initiative was started with the fathers.

Me: But why do you think they're flipping the role, what is causing that you think?

Teacher 2: Survival. The mothers are out there in the workplace more, just like she said. Like a lot of the fathers are actually disqualified from gainful employment 'cause once you get – let's be realistic. You get a little bit of a record and in this competitive job market out here these days it's very hard for you to get a job.

Within the first few months at the Head Start, it was apparent that males made up a significant proportion of the family members bringing students to school. Some staff members believed that this was a growing trend. This brought up questions I was determined to answer. Were fathers at the Head Start more likely now than in the past to be escorting? If so, why do some people notice and others do not?

From February to June 2013 I interviewed teachers at the Head Start. The purpose of these interviews was twofold: first, I was trying to collect qualitative data on paternal involvement over the course of each teacher's tenure at the organization as well as document organization processes on engaging fathers. To this end, I interviewed other staff members such as family workers, cooks, and custodians, many of whom had been with the agency for twenty-

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five years or more. Second, I gathered specific data from teachers regarding the regular escorts of class participants on rosters dating back eleven years. I recorded teachers while they recalled children and families; many told stories as they spoke about each child.

I created the rosters by using old copies of administrative forms that had once been sent to city government agencies. I found these forms in cardboard boxes in closets at the various sites. Using these forms I constructed rosters with the names of the enrolled children according to year, center, and classroom. I used individual names to aid in the recollection process. By giving the teachers a list of names from classes, their memories of past students and families were triggered.

During our interview, teachers were asked how long they had been employed at the Head Start and at which sites. Once a record of their classroom assignments for each year was generated, teachers were asked to look at the roster for each class they had taught and to recall whom they remembered as being the primary escort of the child. They could refer to the person by any term—"mom", "father", "both", "sitter"—the word was completely at their discretion. They could also write down multiple family members. If they could not recall the child, they were to leave the field blank. If a teacher did not identify the father as a regular escort, she was prompted to think specifically about the father of the child. Teachers were asked how often they had recalled seeing the father. They could select from four options: always, sometimes, a few times, or never.

The majority of teachers were able to recall many of the children as well as the person(s) who had regularly escorted them to and from childcare. A table and an accompanying graph illustrating the annual percentage of children whose fathers were identified by teachers as

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primary escorts can be found in the appendix. From 2002-2003 to 2012-2013, the percentage of fathers identified as regular escorts increased by 16 percentage points. Fathers at the Head Start were increasingly likely to be escorting regularly in the last decade. Teachers were also asked to identify fathers whom they had never seen. This measure of paternal absence is presented in the appendix. The percentage of fathers whom teachers could not remember ever having seen—even if they could recall the child and a primary escort—decreased by about 23 percentage points over the 11-year period. Over time, fathers were less likely to be reported as having never been seen by the teacher.

While the percentage of fathers who took their children to and from the Head Start generally increased over the past decade, it seems that much of the increase occurred earlier in the decade, then again in 2009. Similarly, much of the decline in fathers who never escorted their children occurred in the early 2000s and again in 2009. Over the course of the 11-year period there was a 51% increase in the percentage of regular escorts who were fathers and a 41% decrease in the percentage of fathers who never escorted.

My data provide evidence that that the fathers of the children at the Head Start are more likely to escort now than they were a decade ago. Yet, it was clear from the many conversations that I had that not everyone was aware of the trend. Prior to being questioned about individual students and their primary escorts, teachers were asked three questions. 1) *Compared to when you first started, are their more, fewer, or the same number of fathers picking up their children now?* If the teacher had already been working at the Head Start 15 years ago he or she was also asked to make a comparison to 2002. 2) *Do you think fathers are more or less involved with their*

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*children? 3) Do you see many fathers out with their children around the neighborhood, as in playgrounds or just walking about?*

Sixty-seven percent of the forty-six teachers who were interviewed responded that more fathers were escorting children now than a decade ago. Twenty-eight percent of teachers did not notice a difference. While only 67% of teachers perceived a change in the escorting patterns among parents, 93% of them replied that they believed there to be more fathers with their children out and about the community now than there used to be. Several specifically mentioned noticing an increase a few years ago, thus confirming the highest annual change, which occurred around 2009.

Although regular contact with parents places teachers in a position to notice, their perceptions do not represent those of the larger community. To gain a better sense of the general community's perception of paternal presence in Bed Stuy, escorts were asked: *When walking around your neighborhood, do you see more fathers with their children? Are you noticing more fathers with their children at parks and playgrounds?* Forty-three percent of escorts replied that they now see more fathers walking around the neighborhood. Thirty-nine percent of escorts claimed to see more fathers in parks and playgrounds.

A teacher's consistent contact with fathers coming into the classroom may translate into a general awareness of the increased presence of fathers around the neighborhood, including parks and playground. Still, though teachers may be expected to take greater notice of father presence, the sharp discrepancy between the perception of teachers and that of the general population is peculiar. The majority of the escorts surveyed routinely transport children to the Head Start at times when the neighborhood is bustling with parents taking their children to and from school.

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They also enter the Head Start building with other escorts, so they are in a position to notice the distribution of adults, particularly male ones, with children around the neighborhood. Yet, despite their opportunity to do so, escorts as a whole are far less likely than teachers to perceive the increase in paternal presence in the neighborhood or a greater number of fathers escorting children to and from the Head Start.

Although most staff were more likely than family members and escorts to observe the relatively high proportion of male escorts and perceive it to be a part of a recently increasing trend, they still greatly underestimated their presence. Below is a conversation I had with two teachers, both of whom expressed beliefs that fathers were generally more involved now than in the past. Nonetheless, at the beginning of our discussion they underestimated the involvement of the fathers in their class. Over the course of the conversation, they were forced to rely on evidence as opposed to immediate assumptions.

Me: Can you talk about the fathers, the fathers this year or in the recent past years?

Teacher 1: Missing in action. Do you want to hear something sadder than that? A lot of kids come and say they don't have a father, especially when we're doing activities like around father's day and things like that. And just general conversation because when you're listening to them talk, parents, I mean, they talk about, kids talk what they live. So, in their household basically is the conversation. And a lot of them say, I don't have a daddy. I don't have a daddy. I have an uncle. The fathers are rare as dinosaurs. That's sad. You know, that's sad.

Me: Of this class about how many have you seen and interacted with the dad?

Teacher 1: I'll tell you right now, one, two, three, four –

Teacher 2: One, two, three, four -

Teacher 1: Five, six, seven – that's a lot. I mean, just bringing them though.

Me: Routinely just bringing them in, picking them up.

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- Teacher 1: Seven.
- Me: Seven and out of those seven –
- Teacher 1: And I'll tell you what, it's less than that because his dad and his dad or sometime dad, they just browse in.
- Me: Yeah, that's what I was gonna ask you. So, of the seven, about how many of them would you say are actually involved?
- Teacher 1: Five.
- Me: Five. So, five out of seven.
- Teacher 1: Five, yeah, because two of the dads are just like drop off dads.
- Me: How do you know, how do you distinguish between the two?
- Teacher 2: Well one child, he doesn't live there. Dad is not in the household but he's been coming like every two or three Fridays, he'll pick him up for the weekend. So, that's why I say, that's the drop off dad. So, he just comes in and says hello every other Friday and he's gone. But the other child, we've seen his dad maybe two, maybe three times this year just to walk in to pick up and that was it. But the rest of them we haven't seen at all, out of 20, we haven't seen at all.
- Me: So, the five dads that actually come in and they're a little bit more engaged?
- Teacher 1: Well, out of the five I could tell you I have two, only two, three that will come up and conversate or relate to us, just three out of the five 'cause the other two just bring in and leave. Okay, so three of them will come in and talk about things or, you know, want to know what's going on and – six 'cause the dad that you spoke to too. I'm sorry, so that makes four that will come in and talk.
- Me: Okay.
- Teacher 1: But, I mean, you said this is confidential but the one that you spoke to, the one with the dreds, that's Mr. – I don't want to say a name, but yeah. But when he first started coming he wouldn't talk to us either. But I'm very talkative so I –can I say it on tape?

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Teacher 1: When he first came in, he came in with this like, you know, attitude almost, right Ms. -----? [Talking to Teacher 2] Yeah, he wasn't, you know, the last one she talked to, the last parent. I ain't going to call a name.

Teacher 2: Point.

Teacher 1: She's not here today. The child is not here today. And to me, I don't want attitudes because I want you to be comfortable with me having your child and I want to be comfortable having your child.

Teacher 2: Oh, okay [Realizing to whom Teacher 1 is referring]

Teacher 1: So, to break the ice one day, I said, now we got to get an ice-breaker here. I was talking about her, the child's art work. And then he told us what he did. And it was broken after that. So, he's a parent that will come in and really talk to us a lot. And we enjoy talking to him too. But, and another – yeah, about six of them then. So, that'd be eight.

Teacher 2: Oh yeah, forgot about her.

Teacher 1: Yeah, but he'll talk to us. The parent over there, her dad and – about four.

Me: Are they – do you seem, like are the dads harder to engage in conversation than the moms?

Teacher 1: Yeah, they are. It's like almost pulling teeth in the beginning.

Teacher 2: They don't want to tell too much.

For every question regarding fathers, these two teachers routinely underestimated the number of fathers they met, the number of fathers whom they saw regularly escorting, and the number of fathers they defined as really involved. After going through the exercise child by child they ultimately reported that they frequently saw 54% (13 out of 24) of the fathers in the class. This number was much higher than the seven they had originally reported; certainly the fathers were not as “rare as dinosaurs” as the teachers had initially stated at the beginning of our conversation. Despite their inclination to underestimate, these two teachers both held a general



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belief that father presence had been increasing over the years. Below is a conversation with two teachers who did not hold this belief. Their underestimate of father involvement in their class was even greater.

Me: Okay. And do you feel that fathers are more, less, or the same in their involvement with their children?

Teacher 1: Is less.

Me: Less?

Teacher 1: Less.

Me: And just walking around the neighborhood, do you see more, the same, or fewer fathers in the streets, in the parks, at the library?

Teacher 2: In the neighborhoods I see, to me it's about, it's a combination of both fathers and mothers. I see them more on the street than I do here, like, yeah.

Me: You mean with the kids more on the street?

Teacher 2: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

Me: What about you?

Teacher 1: I see the change of culture.

Me: What do you mean?

Teacher 1: Our neighborhood is changing, we're getting different cultures, than it predominately used to be. I see more of them doing more family, fathering, children, interaction than I see the African American men. The new incomings, you see them doing daddy pushing the stroller, daddies doing the school. Daddies are home. But as far as the African American father, no I don't see no change, no nothing. They're still doing their norm thing, hanging on the corner -- corner store. But the new people coming in, what I want to call the new generation, I guess, or the new cultures coming in. Yeah, I'm older than both of y'all, so yeah, I've seen the change in the neighborhood. I was born and raised in the neighborhood. So my era they used to happen, then it seemed like it changed like what -- I'm-a say what, I was going in -- it changed like, for like the late seventies

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you saw the change. With African America, it's still downhill. Due to the fact that we have younger mothers.

Teacher 2: I feel the same, but I feel that a lot of the times with -- with this program, for example, the -- the fathers leave the mothers to handle the school part. You know, so the father will like -- the mother would bring the child to school, pick the child up. You rarely saw the father, unless he -- they was, they having a moment where their back together, or he's home from college, or they -- he wants to spend time with the child, or they doing the family thing.

Teacher 1: Like I have, out of my whole class, I have two fathers I would say. And then the rest, either they don't know, they're in and out, or they're in college.

Teacher 2: We get to three.

Teacher 1: Yeah, maybe about three.

'College' in the above dialogue refers to prison. Saying that a father is in 'college' or 'out of town' is common practice among staff and community members when referring to a man in prison. Teacher 1 is an older women in her mid to late forties, while Teacher 2 is a younger women in her early thirties. Although initially they both agreed that only three fathers were involved, after they did the roster exercise they admitted that of the 15 children in their class, ten were regularly escorted by their fathers, and that seven of these fathers were "always" seen. This was a huge discrepancy from the three they originally reported.

Among staff, custodians, all of whom were male, were the most likely to notice that there were many father escorts. All seven custodians whom I interviewed, mentioned, without hesitation, that fathers were more likely now, than in the past, to escort. Although custodians were more likely to notice fathers as escorts, they were just as likely as the other staff, mostly female, to refer to the significant number of deadbeat fathers, in the present but especially in the past.

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While qualitatively, I was able to observe that male staff were more likely than female staff to notice male escorting at the Head Start, I did not observe this pattern among family members. Out of the 194 escorts interviewed, men were no more or less likely than women to observe more men with their children in the neighborhood. However, I did notice that the age of the escort had an influence on the response. Those 24 and younger and those over 45 were more likely to answer yes to both questions.

| Notice More Fathers with Children Walking |     |     |       | Notice More Fathers with Children at Park |     |     |       |
|-------------------------------------------|-----|-----|-------|-------------------------------------------|-----|-----|-------|
|                                           | No  | Yes | % Yes |                                           | No  | Yes | % Yes |
| 24& under                                 | 13  | 14  | 52%   | 25 & under                                | 13  | 14  | 52%   |
| 25-29                                     | 36  | 22  | 38%   | 25-29                                     | 39  | 18  | 32%   |
| 30-34                                     | 23  | 14  | 38%   | 30-34                                     | 25  | 12  | 32%   |
| 35-39                                     | 16  | 13  | 45%   | 35-39                                     | 21  | 8   | 28%   |
| 40-44                                     | 14  | 4   | 22%   | 40-44                                     | 12  | 6   | 33%   |
| 45 & over                                 | 6   | 15  | 71%   | 45 & over                                 | 5   | 15  | 75%   |
| Total                                     | 108 | 82  | 43%   | Total                                     | 115 | 73  | 39%   |

Below is a conversation with one family worker and two moms who had perceived the trend of more fathers in the neighborhood.

Me: So, in Bed Stuy are you noticing more/less or the same amount of fathers with their kids in the playgrounds, in the streets?

Mother 1 : More.

Mother 2: More.

FWorker: More. I went back to North Carolina and came back. Before I went, there was not a lot of it, but now since I came back, I was like, yeah, a lot of guys pushing strollers, and got the strap thing on and stuff, I was like okay.

Mother 2: Perhaps ten years or so, especially –

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Mother 1: I was thinking the last two or three –

FWorker: Yeah, I was gonna say for me honestly, when I started noticing a difference, maybe 2010 and not, not necessarily that it, wasn't occurring before, but just different things that they were doing. Just things like, for instance, like with my dad, he never had a problem dropping me off or picking me up, so that things I kind of expect, but for a father to stay for classroom activity or for a father to go on a trip and things like that, you know, I more so always considered that to be more of the, you know, the mom role, so I'm seeing that more.

Mother 1: Well, if you talking about our community, we've seen more and more fathers within the last few weeks. With white communities, they were always involved. You either had one of them, the fathers, they -- the moms work, and they're the main caretaker of the children. You see them with carriers on, you see them pushing the strollers. I see it more now with some of the fathers because either they're home because they're not working or they work from home, in our community, or they just want to be involved and they want to see their child raised a certain way, and they realize, some of them, some of the older ones, but mostly the younger ones, the child can't do so well, won't do as well if they're not involved.

As came across from conversations with teachers, family workers and moms struggle with the act of escorting or being out with the child in public and true father involvement. It is possible that escorting is an isolated action and does not accurately represent the degree of the father's general involvement with his child. Perhaps escorting is the only involvement a father has with their child. I will discuss the connection between escorting and other measures of father involvement, but I will first speak about the significance of escorting as a measure, in and of itself.

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At minimum, the act of escorting by of fathers is important as it is a public display of fatherhood in the community. Children attend school five days per week, ten months out of the year. This has not changed in recent decades. Like clockwork, adults and children are walking around the neighborhood in the morning, going to school and then back home again in the afternoon. The transport of children to and from school is a recurrent and ubiquitous movement that occurs without fail over the full course of the year. Unlike sporadic trips to the park, the passage to and from school occurs at similar times within the community: 7:00-8:30 am and 2:30-4:30 pm. In urban communities, this behavior can easily be noticed by others living in the neighborhood because the primary mode of transportation to school is on foot. Even those who do not escort their children on foot can be seen by the local population since children walk with their adult escorts to buses, trains or even cars parked a block or a few blocks away. While escorting is not the only activity in which men are seen with children, it is an important one.

My data suggest that the face of escorting is changing in Bedford Stuyvesant. What the local public has long viewed as an activity primarily performed by women is now increasingly being done by men. While my data is limited to one Head Start organization, it is indicative of a broader public pattern of men around the neighborhood with children. This public display may be have been affected by changing escorting patterns within the family. If more men are now escorting their children to school than in the past, then this may have great implications for the public movement of people around the neighborhood. Children may be seen frequently with men discrediting stereotypes of urban black fathers.

Black men have typically been presented as isolated figures in the public domain, depicted either alone or with other black men. By the early 1980s, images of the "fatherless"

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black family were proliferating. Criticism of public welfare escalated, dramatically turning to the ghetto black family as its primary example. Depictions and discussions of the perils of single black mothers and fatherless children pervaded both the scholarly literature and the media (Hymowitz, 2005). Heated arguments between liberals and conservatives on the causes and consequences of paternal absence placed the black family at the center of the American discourse on the “proper,” most “effective” family structure.

The emergence of hip hop offered a direct dialogue with the very men blamed for weak black family structure. The voices of young black men could now be heard directly and regularly as never before. They frequently took on rebellious tones, either aggressively criticizing structural inequalities or glorifying reckless and often lawless behavior that gave them a seemingly easy way to circumvent the limitations of a life of poverty. Offering hope for recording contracts, hip hop served primarily as a vehicle for urban men to express and transcend their marginal position in society. Rappers, however, did not give the public an intimate look into their family lives; fatherhood was rarely a part of the hip hop narrative. The image of the detached black male thus became fixed in the public eye while offering a partially culpable scapegoat for the ills of the ghetto family and its children’s bleak future.

Escorting has changed this image dramatically, ever since men have increasingly taken on its responsibilities they have been more frequently seen about the neighborhood with children in tow. What are the implications of this and similar public displays on local understandings of fatherhood? Is escorting part of a broader trend of paternal involvement or is it an isolated and unrelated measure?

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Escorting appears to be a good indicator of general involvement at home since most of the fathers who escort were also responsible for additional care beyond transporting their child. Forty-five of the 194 escorts who participated in the survey were biological fathers and regular escorts of their children. Sixty four percent of the fathers who regularly escorted their children in the morning were responsible for bathing, dressing, and preparing them for school. Eighty-two percent of the fathers who regularly picked up children in the afternoon were responsible for their care into the evening. Yet, father escorts (71%) were less likely than mother escorts (91%) to report that they were the primary person responsible for getting the child ready for school. However, there was little difference between fathers and mothers who reported being the primary person responsible for afterschool care (93% versus 96%).

Generally, escorting as a measure of father involvement is a rather conservative measure because many fathers may be involved in the lives of their children despite being unavailable to escort their children to and from school. Also, escorting is a public activity and while it may be a good indicator of involvement, it does not allow us to know the extent of a father's involvement at home. The distinction between escorting in public and involvement in the privacy of the home, is of great importance and might explain the disparate views among community member regarding whether or not fathers were more involved now than in the past. Generally, family members of the children appeared to be very split in their opinions on the trends of father involvement. Family members were less likely than employees to notice more fathers at the Head Start. If they did, they, like some of the staff, were skeptical as to whether the father's involvement extended beyond escorting. On a few occasions, both employees and family members noted that fathers had been involved in the past but no one had really noticed that.

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Usually those who held such opinions pointed to a personal experience with their own father or the father of their children.

Older Mother: Where I lived at, most people, we were all single mommas.

Me: Uh-hum. And the fathers, were they around?

Older Mother: Fair amount, sometimes. Some people they were in the household but not counted. Mine was in and out. Well, I'll say the mother had the primary responsibility.

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Older Mother2: I have to do stuff for them and my husband works at night. And my husband is one that once believed that the wife should take care of the kids and he work and he'll be the bread winner. So, I have to tell him, honey, it don't work that way no more. I'm working, you're working. I help to pay the bills, now you have to take care of them kids, you know. So, there's a lot of change and there's not much change.

To explore general levels of involvement as perceived by family members, respondents were asked questions about the involvement of children's fathers as well as questions about the involvement of their own fathers. Escorts who were not biological fathers were asked:

*"Generally, how involved is the father in the child's life?"* Respondents could select from a four-point scale: *very actively involved, involved somewhat, involved a little bit, not involved at all.*

All escorts were asked, *Which best describes your father? I rarely or never saw my father; My father was around but not actively involved; My father did not live with me but he was actively involved; My father lived with me all/most of my childhood.*



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| <b>Involvement of child's father</b> | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>%</b> |
|--------------------------------------|------------------|----------|
| Not involved                         | 19               | 10       |
| Involved a bit                       | 19               | 10       |
| Involved somewhat                    | 25               | 13       |
| Very actively involved               | 82               | 42       |
| Escort was the father                | 49               | 25       |
| Total                                | 194              | 100      |

| <b>Involvement of escort's father</b>       | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>%</b> |
|---------------------------------------------|------------------|----------|
| Rarely saw father                           | 35               | 18       |
| Around but not active                       | 25               | 13       |
| Non-resident but active                     | 39               | 20       |
| Resident                                    | 80               | 41       |
| No answer or Other- such as father had died | 15               | 8        |
| Total                                       | 194              | 100      |

Three dummy variables were created to enable a comparison between levels of father involvement experienced by children compared to their escort. A child's fathers was coded as actively involved if the escort reported that he was very actively involved or if the father was the escort. Fathers of escorts were coded as actively involved if respondents reported that their fathers had lived with them most or all of their childhood or had not live with them but were highly involved. Sixty-eight percent of children had fathers who were described as actively involved or was the escort. Eighty percent of fathers are considered at least somewhat involved. Sixty-six percent of escorts had fathers who resided with them or who they described as actively involved.

|                 | <b>Actively Involved</b> | <b>Involved Somewhat</b> | <b>Not Involved</b> |
|-----------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|
| Child's Father  | 131 (68%)                | 25                       | 38                  |
| Escort's Father | 119 (66%)                | 25                       | 35                  |

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Some parents said that though their fathers had been in and out, they had been there.

Young mom: Even though he left me when I was young, he was there when he was there, he showed me nothing but love 24/7. And, I remember that and people say “how do you know how he really felt?” I say, “I remember.”

The comment above offers a glimpse as to why so many of the Head Start escorts reported that their father had been highly involved. Regardless of the various thresholds that define a father as actively involved, most escorts reported having meaningful relationships with their fathers. The next chapter explores the notion of fathers being “in and out,” a common phrase used by many in Bed Stuy to describe the involvement of fathers both now and in the past.

### Discussion

Analysis of escort data from a Head Start serving primarily low-income black families shows that over the past decade there has been an uptick in the escorting behavior of these Head Start fathers. Since this data focuses on the activity of regularly escorting fathers, and the majority of these fathers also take care of their children before and after school, escorting can be associated with additional paternal involvement. Even if a man's only interaction with his child is escorting, the frequency with which it occurs may influence the trajectory of his long-term involvement. Bonding with the child and accolades from community members for this public display of fathering may influence a man's motivation and shape his fathering identity.

The fundamental finding of this chapter is that fathers are more likely to be escorting their children to and from the Head Start than in the past. This routine display is changing the daily public landscape of who is seen out and about a low-income, historically African-American

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community. Not everyone perceives a shift in escorting or general community patterns of children out and about the neighborhood. The age group 25 to 44 (tabulation by age shows that the distinction really falls into the 24 to 45 age bracket) is less likely to perceive more fathers around the neighborhood. This age group extends over twenty years and defines a generation born between 1968 and 1989. This age group represents children growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, when black communities were reeling from steep declines in employment among black men, and the crack epidemic was at its peak. Two recessions occurred during this period, in 1981 and again in 1991. The recession of 1981 was one of the longest on record since the mid 1940s (see National Bureau of Economic Research). If unemployment negatively influences a father's involvement with his child, then this time period might reflect greater father absence.

The 1980s and 1990s were a unique period for Bed Stuy residents. It is challenging to unpack the myriad of factors contributing to one's adult perception of fatherhood in the community. Analysis of my data did not show that a person's own experience with an absent father was indicative of his or her general impression of fatherhood in the community. But, what about the images present during the childhoods of those growing up during this time period? Media stereotypes and a public landscape absent of men with children did exist. Perhaps the negative depictions and real experiences of that period are affecting Generation X's, those coming of age in the 1980's and 1990's, ability to notice the uptick of fathers around the community. Casual connections between formerly flawed measures of paternal residence and fatherlessness as well as their implications have imprinted on us all. If the larger public's perception of black fathers has been influenced by this image surely the adults of these

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neighborhoods have been similarly affected. A community landscape absent of men with children may have made a lasting impression.

It is important to note that while the majority of fathers of escorts were reported as actively involved with their children, over one third were not. The damaging effects of this substantial percentage of uninvolved men on the lives of their children, their families, and their community are evident and documented. What has been less documented are the actions and behaviors of black fathers who may have been sporadically active in the lives of their children. Chapter 4 will discuss this at length. Despite the devastating implications of rampant unemployment, poverty, and incarceration in urban black communities, many black fathers of a generation ago managed to remain actively involved in their children's lives, as reported by escorts at the Head Start.

The experience and strategies of low-income black fathers were passed down to their children. Escorts describe involvement of fathers of the current generation of children as being higher than those of fathers of their generation. Yet, many still consider their father's involvement as significant. How do black fathers manage to remain actively involved despite the high likelihood of unemployment, poverty, incarceration, and residence outside the household? What strategies do these men use? What obstacles confront them? How are past and present ideas of fatherhood communicated? How are fathering beliefs and behaviors impacted? We will explore these issues in ethnographic detail in the remaining chapters of the dissertation.

Let us discuss the methodological limitations and strengths of this examination. The findings are based on data about families at a Head Start in Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. My sample size, based on escorts reported by teachers, ranged from 53% to 87% of the entire

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population over an 11-year period. Escorting data was also gathered from teachers' recollection of students. To improve the accuracy of information drawn from memory, teachers were asked to recall specific students. This study also measured the escorting behaviors of fathers of preschool children (ages 3-5). Fathers are more likely to be present when their children are younger (Lerman, 1993), so the high percentage of father involvement in this age category is likely to decline as the 2012 cohort ages. It is too early to know how many of the fathers will still be considered actively involved by family members by the child's eighteen birthday.

Although a convenience sample, surveyed escorts represents 33% of the entire Head Start population in 2012 and 51% of the families who had an opportunity to participate. Comparisons with the previous generation's experience are a useful guide, suggesting that at least two thirds of fathers will remain actively involved. The increased likelihood of fathers leaving as a child ages is taken into account because data obtained from adults has the benefit of covering the entire course of the escorts' childhoods.

What this chapter tells us is that escorting and men appearing in public with children around Bed Stuy are a more frequent phenomenon than they used to be. Yet, perception of this trend is not evident to all. Perhaps, it has to do with the time it takes to refute long-standing stereotypes, especially among those who grew-up at a time when those stereotypes were ubiquitous in the media and confirmed by the urban landscape. Whether or not escorting correlates with meaningful levels of involvement, escorting and other public displays of fathering are important to the fathering behaviors of individuals over time because they influence the beliefs and behaviors not only of fathers, but also of those in the position to support and

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inhibit their long-term involvement. The next chapter will focus on the implication of public displays of fathering on fathering behaviors, father involvement, and perceptions of both.

### **In and Out: Poses and performances of black fathers**

As I sit on my usual bench in my neighborhood park, my daughter plays with four little girls on the toddler slides a few feet away. Three older women are sitting nearby chatting and minding the little girls. A young man who looks to be in his early to mid-twenties saunters through the entrance pushing a baby carriage. His long legs smoothly and quickly carry him across the playground towards the basketball court. One of the older women yells out to him, “Who dat?” The young man looks her way and yells back. “My baby.” “Your baby?” the woman asks with an emphasis on the word *your*. The man abruptly stops, turns around and pointedly says, “my son,” with an emphasis on *my*. The curious woman quickly gets up and runs to the carriage, peeks in and says something inaudible. The man, seemingly annoyed, frowns at her, nods and says again, loudly, “yeah, my son.” The man continues walking towards the basketball court and the woman returns to the bench. I follow the young man with my eyes as he crosses through the courtyard-like seating area to the court. He stops to talk to four other similarly aged men at the edge of the court. They pound, then talk and laugh, facing the game on the court. For the entire twenty minutes in which I observe the five young men, while frequently glancing over to check on my children, the young father’s left hand never shifts from the right handle of the black and gray baby carriage.

In the streets and playgrounds of Bed Stuy, a longtime resident may or may not perceive more men with their children around the community. Yet, she will quite easily notice that the fathers whom she does notice are behaving in ways that she does not recall observing before. Men are visibly different. Men push strollers. Men wear little pink carriers with bundled babies

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over their hoodies and basketball shorts. Men hang out in front of public housing or corner bodegas as they have always done, but now a toddler will often be tugging at one of their legs.



These scenes, easily stamped on one's memory, are repeatedly and passionately offered as evidence by community members that something is changing among fathers in Bed Stuy, immediately prompting two questions: Why are these images so striking? And, what is the cause behind their growing prevalence?

The second question is a bit easier to address. One explanation for the more frequent sight of fathers with children lies in the general shift of American ideas and values regarding acceptable fatherhood roles. Recent academic attention to fatherhood speaks of the concept of “new fathering,” a modification in fathering identity that embraces emotional attachment to the



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child as well as breadwinning (Dermott, 2003). This shift partnered with swift and rampant changes in gender norms, influenced in part by feminist and gay rights movements, have compelled both academics and lay people to challenge once widely held assumptions about gender and gender roles related to motherhood and fatherhood. Consequently, parenting behaviors once seen as non-masculine and relegated to mothers are now increasingly acceptable to fathers.

There may also be a materialist explanation for the growing prevalence of men caring for children. The growth of the female-dominated work sector, as in health care and retail sales, especially in low-wage jobs, has made it easier for women to find and hold onto jobs during economic downturns (Levine, 2009). Fathers have to care for their children more because they are becoming more available to do so while mothers have become less so. The greater availability of fathers has led to their caring more for their children.

While both factors are encouraging American fathers to engage in new behavior in their parenting role, the materialist explanation is not a new phenomenon for the black family. Black men and their families have been struggling with a scarcity of economic opportunity for over 50 years (Wilson, 1996). Unfortunately, characters such as Mr. Mom were not available back then as acceptable alternative roles (Russell, 2010). As a result, the manner in which some black men fathered while facing few economic opportunities may have been kept out of the public eye.

Today, widespread modifications to family role norms have enabled men to take on tasks that they would once have shunned or hidden. For low-income black men especially, changes in social norms may play a significant role in their trajectory as fathers. Once kept primarily in the

intimate space of the black family, men are now increasingly finding it comfortable to father in public.

Although changing social norms in fathering behaviors may explain the growing public display of fathering in low-income neighborhoods, it does not necessarily explain why images of black men doting on children are so striking. Community members often compare such scenes to similar ones with white or even middle-class black fathers. Such comparison betrays that their remarkable quality lies in the fact that they occur less frequently in this milieu; low-income black men are less likely to display these behaviors in public, thus when they do so they are more conspicuous. While this rationale may have been acceptable a decade ago, it is less so now. Such scenes have become quite common. Yet, even though people admit that they are constantly witnessing them, they still describe them with awe and fascination.

Teacher: And a lot of parents didn't have their mother growing up or they didn't have their father growing up and a lot of fathers, and I know like for the younger guys, some of they didn't have their father in the house. And so I see them with their kids and I be cracking up and there's one little boy, he's like 21 now, he has a baby, his first child. So him and his brothers kind of went astray on the mother. All of them ended up being in the clinker and one brother died, but with these kids when I see them with their children you wouldn't never thought that they went down that route and done something they shouldn't have ended up in jail.

It is also possible that the novelty of black fathers with their children has not yet worn off because public displays of fathering among them is of fairly recent origin. When observed, such scenes are naturally evaluated against one's perception of the involvement of black fathers in low-income neighborhoods, which, as shown by the escort interview data in Chapter 2, has been

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frequently underestimated. Yet, there is another reason why these images strike many as remarkable. Visualize these two:

*At the corner across the street from the playground a young man holding a two-year-old girl is talking to another young man. The little girl is fiddling with his ear. He sways his head and then shifts her to the other arm while taking the hand she was using to play with his ears and presses it to his lips. While all of this is happening, he continues his conversation with his friend, "Leave dat shit, man. You just gotta walk away."*

*A young man is walking down the street screaming into the phone at what I deduce<sup>8</sup> is his baby's mother. A baby is pressed against his chest in a baby carrier. He stops walking, stops talking and lifts the cover off the baby's face; seeing everything is all right he places the cover back. He continues his saunter down the block, lowering his voice. He straight-leg jogs across the street to avoid the oncoming traffic, tugging at his low-riding jeans to keep them from falling down. His blue and white striped boxers are clearly visible.*

The juxtaposition of the young black urban male, perceived as hard, unapproachable, and delinquent with a young child - innocent, needy, soft, and fragile - is visually provocative. Moreover, while contrast between the man and child makes for a striking image, it is their dynamic interaction that evokes not only emotion, but judgment. What we see are particular behaviors that most of us find unacceptable in the presence of children, such as cursing and

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<sup>8</sup>I watch as he yells into the phone about a misunderstanding on who is supposed to watch the baby.

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yelling. Yet in the midst of these displays are acts that are clearly affectionate, gentle, and nurturing. To many, the fathers in the episodes described above may appear irresponsible. When it comes to children, people generally hold strong convictions regarding their security and care as well as their impressionability. The notion of a child as a blank canvas implies that their lives and moral characters are shaped by their parents. The display of acceptable behavior in the presence of children is a social imperative; violations can elicit strong emotions. Low-income black men are known for behaviors that strongly contradict socially acceptable behaviors, especially those related to proper parenting.

Behaviors among urban black men that are widely considered antisocial by the general public contribute to the widespread negative view of these men. Even within the community, a stigmatic perception of black men - especially young ones - is pervasive. In cases where the stereotypical public image of the "hard" black man directly contradicts the positive parenting traits portrayed, many observers are unable to reconcile what they see with what they already hold to be true. This conflict often makes the observer fail to recognize evidence of responsible parenting traits and seek validation in preconceived ideas. One father shared a story about being on a train and overhearing two women commenting on another young father tending to his toddler daughter. Upon observing the man wiping his daughter's runny nose, one woman complained to the other, who nodded in agreement: "See, he's wiping her nose all rough. He don't know what he's doing." As the father recalled this story, he shook his head and said, "At least he was wiping her nose." The father expressed the frustration that even when fathers are trying to do the right thing they get admonished. The father admitted that this had happened a

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few years ago, but his unsolicited relation of it shows how significantly the witnessing of this negative response to an act of public fathering affected him.

Majors and Billson (1992) developed the theory of the “cool pose,” a set of hypermasculine behaviors used by black men to cope with the barriers and pressures presented by social inequality. Aggressive tones, cursing, stances are all examples of “the ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength, and control.” Witnessing these behaviors of black men match what we believe and understand of urban behavior from actual observation and from what is depicted in music and the media. Yet, when cool poses are juxtaposed with a child the interface is jarring. Below is an interaction with Charles and J, his son. Charles has just discovered that J urinated on himself.

“What you doing peeing on yourself? You wanna act all grown all these other times and then you be a baby and fucking pee on yourself.” I hear Charles’ voice well before he comes towards the office I am in. I walk to the main hall to see what is going on. Down the hall, Charles, visibly upset, is standing outside the classroom door. The teacher tells Charles, “Go, just go.” He mutters while standing there watching the teacher tend to his son. He sees me. I gesture with my head for him to come and walk back to my office. Less than a minute later Charles is standing at my doorway.

“What’s wrong?” I ask him. “J is worried about other fucking kids. I guess he didn’t go to the bathroom in time and he sprinkled on himself, but he didn’t pee. ‘Daddy, I peed.’ What you mean pee, man, you standing up. How you possibly pee on yourself? I wanted to smack his head off so bad. I swear I wanted to smack his head off. It took like everything in me not to deck

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him. I mean seriously, everything in me. That's so stupid. Stupidity. You worried about other people. Instead of worrying about yourself. What you suppose to be doing."

"You gotta calm down, dude," I say. Not listening to me, Charles continues his tirade. "He's too big to be peeing on himself. I mean I understand an accident. Shiiiiit, people have accidents, but this ain't no accident. Fucking ridiculous. How that look like, my son peeing on himself?" "Charles, are you serious? Kids pee on themselves. It happens. My son did it too when he was that age. It takes a while. It's frustrating. Does he do it all the time?" He looks at me. He takes a while to answer. I can tell he is trying to control his anger long enough to process and respond to what I am saying. "Does he do it all the time?" I ask again while pushing the chair to him, signaling that he should sit down. He does. "No. Not with me. With his mother, but not with me. She's always asking me why he be peeing in the bed with her but not me. I tell her because he's too comfortable."

I tell him that my son had accidents and that some kids have accidents even when they are eight. "Psssh. Fuck that. Not my kid. Let him be peeing on himself when he's eight." Charles pauses and looks at me. "When your son stop?" he asks, abruptly. I reply, "Can't remember, around J's age though." I remind him that this is exactly why a change of clothes is required for all children at the center because accidents are bound to occur. He leans back. I can see that he is calming down. He says, "J pees in the bed sometimes. I make him get up though, each time." I joke with him, "I'm sure you peed on yourself when you were little." He gets serious. "Nah man, I never peed. I told you about when I was a kid. I was always on point."

Charles' son's "accident" was an affront to both his and his son's manhood. This interaction shows not only Charles' adherence to the cool pose, but how he is using such values

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to measure his own preschool son's behaviors. Yet, his reaction can easily be viewed as a performance because as angry as Charles appeared to be, his anger was not at J for peeing on himself but at the fact that the accident had been visible to everyone. He admitted at the end of the conversation that he was used to J peeing in bed. Charles was embarrassed that he had gotten called down to the Head Start because J didn't have extra changing clothes and that staff members had been able to see that he was not in control as a father, and in his own opinion, as a man. When I joked about his peeing on himself when he was a kid, he did not find it funny. I had insulted his *face*--the presentation of himself that he offers the outside world (Goffman, 1959). The first time I met Charles, I asked him how his son would describe him. He responded, "My dad is cool."

Unfortunately, our ideological notions of fatherhood are changing much more rapidly than the factors that demand public cool-pose performances by black men. This places black fathers, especially those residing in low-income neighborhoods, in precarious positions. While mainstream cultural ideologies on gender, manhood, and fatherhood are rapidly changing, concentrated urban poverty is not. The need for the cool pose still exists. In other words, black men have to find a way to embrace fatherhood yet still maintain their poses.

Part of Charles' cool pose is how he expresses himself. Charles has an extremely foul mouth. At times it feels as though every other word out his mouth is a profanity. While most people resort to cursing when they are angry, Charles curses as a means of expression. Because Charles and I developed a relationship, staff members came to me to ask if I could get him to "tone down his language" and "lower his voice," in other words, to alter his cool pose. A few times, he reacted poorly when being told that he should not curse.

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“I’m gonna curse. You can’t tell me nothing about *my* son. He’s in school right. He’s doing the right thing, right?” Charles’ mode of speech naturally included curse words, so if he did not catch his foul mouth in time when communicating, he often got reprimanded, grew indignant, and then cursed some more, this time out of anger and spite. Once a person’s judgment of his inability to speak appropriately made him feel inadequate he immediately engaged in harsh rebellious displays to regain his sense of control and masculinity. Cursing and pointing out that his son was *his*, was an example of his attempt to display his control.

Despite this performance, Charles knew that cursing around children was inappropriate and tried to change it. One day, while Charles, J and I were playing a game he started to tell me a story and began cursing. He quickly stopped himself, however, looked at his son and said in a child-like high-pitched voice, “Daddy, don’t say that. And like when I be cursing, Daddy, don’t say that. Right baby? When I curse, you be telling me, ‘Daddy, don’t say that’.” J replied, “Yeah.” I gave J a high-five and told him, “Right. You tell him, J.” Charles continued: “That was yesterday. Daddy, don’t say that. And I would never say, ‘mind your business’ you know because he right. You right. I’m sorry baby. You should of heard my mom. She be cursing all month. She be cursing like a mug. That’s probably where I get it from.” I asked him, “I wonder when you were his age, did you used to tell your mom to stop cursing?” Charles responded quickly: “Yeah, and she’d told me to mind my business. Straight up. Yeah, my mom be like, ‘mind your business. I’m grown.’ All the time. That was my mom’s thing no matter what. ‘I’m grown. Mind your business.’ And she didn’t play. My stepmom and mom back in the day, she used to curse more.”



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Charles' failure to change his language and his demeanor is as much a matter of ability as it is a matter of resistance. Charles learned to express himself through cursing from an early age and now, twenty-eight years later, he finds it difficult to stop even when he wants to. Charles struggles with code-switching. Originally used to explain a linguistic phenomenon, code-switching is defined as the act of using different languages during a single conversation (DeBose, 1992).<sup>9</sup> The use of the term 'code-switch' has evolved to encompass behaviors beyond language, including dress, appearance, and mannerisms (Carter, 2005). Countless forums, websites, and blogs discuss the need for minorities to code-switch in order to be successful in school and their careers. Some educators and non-profit professionals teach the concept of code-switching to students in middle and high school, and even in college as part of a curriculum aimed at making them more successful in their academic and professional lives because it helps them to conform to given settings.

The concept of code-switching can be applied to parenting in general or to fathering in particular. Parenting classes encourage the use of behaviors with children that are antithetical to the cool pose. The use of a high-pitched voice, an open welcoming stance, and repetitive, clear language conflicts with cool-pose posturing. Fathers for whom the cool pose has become a

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<sup>9</sup> Although arguably everyone does it, code-switching is most used to describe the switching between black English vernacular and Standard English conversation. Recently, President Obama was criticized for code-switching in campaign speeches, which, some felt, was exploitation of his racial connection to black audiences. More notoriously, code-switching became part of the national dialogue when it was propelled into the media spotlight during the Trayvon Martin court proceeding. Although technically speaking the same language, the star witness and the defense lawyer were unable to comprehend each other. As the lawyer's legal lexicon and the witnesses' broken English collided, the chasm between the codes of speech and conduct of the white, middle-class, highly educated mainstream and the black, low-income, urban youth culture was clearly portrayed to national audiences. According to public opinion, Rachel Jeantel was at fault because she was unable to code-switch, meaning that she was unable to communicate to and conduct herself in mainstream society.

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feature of their personality find that a tension exists between masculine performances and the nurturing demanded by their new fathering role.

At a Saturday basketball program run collaboratively by the Allan Houston Foundation and the Head Start's Father Initiative program, was a father with two children, a young son around 3, and an older daughter around 6. His daughter went off to play with other children, but his son did not want to let go of his father. One of the other fathers, yelled from the court. "You want in? We're about to start a game." The father excused himself from much of the day's activities because his son would not let go of him and he was too young to play. I told the father that I could watch his son while he played

I distracted the little boy with a toy car game, long enough for the father to escape to the court. Less than a minute later, the little boy realized his father had left and started screaming and walking onto the basketball court. A father almost ran into the little boy and yelled, "Little man, you're gonna get hurt." By this time I had reached the boy to pull him out of harm's way, at which point he began to cry loudly. The father on the court, yelled to his son. "Come on, give me a second, Kian." Kian would not hear it. At first the father tried to ignore his cries, but Kian was inconsolable. Eventually, everyone in the gymnasium could hear him. The father shook his head making apologetic gestures and statements. Before leaving the court he *tap fists*<sup>10</sup> to the fathers on the court and headed towards me and his son, shaking his head. The fathers looked for someone to replace him. He was visibly upset. "Man, why you always gotta do this to me. Stop all this crying. It's too much. Stop crying. I said stop." He grabbed the boy's arm and shook it. The little boy upset by his father's rough tone began crying louder. The father looked around,

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<sup>10</sup> A handshake-like gesture where you hit fists

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looked at me, then sighed, stepped back and wrapped his hands behind his neck. His son reached his arms out to him. Not reaching back he said, "Okay. Come on, Kian, let's go." He walked away from Kian and headed for an empty hoop. His son toddled after him, his cries softening. He leaned his back against the wall and pulled out his phone and began playing with it. Kian, standing with one hand holding his leg, watched everything happening in the gym. I headed across the gym and sat down next to Dave, a father with a bum leg proudly watching his ten-year old-son tear up the court. Kian and his father were still in my view. Dave and I spoke about the challenges men face when dealing with children. "We be walking on thin ice. Even if it's the right thing for our kids society sees it as the wrong thing. And then, you know what? My kids are not mine until they do something wrong." After several minutes, Kian's father looked up from his phone to watch the court. He looked down at Kian, who was still standing at his leg quietly. He picked up his son and headed to one of the program coordinators to ask for an extra basketball. He and Kian played together for the rest of the program.

Kian's father was upset and obviously struggling with the attachment issues of his child, but unlike many parents, he did not try to comfort his son while he was crying and did not reach back when his son reached out for him. Part of his lack of "nurturing" behaviors may be due to the fact that he was upset at Kian because he could not play with the other guys. Nevertheless, his response to Kian was also watched by everyone, and he was clearly aware of this. Before they left that day, I asked him about Kian and the crying. He told me that Kian was "just like that" and that he hated to take him out because he was always crying in front of everybody. "It's embarrassing." He also told me that he did not want to be some angry father but neither was he a "pushover" "who can't control his kids." Kian's father may have been wary of how others were

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watching his response to Kian's crying. However, his cool behavior towards Kian was not characteristic of his general behavior with his children. I had watched him that and the previous Saturday and saw that he was playful and caring with his daughter and his son. His son seldom left his side. That Saturday was the last time I saw him at the basketball program. It was the second Saturday of a six-week program. When I called him a few weeks later to see if we could catch-up after the program, he told me that his son was just too young and he wanted to wait to take him out more often when he got a little older.

Since the cool pose is a response to a negative image and limited opportunities, low-income black men may hold on to masculine performances more tightly than do middle-class black men. For them code-switching is a harder task. An inability to code-switch may not only reflect a lack of desire but a lack of ability. Although many urban youths recognize the difference between their and mainstream behavior, they do not know how to switch. In the same way that low-income black youth may have a hard time code-switching in educational and profession arenas, black fathers may have a hard time code-switching their behavior around their children. Code-switching is a learned action that is perfected with experience over time.

Encouraged by his son's teachers, around Christmas time Charles decided that he was going to read a book to his son's class. The Father Initiative at the Head Start has a program it calls "Men Who Read," which encourages fathers and father figures to come in and read to the entire class. Charles, though he would not verbally admit it, was extremely nervous. He told me about the reading a week in advance. He asked the teacher if he could take the book home to get comfortable with it. The day of, he came to my office extra early and checked with me on the pronunciation of some of the words. It was a children's book on Kwanzaa and the principles

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were words taken from African languages and challenging to pronounce to those who were unfamiliar with them.

Although he was nervous, he was excited too. He paced back and forth from my office to J's classroom wondering when the teacher would call him in. When he found out that the teacher had decided to have him and another parent read at the Christmas party before the entire site, he became anxious, but his pride would not allow him to back out.

Charles: I didn't know I was gonna be reading in front of everyone. That's aight<sup>11</sup>. That's aight though. I'm still gonna do it. I'm about to run to the store right quick. I'm nervous. I hope there aren't no parents up in there.

Me: Why?

Charles: Are there parents there?

Me: I don't think so.

Charles: They be judging. Don't judge me. Don't judge me.

I told him that he would be great and that if he got stumped he should simply ask the children questions because they always had something to say. That seemed to relieve him as he responded, "Yeah. I'm gonna be animated too. Not boring, you know. Yeah, I'll ask them about Santa Claus."

At the Christmas party, Charles read aloud, his voice louder and more confident as he went along. At the end, as planned, he asked the children a question: "Anybody know what they gonna get for Christmas?" All forty children raised their hands as a murmur of excitement stirred the group. A huge smile spread across Charles's face as he pointed to each kid wiggling and squirming to be called. Afterwards, Charles came back to my office. "J was really proud of me. I

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<sup>11</sup> Aight is a colloquialism for alright.

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saw him tell his friends that I was his father.” Charles was proud too. He asked me to put the video I had taken online.

Charles’ development as a father presented him with a daily struggle between relying on his cool pose, which had become second nature to him, and developing a more nurturing fathering stance now that he was a new father. Whenever his masculinity was threatened, Charles fell back on his standing cool pose. However, if opportunities arose to present masculine displays that did not conflict with his sense of control, he was open to embracing them. Embracing a new stance was only possible when he did not perceive others’ reactions as attacks on his manhood. This necessary change in perception is a learned skill that—with support—can be developed over time. The cool pose is just one specific type of performance of masculinity; there are others that may satisfy Charles’ need for control and that are not at odds with nurturing fatherhood.

In an interview, one teacher told me of a very similar experience with a father of a child in her class.

Teacher: And we have one dad who came in – no, we re-encouraged them to come pick a book, take it home, get familiar with it, you know. One of the parents came and he seemed so nervous. It was a little like with the children, you know. By the time he read that first book, he read like three books, and after he read the first one, you know, we got his confidence. He read three books and it’s good that he knows he can come in and we try and tell them if you come in and volunteer, you come for five or ten minutes you don’t know how much that five or ten minutes or half an hour means to us. You might say it’s nothing but to us it means a lot, you know, so and I’m glad they are coming in and the program is providing some programs, you know, for the fathers to, you know, to be involved.

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While the cool pose is a performance that is drawn upon, it can easily become a performance that is restrictive. Many black men feel constrained by what they believe is acceptable masculine behavior, especially when it comes to fathering in public. One day, a father agreed to do a short interview with me. He came into the room with three boys. Two of the boys attended the child care center; the other boy seemed a little older, about ten. The father walked into the room and said to the children, "Sit down." The boys immediately scrambled around the room to find seats. The ten-year-old pulled out his hand-held video game while the two little ones sat at opposite ends of the long table and looked at me with wide eyes. The father and I began our conversation. At first, his eyes darted around the room, making sure that his boys were behaving. We began uncomfortably. While asking him about the boys' relationship to himself, there was a muffled but loud sound. A few seconds later came a pungent odor. "Who did that?" the father asked angrily. The little boy next to me did not say anything, but we all knew it was him. The father looked at the boy and then at me. "Wait until we get home," he said. The boy looked down. I began to ask the father questions, and as we engaged in comfortable conversation, the father became more and more at ease.

Near the end of the survey, his upright posture became slouched and his fitted cap came to be turned from the front and cocked on top of his head, positioned slightly to the left. Like me, the boys sensed the father's ease. One of the little boys got up from his seat and stood near the other. "Dad," he said, "I lost my money." Recalling the man's reaction to the earlier faux pas, I worried that if a mere fart had warranted an ominous threat, then what would be his reaction to the loss of money? The father jammed his fingers down the boy's little pockets. No anger appeared as he told his son, "It looks like you lost it." He jiggled the boy sideways, and the

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little boy and his brothers giggled. We all got up to search around the room for the boy's two dollar bills. We eventually found them. The father sat down, resuming his slouched posture. We continued our conversation. The boys joined it as well. The father smiled and joked with me and his children.

Afterwards, while writing up my notes, I was baffled by the father's behavior. Why did he get angry at an arguably uncontrollable bodily release of air yet react nonchalantly to a careless loss of money? For some fathers, silly actions with children occur only in the privacy of the home. In other words, the playfulness of home is rarely witnessed by a participant observer in public. Many of the fathers whom I informally surveyed used the words *silly*, *playful*, *funny* or *crazy* to describe interactions with their children. However, few of these brief interactions that I witnessed at the Head Start included playful behavior.

Carl, like many of the fathers I surveyed, used the words *playful* and *silly*. At first I could not see a hint of these qualities. At the start of our conversation, Carl's behavior appeared quite uncomfortable. His speech was halting and curt. He sat at the edge of his seat. His eyes darted back and forth in the room as he carefully watched his children's behavior. After a few questions, it was clear that his guard was gradually relaxing. As he slouched in his seat, he began to smile more often and offer longer answers to my questions. Near the end, he began trying to engage his children in the conversation. During the first five minutes, I witnessed Carl's public persona, the image that he was trying to project while feeling his way into an unfamiliar situation. After a while, less of what Carl was trying to project and perhaps more of who he was in his private life began to show through. He told me he that he would describe himself as silly,



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and eventually I saw it for myself. In the span of twenty minutes, I got to observe both Carl's public and private fathering behaviors.

Performances of masculinity can influence the ways in which fathers interact with their children both in public and private. Carl, in fact, does have a more "silly side." Yet for some fathers, such as Charles, play and silliness does not fit in with cool pose performance. Although I saw him display affection towards J, it was usually quick, awkward and rough. He was never silly. Later in our relationship, I asked him if he was ever "silly" with J privately at home. He said that he was, but though he and I became close, I never witnessed him being playful.

One day, as I was showing him a photo of him and J that I had posted on Facebook, we came across another photo of a father and son, which I had also posted. I scrolled past it quickly, but Charles told me to wait a minute and to go back to that picture. It was a father who had his son upside down on his shoulder. "Who's that? I could do that. I could throw J on my shoulder. I could be that type of father." Charles was comparing the photo to the one that I had taken of him and J, and which he had made me retake several times. After our short photo shoot, he selected the particular photo I had posted because he and his son looked the most "cool" in it. Coming across a silly candid shot of another Bed Stuy father with his son seemed to evoke a sense of wistfulness in Charles. While some fathers may hide their silliness from public view, others hide behind a rhetoric of play and silliness but they do not feel comfortable acting in ways that rigid performances of masculinity inhibit, publically or privately.

In studies of middle class Americans, fathers spend much of their time playing with children (Lamb and Lewis, 2004). When I compared interactions between fathers and children at Hopkinson Playground to those in Fort Greene Park, I could see that fathers in Fort Greene were

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more likely to be horse-playing and acting “silly” with their children. The neighborhood of Fort Greene borders Bed Stuy to the west and its park is principally frequented by middle-class whites and blacks who live in the million-dollar brownstones surrounding it. Although many of the fathers I saw in Fort Greene Park were white, some were black. Middle-class black fathers may feel less pressure to abide by the rigid rules of masculinity, such as the cool pose, in their daily lives or while interacting with their children in public or in private.

Roger exemplifies this. One of the first fathers whom I followed, Roger, a long-time Bed Stuy resident, is a married 39-year old with a four-year-old son. Prior to having a child, Roger worked with a major corporate firm in the city. Now he is a stay-at-home father who can best be defined as a member of the “creative class,” that is, he is highly educated and well connected. While hanging out with his son, he was on the monkey bars, racing and tumbling with his child, making funny faces, and chasing his son around the park. He was by far the silliest black father I had ever witnessed in public during my study. Roger was one of the few middle-class black fathers whom I followed. While his child did not attend the Head Start, Roger and his family were longstanding members of the Bed Stuy community. Like Charles, Roger could be found with his son in the neighborhood parks and out and about the neighborhood streets. Yet Roger and Charles were very different fathers. Although they both grew up in Bed Stuy their worlds differed. They did have one thing in common, however; both lived lives that demanded little need for code-switching.

Charles is unemployed and hustles on the streets. He has been in and out of prison. He lives his life at the margins of society. He does not have a driver’s license or any other identification card. He also does not have an email address or a bank account. He has never held

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a formal job and did not graduate from high school. His network, including his family, consists primarily of people in circumstances like his. On any given day, month or year, Charles's manner of dress, speech, and behavior are exactly the same. He rarely has to place himself in a situation in which his behaviors are at odds with his environment. Most everyone he comes in contact with, understands and accepts his pose and experiences. Like Charles, Roger rarely has a need to change his everyday behavior. He and his wife are both highly educated as are most members of their families. Although on opposite sides of the cultural mainstream, Charles and Roger both live lives that allow them to project the same face everywhere. However, many black men cannot function with one face. Somewhere between these two extremes, are many of the black men in Bed Stuy. Carl and Kian's father are two of these men. So are, Malik and Shawn.

During my first formal interviews with Malik and Shawn, they were both very cordial. A little on guard at first, they, like Carl, politely answered my questions. Although neither had finished college, both had attended for a few years. Malik was employed at a school, while Shawn, though currently unemployed, had recently worked at a bank for a couple of years. In their initial interviews, both displayed interest in my dissertation and debated some of my burgeoning theories. Both asked me to send them a copy of my proposal so that they could read more about my ideas. Both told me afterwards that they could not get through it all.

In both of their initial interviews, they recounted stories that did not match up with the professional, good-mannered demeanor they displayed. Malik told me of a time when he and "his boys" had gone to find his ex-girlfriend's new boyfriend with a gun in the car. Shawn recounted getting into an altercation, being arrested and having a stint in jail. As I got to know each of them and saw them beyond the office setting, I realized how compartmentalized their

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lives were and how successful they were in navigating through the different segments of their lives—in other words, how adept they were at code-switching. Whenever I hung out alone with Malik or Shawn outside the office or with them and their friends, their stances and postures approximated those of Charles. Yet, in front of their children they came closer to those assumed by Roger. Once I saw Shawn with his friends and with his son, and his cool pose performance of masculinity, though muted, was observable.

Malik and Shawn's ability to exhibit more nurturing displays of fathering and to tone down their cool pose stances before their children has been influenced by their history of having to code-switch in the educational and employment arena. Although they still conduct performances of masculinity they know when, how, and with whom to resort to them. Their ability to vary poses according to situation helps them embrace what may feel to Charles as emasculating behavior, such as acting silly. Malik and Shawn have both learned how to code-switch from the cool pose to the father pose around their children. This constant swapping of poses has led both of them to tweak and create a looser cool pose, which enables them to abide by local cultural norms of masculinity yet not violate mainstream norms of responsible fatherhood.

#### Hip Hop and Black Fathering

Media has a lot to do with increasing black men's ability to "loosen up" their cool pose stances. Ironically, although hip hop might once have defined the cool pose it may now be undermining it. While the term *metrosexual* is fairly new, the term *pretty boy* has been around since the 1980s. Pretty boy was used for men who took extra care with their clothing and

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groomed themselves very well. It was also used for lighter skin men with “good hair.” It was also often used as a derogatory term for black men whose sexuality was “questionable,” such as Al B. Sure. Although R&B icons had their share of pretty boys, hip hop did not. This began to change in the late 1990s when music mogul Puff Daddy led the charge to re-invent the hardcore, hyper-masculine persona standard in hip hop and celebrate the pretty boy. His protégé, entered the rap scene as "Murder Mase," but dropped the criminal moniker, proclaiming to the world in his Billboard #1 hit, *Lookin' at Me*, "I was Murda. P. Diddy name me pretty. Did it for the money, now, can you get with me?" With slight gloss on their lips, well-groomed faces, preppy clothes in colors, such as pink and baby blue, once unthinkable for men to wear, Diddy and Mase still rapped about getting money and girls. They represented Bad Boy Entertainment as blinged-out pretty boys. Gradually, masculinity as defined by hip hop began to expand, first among the black middle class and educated sector, and eventually and, less uniformly, to the neighborhoods. Some rejected these rappers and clung to rappers that stuck with more traditional hard masculine styles.

Regardless of style, hip hop seldom showed anything but the face and fantasy of black men in the hip hop music world. Verses, here and there, offered some indication of the struggles men faced as fathers. However, focus on this subject was often negligible and connected to men's traditional role as providers. Rap icon and Bed Stuy's Biggie addressed his struggles as a father-provider by opening his first album with a dedication to all the people "that called the police on me when I was just trying to make some money to feed my daughter." Other references to fathers confirmed the theme of the absentee black father. In the classic early '90s hip hop song "T.R.O.Y," C.L. Smooth addressed his frustrations with his own father while celebrating the

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often overlooked occurrence of social fathering in low-income neighborhoods with the line "he took me from a boy to a man so I always had a father when my biological didn't bother." 2 Pac's hyper-critical "Papa'z Song," in which he bashes his father, epitomized for many the experience of urban youth dealing with the considerable number of men who had abandoned their families. It also pushed to the forefront the condemnation of men while offering an implicit imperative for men to do better.

In the last decade, there has been a noticeable increase in songs in which rappers dedicate more time to the topic of fatherhood yet the lyrics focus more on pledges and the desires of men to be good fathers than on actual experiences.<sup>12</sup> Hip hop lyrics have not changed drastically so as to influence the fathering behaviors of the men who consume the genre. However, a new form of media has finally brought the family lives of black men into the public arena in a way that hip hop probably never will. America's fascination with reality television is evident in almost every area from duck-calling to baby beauty pageants, but the most popular shows are those that focus on the real life experiences of celebrities. Reality television offers a deeper look at black men and their intimate lives beyond the public face. For celebrities without a reality show, entertainment news and web blogs offer up-to-date insider knowledge. The lives of black male hip hop artists and sport celebrities are easily accessed while public reliance on manufactured, monolithic masculinity performances in lyrics and videos is diminishing.

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<sup>12</sup> Juelz Santana's 2005 release "Daddy" focuses on the birth of his son and his pledge to be a good father. In the same year, The Game released his similar track "Like Father Like Son". Jay Z's recent 2012 release of "Glory", which is dedicated to his newborn daughter, contrasts his pledge to be a good father against his father's past misdeeds.

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In conversations with community members about “good fathers in the media,” the hip hop artist T.I. was regularly mentioned by many, especially by those under age thirty. One day, two mothers, one father, a family worker and I were hanging out in the lobby during drop off. The younger mother, in her early 20s, said to the other mother who was slightly older, "T.I., he's a real good dad. Real good. You watch his show?" The other mother and I both shook our heads ‘no’. The father, sitting furthest from the group of four women (including myself), and who had remained fairly quiet for most of the conversation, chimed in: "Yup. He's good. He always look out for his kids. You should watch it." I ask the mother and father more about the show. Although I was aware of both T.I.'s music and the fact he had a reality show, I had never watched an episode.

In addition to his successful rap career, T.I. also has a reality television show called *The Family Hustle* on VH1, in which his everyday life managing his rap career and family is captured. Jay Z, a Bed Stuy native, has also regularly been identified as a good father. The recognition of Jay Z as a good father has little to do with his actual behavior because he became a father in January 2012 after many of my conversations with Head Start family members. Nevertheless, the media hype on his thoughts about being a father, his desires to be a good dad, his recollections of his father leaving, and the general media blitz surrounding the offspring of his high-profile relationship with Beyonce might be what has pushed him to the forefront of minds thinking about “good black fathers”.

The widely held view of T.I. and Jay-Z as "good fathers" seems to stand in contradiction to the notorious criminal backgrounds that T.I. and Jay-Z have used to establish street credibility in the urban communities in which they launched their careers. Even now, their lyrics still

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reference past and present misdeeds to bolster their deviant image. Yet, the hardcore image they continue to project to their consumers is now reconcilable with their public image as good fathers, which has diminished perceived contradictions between "black man" and "black father."

For some young men, it is important that fathering stances not annul their performances of masculinity. The age of reality television indicates that men can still adhere to codes of cool posing while also being responsible fathers. T.I. and Jay Z offer alternate versions of fatherhood for men who cling to more rigid performances of masculinity. Interestingly, rappers were not suggested as good fathering role models by anyone over the age of forty whom I surveyed. For those in older age groups, Barack Obama and Bill Cosby<sup>13</sup> were most often noted as good fathers. Younger fathers perceived hip hop artists as more similar to themselves in terms of experiences and values, and thus T.I. and Jay Z's perceived commitment to fatherhood made them role models. Being a father no longer necessitates a complete abandonment of instilled masculine codes, thus making fatherhood less at odds with street values. Yet, without reality television the private connection between black male celebrities and their children would still be hidden from public view. Below is a conversation I had with a younger father who embraced the story of R&B singer and songwriter Nelly being a father figure to a child who was not biologically his:

And he got married now or whatever the case may be. I respect him because --  
It wasn't his kid. Well, as a matter of fact, the new girl he got, I think she's pregnant. But yeah, that wasn't his kid. He was taking care of the kid and everything and even after he found out it wasn't his, he still kept it. He still taking care of the kid. That's why I take

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<sup>13</sup> When Bill Cosby was offered it was usually his television persona of Heathcliff Huxtable on the 1980's sitcom The Cosby Show that was being referenced.



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my hat off to that man. I take my hat off to him and then you know what she did? She got the money and she upped and left with the kid. [It was on] *Behind the Music*. They had a *Behind the Music* special on him. Everybody – Wendy Williams – everybody was like yo, I love the Neyo-*Behind the Music*. Like everybody take they hat off. I take my hat off to that man. He's a good man. Like, people are like come on, you're rich. You don't have to care about nobody else's life. And he really took the time. He said, you know, I've been raising this kid for like a year, I'm going to keep doing my job and that takes a hell of a man. It really does. But I could understand because God forbid \_\_\_\_\_ wasn't mine, he's still mine. There's no way I would be able to say at this point because he's not my biological son that he's not mine.

Although black male celebrities offer various definitions of fatherhood from which black men can draw, ultimately it is often community peers who have the most influence on beliefs and behaviors. Ethnographic research emphasizes the connections of black men to other men in the community (Anderson, 1992). The very act of seeing more men with children around your neighborhood, ones with whom you can identify, is affirming and encouraging. Ralph, told me about how it made him feel to overhear another father on the bus as he was on his way to see me:

Ralph: He was just happy, like I could tell he'd been struggling with her or whatever the problem was. It's just when I hear stuff like that I'm just like oh, yeah. I feel you; I'm in that line. I'm there. He was saying that he went to court. I guess he was having issues with his child's mother and he won custody. She was like upset in court. But when it balled down to it, he really was trying to take care of his and he fought for his and he won. Yeah, I wanted to say something but I'm just like nah, let me mind my business. But I understand because I'm, you know, going through with my daughter so it's just like I understand what you're going through. So it was cool to hear that someone else is also, you know, trying to take that step.

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I'm feeling like a lot more guys are starting to become like that; not everybody, though. I know the dirt bags still.

Me: Do you have friends who are just involved -- just as involved with their kids as you?

Ralph: I would say my boy. He's just from part of the household I was telling you about. He just had a daughter by one of the females up there. He's special to me -- like on the day he came in he's like where is the script for being a father? Where is the script for this? And I was just like hey, I'm figuring it out as I go and stuff. And we just sit there and talk. Like he came up to me just last week very upset. He's like since I was working before the baby got here, I was buying everything. I'm working two jobs. I'm doing everything I can. This week, that recently happened, where his job is really slow -- well it's been slow for like a month or two, but this week has really been slow -- slow for him. He already got a check; he owes them rent. And the mother asked for some pampers. He was like I'm going to try to get them as soon as possible. I don't have money right now, but by, you know what I'm saying, by such and such -- by a time period I'm going to have it. The mother blows up on him through text message. Like oh, it's one time he doesn't have something and he's just getting blown up on, like he never did anything at all. And I'm just like wow, I know exactly what you're talking about because my sons' mothers was like that.

While seeing more fathers around the neighborhood offers encouragement to fathers to increase or maintain involvement, it also leads to greater condemnation of black men who completely abandon their roles. This creates tension in friendships between fathers who are involved and fathers who are not. Mark talks about his relationship with his friends who are deadbeats.

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I am going this way and you are going this way. It makes me upset. They don't even call their kids. I don't see them with them. We can't talk about the kid situation. They are statistical deadbeat dads. Here you are sitting with me talking about your baby's mom and I am in the situation that their children's mothers are in. But, I didn't think about it until I had my kids. A woman can't tell you you can't see your kids. You have to try. Some guys use that as an excuse. Gets me upset. They feel a certain way when I say I gotta go get my kids. I think what I am doing is making them feel like I am backing them into a wall. I mean I want them to do it [be more involved] but I don't want them to feel threatened. On facebook too, I got all these pics of my girls and you got a pic of Gucci this and Prada that. [Pauses] It took me some time to realize that I was making them feel that way.

This tension occurs not only among friends but also within families. Ralph, a father of four children, recently gained custody of his youngest daughter who was enrolled in the Head Start when I met him. He is now trying to gain custody of his two sons aged 8 and 10. He has another eight-year-old daughter who lives in Florida. He explains to me that the tension between him, his brothers and his friends is affected by whether or not they are trying to be actively involved in their children's lives.

Ralph: It's weird -- my brother's in a situation where his child has been here for years now and he's not like me, you know what I'm saying? Like I spend time with my kids, I try to fight for my kids, I try getting my kids. His son stays in the Bronx and that's all. He's younger than me by about two years, but he'd rather take care of somebody else's kid than his own, which doesn't make any sense. Well, he has a girlfriend right now, and she has two children that are small, and it's just like why hasn't she met your son yet? Why hasn't your son been out there to see you? What's going on with that? I can't really tell him to do anything because -- like if I say something to him, he'll be like oh, nah, she won't let me do it. Like he makes excuses instead of really going for it, because he actually has the mother's

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mother -- the grandmother on his side. She's willing to be on his side. That's really rare. But he doesn't want to take the initiative and I'm just like wow, that's crazy. I wish I would have had it like that, because then my situation would be totally different. So I'm just looking at him sometimes like I don't know.

Me: So why do you think the grandmother is on his side?

Ralph: Because she -- I guess she knows her daughter does not take care of the kids the way she should, and she feels like you shouldn't do that, you know, keep the child away and stuff like that.

Me: So, even though you think it's excuses, the mother is literally making attempts to keep him from the son?

Ralph: Yeah, but he could go up there and really fight, you know what I'm saying, and go see his child and try to get his child. If he really wants him he can, but he just -- I don't know. Every once in a while I throw it out there. He gets offended all the time. He's really defensive. He's -- don't worry about me; I got it. He's really -- he's always defensive. And then he'll like argue, but I'll let him know I'm still your big brother. I'll put you in a chokehold like you were little again.

Me: What's the age difference?

Ralph: Two years.

Me: Does he readily admit that okay, I could be a better dad?

Ralph: No. He automatically says it's her but it's just like -- I understood it's her partially but it's also he has to take initiative to go up there and see him and knock on the door for an hour, at least. I don't care if she doesn't let you in. At least you know you stood at the door for an hour yelling through the door I want to see my son -- you tried. You know for a fact -- you know what I'm saying? There's been times I went up there with him to go see him and stuff like that, like my nephew -- I haven't seen my nephew in a while -- it's probably been almost two years. The last time I seen him he was upset at his father. He's like don't talk to me and I'm just like I understand. He's [the brother] looking at me when that happened, and I'm looking at him like you know what you've got to do.

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Ralph then starts talking about his various friends and whether he considers them good or deadbeat fathers and the relationships he maintains with them based on this.

Ralph: Everyone comes to me like what's going on? One of my friends that recently had a daughter and he's going through issues with the mother and other things and stuff like that. So he comes to me all the time and talks like yo, how do you do it? How do you do it, you know what I'm saying? Because I'm now -- I would say I'm nine years into it, so they're like wow, how do you do it; how are you dealing with the situation with the mother. They know -- most of them know her or of them so they're like wow, I don't know how you're doing this and stuff like that - - crazy. My brother (other younger brother) is about to have a baby in January, and I'm telling -- constantly telling -- it's really weird because I constantly tell him stuff but then he has to go through it to understand what I was talking about, because I tell him these things -- he says oh, you're right, you're right big bro and then doesn't really listen or doesn't take --

Me: How old is your brother?

Ralph: Twenty something. I don't -- I can't keep up with that.

Me: How old are you now?

Ralph: I'm 31. I'm the oldest of six. Now almost all of us have kids except for one of my sisters. So it's just like everybody has kids; they can't deal with that. They've got their own problems and stuff like that.

Ralph then speaks about two other friends, one who, he feels, is not a good father and one who was not a good father before but has changed to become a better dad.

Ralph: One of my friends -- his daughter's down South. No initiative, really. I don't -- I don't hear him talking about her every day. I don't hear him talking about -- oh, I'm trying to get her; you know what I'm saying? She's down South with the mother, okay. Well, I'll give it to one of my friends. He's married; he's younger.

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He's married to her in a house with her. Not his house; not her house -- his mother's house but he stays with -- he's around his child now. He's working now. He used to be just not doing anything, but now he's starting to, you know, I hardly see him now. And I'm just like wow, that's good. Before I've seen you every day -- do you want to smoke, do you want to drink, do you want to party? It's like that I see you every day, but now I don't see you every day. You're working; every time I see you on your facebook you've got a picture of your son, kicking it with him. Still being -- trying to be a player even though you're married, but whatever. I'm like we'll tackle one demon at a time; you'll be all right, you know what I'm saying?

Me: Why do you think the change in him?

Ralph: His grandmother moving. His grandmother ran the house. He's good now, like he's starting to take care of stuff. I see him every -- probably every two weeks -- every two weeks or a month I see him, like oh, what's going on? How are you doing? So that's a good thing. Everybody else they don't take care of theirs, really.

Me: Do you ever get into those same conversations with them that you get into with your brother?

Ralph: Nuh-uh. Because I feel like that's not my business. You my boy but that's not my business -- nope. Every once in a while I get a question here and there. Yo, how do you deal with them? How do you deal with the mother? What do you do, like how do you go through the court system? Where do you go for this? Stuff like that, just little questions here and there. I'm just like oh, you've got to do this, you've got to do that, you've got to do this. If you want to go through the court system, it's downtown Brooklyn; get onto the 38 bus, go here, like that, you know what I'm saying? I'll give them -- that's what I've got; this is what I did. I only tell people stuff of what I did. If I ain't doing it I'm not going to tell you nothing.

Me: And do they follow your advice?

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- Ralph: Sometimes they'll act like it, just nod their head yeah, you're right, you're right. And I'll probably ask them a month later -- so what happened with that? Oh yeah, so yeah, you know what I'm saying? And then I get a story -- oh, okay. And then that's why I get them -- whatever. You're not doing anything. Well, you're not ready to do nothing, and that's what it boils down to. You're not doing anything and you're not ready to do nothing.
- Me: So what do you think [about] why people get ready?
- Ralph: Oh, because they're about to go to child support court, so now they're ready and stuff like that. That's the only motivation I'm seeing. Once it starts to touch the guy's pocket, it's oh I'm ready now. And it's like oh, you weren't ready before. No -- now they're touching your pocket -- oh, so you can't party -- like you can't get fresh like I don't have the new polo I used to -- so now, you know what I'm saying? A lot of my friends, they're snazzy dressers. I want the new stuff. I want the new Jordan's, the new this and that, but it's just like okay, where's your kids at? Oh, they don't got that? Oh, but you're still trying to get -- oh, okay. You're trying to buy the new Gucci-- are you serious? You're stacking money for a Gucci \$2,000.00-\$1,800.00 for a belt? You're really trying to do that?

The shift from private to public fathering among black men in low-income communities makes it easy for everyone to discern who is a deadbeat and who is not. In past generations, men hid their non-economic contributions, which were largely designated as “women’s work,” from the eyes of their friends, extended kin, and especially their neighbors. Consequently, the details of involvement and the roles of fathers were a very private matter perceptible by few beyond the family household. Men who were not employed had more reasons to reject or hide roles based primarily on non-economic contributions because their inability to provide increased their vulnerability to threats regarding their masculinity. The non-public nature of fathering in low-

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income communities created a space where those other than close friends and relatives could not distinguish between black men who abandoned their positions completely and those who were involved behind-the-scenes or sporadically.

The unwillingness to father in the public eye as a factor of perceived social disapproval explains why father involvement among men may have gone underestimated in the past. Given the explicit disapproval by friends, families and neighbors of behavior that does not align with cultural notions of masculinity, the non-economic side of childrearing is difficult for a man to embrace, let alone sustain. It is critical to mention that social approval or acceptance of a behavior does not need to be stated explicitly to affect that behavior. Implicit social disapproval, expressed by few examples of fathers embracing the new fathering role, especially within their social network, has led many fathers to shy away from this role, either by keeping their non-economic contributions at a minimum or attempting to hide it from public eyes.

Mark, a young single primary caretaker of two little girls, told me how social approval factored into his fathering identity. When saw him by himself they started telling him that they didn't "recognize him without his girls." "I started realizing that being a father was who I was. Yeah-- see me with my girls." But what about in private, at home?

Ms. O, a 65-year-old family worker, and I talked about her experience of trying to get her husband to take on responsibilities that he considered "woman's work," especially in front of their friends. She believed that it was easier for women to get their men to take on additional responsibilities at home now, but alluded to the fact that the approval of friends and family still plays a huge role.



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Ms. O: I think we women have to be supportive of our men now. They're trying. Some of them are trying to do the best they can and we have to support them. It may not be what they want 'cause I remember, I told my husband, I said listen, I'm not taking the responsibility of all these five kids. You gonna take, this week you're taking three of them, I'm taking two. He was like, is she crazy or something telling me what to do. And I remember, you know, and he was looking at me like, no. , I can see it the expression on his face. No, she not talking to me like that. I said listen, it's hard for me. All I'm asking is some help. And I told him. I can see the expression on his face and I told him. He said, Well I have – and I said, no you don't. You expect to come in and your food on the table. No, if I cook you can take a plate and spoon and go take the food. I remember one Sunday I cooked and we had some friends and my husband said, no you see he was one, he's like a follower kind. He said, Well so and so wife takes his food out and put it on the table. I said, look at me. Do I look like so and so wife to you? He didn't eat that day. See, he's from the old school. His mama did it for his father. And he believe that I should do it for him. But his mama didn't work. The husband work and bring all the money. I work even with him.

So, I have him sit down to ask him, said we need to talk. I said, listen just calm down we got to talk. I said, listen you got to help me. You gonna have to, you know, he could cook a curry good, man; a terrible curry<sup>14</sup>. I said, look just cook what you know to cook. I'd be grateful for that. You want to cook curry every day, as long as you eat it, it's fine. You know, but don't expect me to work eight hours, you work eight hours and you expect me to contend with the kids, do the washing, do the cleaning, no. I said, you could take some clothes and put them in the washing machine too. All it takes is put the clothes in, take some soap, put it in. But that's women's work. Oh that was the wrong thing he said. Oh no, oh no. I said, excuse me what you just said. After he said it I know he was sorry he said it. He said, but my mom. I said, I'm not your mom, I am your

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<sup>14</sup> Terrible here means good.

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wife. It's 50/50. You pay bills, I pay bills. You buy food, I buy food. Do you understand that? He never told me that again.

We have come a long way and we not going back. But you see, he was in that setting where all of the wives cater to their husband, okay. And he saw that. I wasn't doing what they did, okay. They say, oh man your wife is mean. I said, excuse me I heard that. No, I'm tired. I work five days a week and I got to pick up the kids from the babysitter, daycare, whatever. Bathe them, feed them, you work at night. You know, so he had the better end of the stick 'cause he wasn't there to do that. He's home in the day when everybody, nobody is at home. My husband in the morning he stepped up and drove them to school. At fifteen years old my husband still driving them to school. You know, but it all worked out. Thank god you live in this neighborhood. So, you have a mom and dad to help you pick up the kids?

Me: No, no, my husband, he picks up.

Ms. O: What a sweet man. That's good. I didn't mind him staying home. I don't mind, I don't care what nobody say, I don't mind taking care of my man as long as he help do something. I don't care what nobody say. I don't have to please nobody. You don't have to be, you know, people say, oh you work and your husband at home, ain't none of your business, mind your business. Thank you.

Lack of economic opportunity has given many black men the chance and time to contribute to the household by taking care of children, cleaning, and cooking. The approval that they receive for these contributions is an intimate family matter and depends on the ability of the father and mother to deal with non-traditional roles, especially when they require financial resources. Yet, families do work this out in a myriad of ways, something discussed in detail in the next chapter. Some adaptations of household roles have been kept private because approval

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in the public domain had not yet caught up with the realities created by the structural conditions of black families.

Now that non-traditional fathering roles are also being adopted by mainstream families, black fathers are able to come out of the margins of their families and to father in public view. Those who are involved and those who are not are more easily discernible by people outside the family but inside the community. Due to growing public displays of fathering, involvement can include how often people see him with his child around the neighborhood which is not restricted to whether or not he lives with his child.

Regrettably, old ideas die hard, and beliefs about a black man's role in the family have real implications for fathering behaviors of low-income men. If caretaking and emphasis on the emotional bond between father and child are actively or passively opposed by friends, family, or neighbors because they do not fit cultural understanding of a father's role, then a man's response to fathering may be 1) to internalize such perceptions and shy away from this role; 2) to reject this cultural notion and embrace the non-economic aspects of fathering, or 3) to try and manage this conflict and minimize the exercise of care-taking in public. These three responses are not mutually exclusive. It is also possible for a man to vacillate between the first two because of the third.

What is important here is the concept that public fathering and private fathering are not synonymous, and as public approval for new fathering actually becomes more of a mandate public displays of fathering will continue to increase. Perhaps in some cases public displays of fathering are beginning to outshine actual private behaviors of fathering, which would offer an additional explanation for why fathers' practices do not currently match their ideological position

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(LaRossa, 1997). Yet, implicit and explicit judgments of new fathering roles by kin, friends, and neighbors greatly influence the adoption of fathering roles by low-income fathers.

#### Summary

Black men's fathering behaviors are occurring more frequently in the public eye. Changes in mainstream ideologies about fatherhood, less rigid notions of black masculinity, and the popularity of reality television have encouraged black men to come out of the margins of their families. While public affirmation can affect both the private and public behaviors that some fathers have eschewed, a lifelong relationship like that between a father and child is not static. Fathers who were once thought of as absentee, have been in and out of their children's lives and are struggling to reconcile contradictions between what makes a good father and what makes a man, and deciding which aspects of each they should exhibit or keep private.

Community members often describe the "in and out" nature of black men's relationships to their children. While this is largely true, this observation does not address the many nuances that contribute to this dynamic. First, community members are in and out of the lives of the fathers they observe. Also, what they observe is only the public face of fathering, which is influenced by men moving in and out of their willingness to display particular behaviors in the public eye. As more men walk out of their homes and see other fathers who resemble them and act in like manner, pushing strollers or attending PTA, they realize that such behaviors are a viable option. As they take their children to parks and see other fathers chasing their children through monkey bars and acting silly, or alternating between masculinity and nurturing performances, they assume fathering behaviors more readily. As the celebrities whom they

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admire include fathering relationships in their public personas, they cease seeing their street reputations and responsible fatherhood as being at odds.

Black men's growing public connection to their children forces everyone to re-evaluate long-standing notions that most low-income black men have been and are largely deadbeat fathers. The image of a black man assuming a cool pose while nurturing leads to a more nuanced understanding of black, low-income fathers in the local community. Performances of masculinity and responsible fathering may not have to contradict each other, but the successful reconciliation of the two may have a significant impact on their fatherhood trajectory. Whether and how these two stances are merged may be connected to child outcomes.

Black fathers today are living at a time when they can more freely define and construct their role in the family without worrying about how their efforts might be perceived. Defining a fathering identity is a complex and dynamic process that is affected by clashing norms. With time and opportunity, many men, like Charles, will embrace alternate ways of exhibiting their manhood that do not violate responsible norms of fatherhood. Such attempts can be intimidating at first, however, especially for those who live lives that have never required them to change their behaviors, language, or demeanor.

Re-claiming fatherhood will occur in fits and starts as the benefits and consequences, both real and perceived, of fatherhood change along with the frequently changing circumstances of low-income men. Black men will continue to father in and out of the margins, but mainstream approval of new fatherhood roles will hopefully support a closer connection between fathers and children and its consequent benefits to society and family. In such a space the involvement of non-resident and unemployed fathers can also be more clearly discernible from that of actual

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*deadbeats* and at the same time heighten implicit approval of father involvement and disapproval of those who reject their responsibilities.

Given structural constraints, black men of low-income black neighborhoods will continue to develop strategies for maintaining a connection with their children. Beyond these constraints, however, the hearts and minds of families still have much to overcome as they deal with the tensions caused by limited economic opportunity. Throughout this process, men may switch between traditional and new norms to justify their behaviors. The dilemma of men trying to define their fathering identity and role in the family is shaped by members of that family, extended family, and local organizations. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 discuss these issues in each of these ecological contexts. Men are in constant negotiations with others as they adapt their father role in accordance with structural realities and local norms. These negotiations have huge implications on the relationships of couples and subsequently on family accord and stability. It is not only black men who have to adjust and adapt to the structural and ideological constraints of playing a functional role in their families, but also their children and the mothers of their children. This takes us to our next chapter.

## Chapter 4- Something Between All & Nothing

### **Something Between All and Nothing: Strategies for keeping hold of family**

Although fathers today may be increasingly inclined to embrace a caretaking role because it is more publicly acceptable, they, especially if unemployed, may still not readily assume the responsibilities it entails if these are not accepted or encouraged by friends, neighbors and relatives. Breadwinning is incredibly intertwined and difficult to disconnect from the role of father in the hearts and minds of many. Even as more people agree that fathers should do more than merely provide income, the emphasis here is on the qualifier “more.” In other words, caretaking responsibilities of fathers should take place in addition to, not instead of, breadwinning. Low-income black men, many of whom face long periods of unemployment, assume caretaking roles in lieu of offering their families financial support. Consequently, their caretaking behavior is not highly lauded, and is sometimes even openly objected to or derided by family, friends and neighbors. During an interview with two teachers, we discussed the idea of black families coming up with new roles and their opinions on alternative roles to the traditional model.

Teacher 1: So, when you're raising your daughters, this is something that you're going to have to say. It might be a possibility that your man can't provide for you the way that you going to be able to provide for yourself. So how are you going to handle that? Do you mind your husband staying at home while you work? That's something that's a inner thing. Because some women they don't want you around in the house all day while they at work and you at home cooking. You should be at work too. I'm getting up every morning and you ain't laying in the bed all day. You know, and even though that might not be the case-- he might be home

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cooking and cleaning and taking the kids to school or picking the kids up. But, in her mind he ain't doing nothing.

Well, I think it depends on the situation, because I had a family last year, the father was a stay-at-home dad and the mother worked. And casually talking with me or whatever, they were saying that well for both of them to work, it cost more for them. Because they had to pay for childcare. And when the kids had Christmas break they had to pay somebody to keep the child. The mother made less money, but she had better benefits. So the father let go of his job because his benefits weren't that great, they had to pay for his benefits. So, that's the situation.

But, I think that was something that you have to do within the family. If the father has the kind of circle where 'oh you at home, look at you, go on and change the diapers', then he'll question his manhood. Because it's like well, hmm my friends, my men in my circle, they don't do that, so why am I sitting here wasting my time? I should be out here get -- working too. [In a condescending tone] That's your job, you go home and do the laundry and you cook? So it depends on the man, it depends on where he's at with himself. You have some men who don't, who wouldn't mind.

Me: When you heard about that particular family's situation and how they kind of constructed the roles in their family, what did you think about it?

Teacher 1: I thought it was commendable because I know that's something, especially within our community, doesn't happen every day. And you know, sorry to say, but our sisters, our tones would prevent a man from doing that, some of them. She is a more reserved woman. You know what I'm saying? So if it was another situation, I'm sure it would be different. I think both of them couldn't. Because after a while, you know, even though that's what's best for them, after a while I think, you know... But it worked best for them, because he would come and he would pick her up and take her to school. And all the meetings we had he was there. You



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know, it was best for their family, so they did what they had to do. But any other family, I don't know, it depends.

Me: Ms. \_\_\_\_\_, what do you think about an arrangement like that?

Teacher 2: Everybody has their own opinion. I can't -- what's good for me might not be good for you. I'm one of the women, my mouth, like she said. I'm the aggressive one. And I mean there is no way a man's going to be sitting up in my house. I don't care you gonna do something, ride a bike, something, bring some money home, you know. And if you don't do it go back to your mommas house, or just you know...

The teachers differed in their opinion as to whether caretaking was a valid role for a father in the black community. The first teacher felt that if a situation called for it, it was acceptable. The choice would then depend on the family and household expenses. The second teacher believed it was never acceptable for a black man to be the primary caretaker. He should contribute financially or leave. Both felt that it would be difficult for most black families to adjust to a family structure in which the man was the primary caretaker. Their rationale was that most black men could not handle the role. More revealing, however, was their claim that even if the men could, most women would not be able to support the idea. Only a "reserved" woman could accept a man in this role. Teacher 2 described herself as "aggressive", implying that this was the reason why she could not accept the notion of a stay-at-home father. Early on in the conversation, when I asked her whether she thought black families would be open to an arrangement in which the father stayed at home as primary caretaker, she repeatedly used the phrase "it's a cultural thing." In her opinion, this role was unacceptable for black fathers, though it could be acceptable for fathers of "other cultures". (Later she specifically mentioned the other

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culture being white.) To her, black men had to figure out how to provide. If they were not able to do they should not be part of the household.

This way of thinking may have a lot to do with the high cost of life in New York City and the need for two-income earners in a household, especially if both have low salaries. The notion of a stay-at-home dad may be plausible in households where one adult can comfortably support the family and where the cost of services such as private child care and nannies outweighs the contribution of one parent's salary. The majority of the unemployed fathers I interviewed were consistently looking either for work or hustling opportunities. Here hustling is defined as the irregular acquisition of money for providing a service or a product through informal means. These means may or may not be legal. Rarely was a father comfortable with referring to himself as a "stay-at-home" dad even if he was the primary escort and caretaker of the child before and after school and was cohabitating with the child's mother who was either working or in school. Those admitting to being the primary caretaker were quick to say that they were playing this role temporarily until they found a way to earn a steady income.

When asked about positive father images in the media, many younger parents specifically mentioned T.I. who has a reality television show, *The Family Hustle*, on VH1. Older parents consistently suggested Bill Cosby, or rather his renowned character portrayal of Heathcliff Huxtable, on *The Cosby Show*. Although there is a considerable difference between the lifestyles of T.I. and Heathcliff Huxtable, there is one obvious similarity: both fathers financially provide for their family. In addition to the ample income they contribute, both fathers are portrayed as very involved in the caretaking of the kids and house. What makes them such great fathers is their ability to be both breadwinner and caretaker. Functioning in only one of these capacities is

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not enough to be a good father. If one had to choose between the two, the breadwinning role is often preferable.

Being a provider is still a highly desirable objective for men in their families, even as other father roles are becoming more widely acceptable. Fathers who cannot adequately provide still have a desire to feel - and be perceived by others - as providers. This presents a challenge to those who are trying to find and define their place within their families. As the ability to provide is a symbol of power and masculinity, unemployed or underemployed men struggle with earning the respect of their lovers, kin, and friends. Consequently, men who are unable to provide adequate financial resources behave in ways that allow them to feel as though they are providing them.

### Stopping by the Corner Store

Although society may be in the midst of modifying the definition of fatherhood, the ability to provide was a salient issue among the fathers I interviewed. The subject of economic contribution was the most common topic brought up by the men in their responses. Some fathers referred directly to the challenge of financial provision.

“It’s hard when I know I can’t supply.”

“Sometimes, I can’t afford to give them what they want.”

Other fathers did not talk about this, but instead noted how good it felt to be in the position of provider, especially when asked, “how do you think your child would describe you?”

“Good. He buys me stuff from the store”

“...buy her what she want from the store and shit.”

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“Loving cuz you know I take all the kids to the store.”

Bed Stuy, like many low-income neighborhoods in Brooklyn, has small grocery stores or *bodegas* on almost every corner. Anderson (1978) and Liebow's (1967) ethnographies show the cultural significance of corner institutions in urban neighborhoods, which provide a social space for black men to occupy. One often finds young men hanging out before these stores, especially if the owners perceive the men as a type of informal security. Corner stores are unique in that children are more apt to be in and out of them, frequently hanging outside them right after school.

Going to the corner store for some fathers and their children is almost a daily ritual. The child grabs some candy, soda or a packaged snack that the father buys if he has a dollar to spare. After school hours, the neighborhood *bodegas* are often crowded with children and parents buying inexpensive and rather unhealthy snacks. Fathers are thus able to provide through the act of buying. Although the amount of money spent is small, the pleasure of a delighted child enjoying a sugary treat is not. The father is also providing food, a critical need. Both children and their fathers enjoy going to the corner store. During pick up time, I often heard children pleading with their father to stop at the store.

One afternoon, I followed a father with two small boys into a corner store. As we went in I heard the father say, “You hungry?” The older of the two boys nodded his head. I took my time grabbing a cup of coffee to observe. The father got a bottle of Sunkist soda. The older boy ran and grabbed a chocolate brownie with colorful candy pieces that lay on the shelf at eye level. “Can I get this, daddy?” The father took it without really looking at it and placed it on the counter with the soda. He also grabbed a bag of Cheese Doodles. He pulled out crumpled bills

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from his jeans pocket and put them on the counter. While he was waiting for his change, he handed the older boys the brownie, and opened the bag of Cheese Doodles for the younger boy and handed him one doodle. The little boy grabbed the cheese doodle with his entire hand. The father then gave him the bag to hold in his other hand. As they left the store, the older boy said to his father while holding up the packaged brownie, “Can you open this?”

Teachers have also noticed this ritual, especially among fathers and their children.

Teacher: And when the parents come together. One time, I was in a class where, when the father came to pick up the child. She was so happy; when the mother come, she would say, oh, I want my daddy. Oh, she want her father to pick her up. That’s her mother. Her mother comes to pick her up most of the time, but she want her father to pick her up. Take her to the store.

On the weekends, places like McDonalds, neighborhood pizzerias, Chinese food restaurants, Crown or Kennedy Fried Chicken<sup>15</sup> are filled with fathers who have their children for the weekend. McDonald’s is typically the preferred place due to its relatively cozy and ample seating as compared to other smaller neighborhoods spots. Obesity is a recognized problem in inner-city neighborhoods. Given their limited resources, low-income fathers often have a difficult time taking their children to more healthy eating places as they are inclined to opt for the cheapest food available. When I asked one father, Malik, about his ritual of going to McDonalds every weekend with his two girls, he told me it was simpler to go there and that his girls begged him to do so. He also told me that they did not like to eat the food he cooked at home. Over the course of the time I knew Malik, his interest in cooking grew. Two years into our relationship, I sat down with him and his girls as he presented us his spaghetti and meat sauce.

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<sup>15</sup> Popular fastfood places in New York’s impoverished neighborhoods.

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He and his girls joked about how spaghetti was his “go to” meal after he had learned how to cook but it was better than rushing to get take-out or microwaved food. Malik now views cooking as an interest and accomplishment but in the past he avoided it, preferring instead to take his daughters to his mother’s for a good meal.

Charles, unlike Malik, has little interest in cooking beyond warming up pre-cooked foods or picking up Chinese take-out. One day the Head Start received a shipment of green bananas and the family worker tried to give them to parents as they left. Many of the older women took them. Charles and I were sitting hanging out in the lobby. The family worker tried to coax Charles into taking the green bananas. “What am I gonna do with them shits?” Charles was truly baffled. We both tried to explain to him how to cook them. He sat there leaning back in the lobby chair, shaking his head. “I ain’t doin all dat.” “Well,” I asked him “What are you and J gonna eat tonight?” “I dunno, you know maybe some of those, you know, Tyson chicken things. Pop them in the oven, drizzle some sauce on it.” He holds up his hand, twinkling his fingers as if he is drizzling sauce. “Those things be jammin.” He kisses his fingers. As he got up to go, the family worker tried one last time to give him some of the green bananas. “You better get outta my face with those things. Nobody want dem things.” The family worker, an older Big Momma type, started fussing at him. “You better learn how to cook. These men today, the women too, they don’t know how to cook. You better take these bananas.” She pushed the bag of green bananas at him, shoved them in his hand. Charles departed with J but left the green bananas on the chair.

The ritual of buying junk food and subsisting on take-out may be detrimental but it satisfies the need of a father to feed his children when he has not yet embraced cooking at home.

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### Children with Small Amounts of Cash

Many little children carry around coins or a dollar or two. Often these small amounts of money are given to them by their fathers. Like going to the store, giving money to a child is a form of providing. One day, while I was hanging out in the lobby at one of the Head Start sites during morning drop off, a man came in with his daughter. I ask him if he had time to talk to me a little bit about fatherhood. He had seen me before, so he said, "Okay, let me just take her to class." He walked her over to her cubby a few feet away. As he helped her take off her black coat, the little girl asked her father whether or not they were going to go to see her cousin. The father said he was not sure. "You be good today," he told her as he gave her a hug. He then said, "Oh wait," and stood straight and patted the pockets of his pants. "I almost forgot." He pulled out a dollar and two quarters and put them in his daughter's pocket. She did not even seem to notice and instead wrapped her arms around his neck while he was trying to secure the money in her pocket. Once he was done, he said, "Okay." He kissed her on the cheek, put his hands on her sides and then nudged her towards the door of the classroom. "Bye, Daddy," she said as she skipped into the classroom. He turned around and walked toward me. We spoke for about fifteen minutes. He was unemployed but was trying to start a business. He lived with his daughter and his daughter's mother. She was his only child.

Younger children do not recognize the intrinsic value of money and light up more when given a sticker or a piece of candy. They also frequently lose money, but despite it all, fathers still give it to them. Money is a daily concern for some of these men who at times may not even have a dollar in their own pocket. Yet because they place so much value on money, when they

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have a little to spare they will give it to their child, assuming that he or she will value this money as well.

### Spending it all on brand-name clothes

For men who do not hold a formal job, the ability to provide is sporadic and informal. On the bench closest to the toddler play area in Hopkinson Playground, a man wearing a bulky heather-grey hoodie sits hunched forward and staring fixedly at a two-year old girl standing at the bottom of a blue plastic slide about two and half feet away. She is holding a 15-oz. green soda bottle in the crook of her left arm. The little girl stumbles a little going up the wrong way and the man quickly makes a faint move to stand up, hesitates, then sits back down as she secures her footing. He looks up to see me watching them and I wave. He nods ever so slightly and I walk over. “Little man’s yours?” he asks, gesturing towards Mari also playing nearby. I confirm while confirming that the little girl is his daughter. Brie, seeing me talking to her daddy, toddles over and places her two hands on each of his knees. He scoops her up, nuzzles the right side of her neck with his lips as she giggles, then sits her up on his knee. She stares at me, sipping her ginger ale through a straw.

While her father and I engage in conversation, Mari zooms past stopping quickly at the fence to the right of where we are sitting. Brie, seemingly bored with our conversation tilts her body to look up at her father, pats his cheek, and then arcs her back as if to slide down his knee. Her dad supports her as she does so and still holding her soda she walks toward Mari, who is busy sticking his hands through the iron fence and yanking the flowers and stems just to throw them on the asphalt where he is kneeling. Brie tries to reach in to grab a plant, but her father



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anticipates her intent and says firmly, “No Brie. Don’t you touch that.” Brie quickly puts her hand to her side and takes a couple of steps back. She stares at Mari who continues to wrench the foliage from its rightful place. She looks to her dad and again to Mari and back to her dad. We both notice her internal conflict with temptation. As I try to convince Mari to find something else to do, Brie’s father tells her to come to him. He notices that the soda bottle is empty. He takes it from her and looks past me towards a trashcan about twenty-feet away. “You wanna throw this away?” he asks. Brie smiles brightly and reaches out her hand. He gives her the bottle and watches her walk towards the trashcan. “Be careful,” he says in a soft, matter-of-fact manner. Our conversation is on pause while we both watch her execute her task.

We continue talking for about fifteen minutes, our conversation becoming very lively. He stands up talking excitedly when we broach the topic of the various ways in which he gets by financially. At one point he points to his daughter’s tiny pink and white sneakers with a black Nike swoosh and proudly tells me that he just bought them with some small squares of cardboard that he pulls from his pockets. As he continues to explain to me the intricacies of collecting Coca-Cola points, I realize then how much better dressed than he, his daughter is. Her pink sweatsuit is in excellent condition while his grey hoodie and lighter grey sweat pants are well-worn. His corn-rolled hair, which seems to be at least a couple of weeks old, is fuzzy but well-kempt. Brie’s hair is freshly plaited with pink bows matching her outfit.

Brie’s father, Eddie, amasses tens of thousands of points through the Coca Cola Reward program from the bottles he collects rifling through trash cans. He then redeems these points for products from the company’s website, such as Brie’s new sneakers. They nearly wiped out all of the points he amassed, but for Eddie they were well worth it. He provided them and, to him, that

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means everything. The curious practice of low-income families outfitted in expensive brand-name clothing is hard to comprehend without recognizing their desire to counteract the stigma of poverty by dressing rich. Additionally, fathers may buy their children brand-name clothing to broadcast to the outside world not only that they can provide, but that they can provide well.

### Not saying No

In addition to providing things, fathers also expressed concern about denying children their requests. Saying no, many fathers feel, is one of the most difficult things about rearing children. For men who cannot provide financially, not denying becomes a mode of providing. When one cannot provide financially, one feels more compelled to “provide” in other ways, such as by doing things for one’s child or by seldom saying, “no.” When I saw children ask to go to the store, mothers were much more likely than fathers to say no.

Below is an excerpt from an email Malik sent me. He really wanted to say no to his seven year old daughter’s request, but did not.

*Since we had worked up a little sweat I told the girls it was time to take a shower. Anna continued to strip naked and run into the tub. After she finished my daughter Monica jumped into the shower I continued to wash her up...and then she asked me to cut her hair. I found it odd that she would ask me to do something like that because is so particular so I repeated her question to make sure I heard correctly. "You want me to cut your hair sweetie?"*

*She smiled and realized I didn't understand. So she clarified, " My hair down there".*

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*I almost choked as my heart lept into my throat and the clarity of what she was speaking of seeped in. Oh my FUCKING God!*

*I could not believe that my daughter had enough pubic hair for me to actually trim!!! I can't even describe how sad, mortified, creeped out I was. But Kayla was all smiles so I had to follow suit. "Sure sweetie I'll cut it, let me just get the scissors" (Oh My God). Kayla smiled as she helped me sort of get a better angle? I felt my heart drop down into the subway....it was the most...I can't even describe the feeling. But I had to keep it together for the sake of my daughter. She was ok, so I had to be ok.*

When we met for dinner one evening, I asked Malik about this experience. He appeared very uncomfortable talking about it.

Me: Why did you feel compelled to do it for her? I mean, if you felt so weirded out by it, why didn't you just tell her 'no'?

Malik: I think I was shell-shocked. [He pauses and shakes his head.] I didn't want to tell her no. Next time, I have to tell her to ask her mother. Maybe I can't be giving them baths any more.

Me: Did you tell Cara (the child's mother) about it?

Malik: No way! We don't talk like that.

Me: You know you didn't have to shave it. She's a little girl. What she needs it shaved for?

Malik: I don't know about those things. She asked so I did it. Even though I wanted to throw up, I did it. Because she asked me to.

For Malik, the inability to buy his children things is of central concern. Many of his journal articles refer to his desire to buy things such as bedroom furniture or even food for his daughters,

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but not being able to afford them. He admits that not having the means to buy things and his status as a “weekend dad” contributes to his unwillingness to tell his girls, “no.”

Mothers also recognize this inability for some fathers to say “no” to their children.

Teacher 1: Cause when daddy comes here you jump for joy. Happy Daddy. Daddy – maybe daddy is with the child, you know, not, you know, the mommy’s kind of strict and...

Teacher 2: The mommy is the one that’s gonna put her foot down and daddy is not. That’s even with my children.

Teacher 1: Because Daddy’s cool.

Teacher 2: That’s even with my kids. My son says dad is this– but you so strict. Somebody gotta hold this fort down. So, it’s me. My son, personally who came through Bed Stuy [Head Start] too. He’ll be off the hook if I don’t put my foot down. ‘Cause daddy, his daddy has this thing now. Oh [in a male voice] his father wasn’t a disciplinary [so] he’s not a disciplinary.

Teacher 1: He’s a good father.

Teacher 2: No, he’s a good father but he’s too soft for me.

Teacher 1: Well, daddy’s cool, all right.

Teacher 2: And one thing is – I know a lot of these kids right here – we have one child in here right now. Oh, God, her daddy is too soft. He comes in here, she knows how to push his buttons. She really know how to get him. And I tell her mother, you gotta come, you gotta help.

Me: That – is that generally the case, that the moms are usually more stricter and the disciplinarian than the father?

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Teacher 2: Hmmm-hmm [agreeing]. When mommy come they know to get up. When mommy come and say, "Let's go," They get up, they get ready, let's go. Daddy come. They're playing around, they don't want to move, they do everything but what daddy say. Most kids know who to play. They know who they gonna get over with. And most of the time it's daddy.

### Perpetual state of starting up businesses

Many unemployed fathers will talk about their attempts to start a new business venture. Self-employment as a strategy to circumvent the limited job opportunities is a common tactic for black men in Bed Stuy.

As Eddie and I watch our children play, he tells me of his plans to start two businesses. One company will be a van business that does interstate travel to prisons. "It's hard to get up there, you know." "Yeah," I say, "I know." His second business, he tells me, will be secured transportation. He pauses and says, "I really need to work on getting the licenses." He needs a firearm license to do secured transporting as well as a license for the vans. As he continues to talk about his businesses, I note how passionate he seems about his intentions. Although I have seen this passion before over the years in countless conversations with black men about business ideas, I am always moved by it. Under my breath I say a quick wish that it work out for him, but I am doubtful. African Americans are 50 percent more likely to be involved in start-up ventures than whites (Reynolds, Carter, Gartner, Greene & Cox, 2002), but the odds of a minority person opening a business are fifty-five percent lower than for a non-minority. Wealth is a determinant for start-up success for minorities, but not non-minorities (Salazar, 2007).

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While some men really intend to try to start businesses, many who have tried and failed still rely on the rhetoric of their role in the household. When unemployed black men who are primary caretakers were asked about their day-to-day life, the overwhelming majority of them mentioned a business they were working on starting. This business was the real reason for them to be home, and watching their child was a benefit of their ability to remain at home. They were not stay-at-home dads, but rather fathers who worked from home.

Even for the rare unemployed father who embraces the rhetoric of the nurturing, stay-at-home one, economic provision may still be a subconscious or unspoken ambition. When I first met Roger, he alone among the dads to whom I had spoken seemed to revel in being a primary care-taker. He has a blog with pictures and videos of Zeneith, his two-year-old son. When I asked him about his decision to be a stay-at-home dad, he said he found it fulfilling and that he was happy caretaking full-time while taking on various graphic arts projects here and there. He felt that he was providing Zeneith with a childhood experience that he simply would not have in a child-care setting.

Two months after I met Roger, I lost touch with him for over three weeks. When we reconnected he told me that he had taken on a new full-time job and was getting used to the new schedule. I expressed my surprise and noted that I had not known that he had been looking for work, and that he had expressed in a prior conversation that he did not want to work full time. He responded that this had been an unexpected opportunity and that he was happy working full-time even though it meant putting Zeneith in full-time daycare. After some probing, he admitted that he had applied for positions in the past but none of these had come to fruition. The job he had accepted was in fact one he had applied to several months earlier; they had finally given him

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a call back. Roger's initial embrace of the stay-at-home dad label had been a way of dealing with his inability to find a desirable job in his field.

Giving children money, not saying no, going to the store, buying children brand-named wear, and starting up businesses are a few of the ways low-income black men try to maintain the sense of power associated with being a provider when they lack the means to be one. These tactics, while aiding their psyche, are not as convincing to their family and friends and most importantly, their partners.

Today a father's assertion of or even openness about his role as caretaker determines new family processes but is nonetheless dependent on how central breadwinning is to his fathering identity and how critical it is to the family. In low-income families the breadwinning father role is much more a matter of necessity than choice. Every bit of income is vital in a family struggling to make ends meet. Therefore, in a sense, replacing breadwinning with nurturing is a sort of consolation prize. It is better than nothing, but not what is preferred. The father, the mother, family, and friends know that a low-income father's role as caretaker does not reflect a choice to be a better dad, but an inability to contribute money, which is understood as the greater need. This makes the negotiation and perspectives of roles in a low-income family very different from those in a household where ends can be met on a single income. A low-income father may feel insecure about a role that does not include breadwinning while a low-income mother may be resentful of the father's inability to provide, not only because she may believe that men should be providers but also because two incomes are critical to the family's survival. How then do men try to manage the feelings of their partner?

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### Smooth-talking: Love without responsibility

Some men can embrace taking on non-economic roles in the household while finding ways to feel as though they are providing in order to assuage insecurities about their lack of ability to do so. Other men, however, cannot overcome the idea of doing a woman's work. In order to stay relevant and connected to their families, however, these men use love strategically as a means to stay connected. Smooth-talking is defined as the ability to persuade by flattery, cajolery, coaxing or the like. Although not restricted to situations in love, in the urban context a smooth-talker is primarily used to describe a man who can convince women to do things that go against her best interests.

While the image of black men as delinquent and violent is pervasive in mainstream media, black men are also pictured as smooth-talkers with their women. Blaxploitation, a film genre that emerged in the 1970s and was set specifically in urban neighborhoods as well as consumed primarily by the population who lived in them, depicted black men with masterful smooth-talking skills. Characters included the pimp, the ultimate smooth-talker able to coax women with sweet words and resort to violence and fear when smooth-talking does not work. Blaxploitation pimp characters have had a huge influence on hip hop culture. Smooth-talking and the pimp persona are key aspects of the music and projected image of popular artists such as Big Daddy Kane (Big Daddy's own), Ice-T, Snoop Dogg, and Too Short.

The effectiveness of smooth-talking has been passed down for generations through media images as well as personal experiences. In romantic relationships, smooth-talking is most effectively used by men to talk their way out of a situation. Saying the right words offers a quick fix in lieu of acting to address situations in which a woman perceives a man as coming up short.



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As men and young boys observe how certain men gain favors and absolution from women simply by smooth-talking them, they come to see this option as a viable way of avoiding responsibility. The skill of smooth-talking is a valuable one for men who need to support themselves, feel masculine, and stay relevant to their families. Experiences of successful smooth-talking validate the option of love without responsibility.

While black men may be able to benefit from attempts to separate love and responsibility, their women and children suffer. Yet, women too accept this smooth-talking strategy and learn to look past a man's irresponsibility as long as he is good and sweet to them. Confident that they will not be held accountable, men can also go from woman to woman for support, and often have multiple families for support. When a man cannot smooth-talk his way back into one woman's household, he can turn to another woman. Ms. M shared with me her father's experience.

Ms. M.: Mom stayed home, uh-hum. I think her only out, well she told me before them, you know she would work because she was single, whatever. She worked in hospital settings and then but as she got older she got diabetes and different things so he was the main breadwinner and she stayed home. But he was a pimp—he was a cheater and everything else but he made sure we had everything we always needed. And he was a card. He was a mess. When my mom died I found sisters popping up everywhere though. It's all funny because there was a set of twins that I knew and they always said hi to me and my kids knew them and everything. I come to find out those are my sisters and I never knew it. They're probably 27 years old, same age as my first son. When I found out those are my sisters, I didn't know. I only found out because my kid was at daycare for fighting one of them. And my father, I sent him to pick him up and they called him and he came to pick them up. And so when he brought—my son already got there and said you can't pick me up? He said no I came to pick them up too and who was that—and my daughters and so my kids knew for a while and I didn't even know. They didn't

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tell me. So they were—I'm like well you are always with the twins but they didn't tell me why but they knew who they were. And then after my mother died then they told me. Then I had another one come out and she was younger and then another one come out. Dear God, they're popping up all over the place. So that was my dad. He was typical cad. And so a lot of us came through that too with one father and different family situations.

In the new age of fathering roles, smooth-talk has additional objectives beyond getting women to overlook infidelity or other irresponsible behaviors. Some black fathers' ability to stay connected to their children and successfully enact the new package deal depends on their ability to “keep options open” by temporarily rekindling flames with their children's mother so that they can have access to their children or get things from the mother.

Mark, a father who has custody of two girls, ages two and four, told me in our first interview about a time he and his girls spent the weekend with their mother, who lives in Harlem. At the time, their relationship was a bit strained because of custody issues. Mark framed the story as if he had gone there to work on their relationship. Weeks later, as we hung out and spoke more, he admitted that he had no intention of “getting back with her.” He did not have any money for the girls and he knew that if he spent the weekend with her he could get her to give him some. Justifying his action, he told me that sometimes as a man you have to “do what you need to do and say what you need to say to get in good with your woman.”

Sean, a young father of a four-year-old boy, expressed the same sentiment when condemning his friends who use the excuse of their child's mother as justification for not being involved.

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You knew what it took to get her to lay down with you. So, I know you know what to say and do to open the door to see your kid. You gotta acknowledge the mixed feelings. Just manage her feelings.

Black fathers who want to remain in their children's lives despite the inconsistencies of love and commitment, often end up fathering in and out of the household and subsequently coming in and out of their children's lives based on their relationships with the child's mother. Because black women often rely on the help and support of kin, black men who wish to stay connected to their families have to find ways to incorporate themselves into the larger kin network. This can become a great challenge because though smooth-talking may be a valuable skill when interacting with a child's mother it is certainly not as effective with the maternal grandmother or other kin members.

### **Femininity and the independent black woman**

Why, we may ponder, would women allow smooth-talkers to come in and out of their and their children's lives? In America as recently as the 1950s, a successful woman was not one who worked but one who married a man and kept him committed to her. Despite women's economic independence, this ideal of femininity still exists. A marriage, defined as the legal recognition of love between two parties, has different implications than a marriage defined by the function of binding adults and their resources to their children to alleviate the risk of burdening larger society. Within the context of poverty, the notion of marriage as a formal recognition of love allows a woman to look past the functional one and accept a man if he displays behaviors that provide evidence of his love for her.

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Black women, have learned from their mother's circumstances to accept all responsibilities of the household including financial provision. Yet, the goal and ideal of a life-long love and commitment is a difficult ideal to renounce and a woman's evaluation of the practical relevance of a man vis à vis her desire to be successful in love creates a revolving door, through which successful smooth-talkers can repeatedly enter and exit. Women desiring to meet the cultural goals of successful womanhood to "keep a man" can easily be exploited by men. Expressions of love can be feigned but financial support cannot. A man can use smooth-talk and empty promises of commitments to convince women of his ability to provide financially between bouts of unemployment. Men who can provide for their families also benefit from smooth-talk as their women sometimes turn their eyes away from infidelity because their men can do what many other men in the community cannot.

Today, influenced by the success of women in the workplace, an unmarried woman is more socially acceptable and black women can celebrate their independence without feeling the need to tie themselves to men who cannot provide. For fairly different reasons, first men, then women, have become accustomed to the notion that their relationship and their responsibilities to their child are no longer a package deal and that eternal love is no longer the only ideal towards which to aspire. Changes in social institutions have helped separate the functional aspect of marriage, holding parents accountable to the rearing of their offspring, from the romantic definition of marriage. Child-support enforcement, paternity tests, family, and child custody court can ensure that both parents have obligations to their children. Marriage is no longer necessary to ensure that a parent, and specifically a father, provides for his child. Without this function, commitment becomes focused on feelings of love, which are mutable. Family, also

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becomes mutable as moms and dads try out new relationships with their children in tow until one happens to stick. In a sense, couples wait for commitment *to happen* as evidence of their love instead of committing because of their love.

In some instances, younger couples especially may be open to really unique relationships to the puzzlement of the older generation. One family worker expressed bewilderment at her daughter's generation's ability to try out new romantic and familial relationships.

Family Worker: Now I'm going to take you back into a personal story. Right now, that's my daughter. My daughter, I tell her she's crazy but I can't live her life. Now she has a boyfriend that she calls "daddy," my grandson calls "daddy" but he know who his father is. He says yeah, \_\_\_\_\_ my father but that's my daddy. And he checks on him every day while at school. He lives in Albany with another woman. And I'm like you accept that?

Matter of fact right now they in Atlantic City. They're meeting each other. He has a daughter with his girlfriend but the daughter knows her because she's sends stuff for her, does stuff. Finally my daughter told him I can't live this life so they had to meet. And so I'm like both you all is stupid because you like, oh it's okay for him to still talk to you and her. So now she knew the other lady was devastated so she's like well, you know she wants to take him [her son] to Disney World. And I'm like you're going to let another woman that she know you messing with her man, take your son to Disney World? Yeah, what's wrong with that? You don't see nothing wrong with that? Okay. So you going to Atlantic City to like officially meet her and him and her, what's the purpose? So that means you're with that. I would never be with that. So I said well if he's say get in the bed and excuse my language, fuck me, are you going to do that too? Oh, ma you stupid. But if you're going a whole state to meet—I said what if you get there and she shoot you? Oh no, she not like that. Stupid.

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Me: Right. So they're all trying to work out these roles together? Like they're all open to some new kind of —So do you think that like you know, the younger generation they're more open?

Family Worker: Stupid.

Me: Well stupid but are they more open to like different relationships?

Family Worker: No morals, yes, yeah. They deal with that. Go with the flow, they doing that. And I'm like I—and she tells me everything. That's our relationship. My kids tell me everything, a lot. Just like I got kids here in the system, they tell me everything, all of it.

Me: Have you seen that sort of thing in the other—in the families that you know, that you work with?

Family Worker: Oh yeah, yes. And so I told them to stop bringing home new people. But in a nice way.

Edin and Nelson (2013) discuss the concept of serial fatherhood where low-income men are more likely to have children with multiple partners and the consequences of this for both the child and the mother. Serial fatherhood is the outcome of serial relationships from which both low-income women and men end up having multiple children with multiple partners. And, a mother's subsequent relationships are more predictive of a decrease in father involvement with his child than a father's subsequent relationships (Tach, Mincy & Edin, 2010).

While some might embrace the freedom to create and frequently change family forms, many are better positioned to pursue a more fixed conventional structure when men accept a more domestic role. An unexpected finding of this study was that in addition to perceiving an increase in father involvement, many employees commented on regularly seeing more couples. One teacher noted that the program should be changed from focusing solely on the mother to focusing on the couple.

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- Teacher: See, we all say everything starts at home. But it depends on what the beginning of home is. If we can gear more towards -- I don't know if they still do it now, because they -- I think they do. They had sessions where parents, single parents, married couples. Okay. I think that that kind of helped out a little bit too. Because now you see -- I see more two-parent households.
- Me: That's interesting. You know, I was thinking about that, but I thought it was just me. Like, I do see more couples together. So, you've seen that?
- Teacher: Yeah. I really started noticing that like maybe a year ago. That's when I started paying more attention. So there -- it's probably happening, but I wasn't paying attention to it until about a year ago. And I was like okay, that's mom and that's dad, okay good. And you know, that felt good that I saw that, because I believe in family, you know.

A few employees observed that though they were seeing more couples, these couples really were not couples in the traditional sense, that is, in long-term, committed relationships. In fact many of these couples did not live together.

- Teacher: Let me ask you, when you say couples do you mean they're living together? The reason I asked you the meaning of couples because some of them are together but they don't live together. They come together, take the children. But many of them are living together and raising their children. In past years we have had people that were couples but not living together. I mean, I guess, they stay here, they stay there, took the children here, you know, they did everything as if they were married.

Another teacher pointed out that couples stay together now because they simply cannot afford to live alone.

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And, I know families that don't love each other but they're together for the children. I see that a lot, too. And I know right on the block I live there's two, there's a couple that they're, they, they just share their bills because she threatened to take him for child support and he couldn't survive off of it, so they stay together to raise the children and financially to survive because either wouldn't be able to survive without the other. And, whether there's love there, it's not really so but they're doing their best because they can't survive alone. So, they're looking at from the avenue where the child has to grow, has to eat, has to survive so I'll do whatever I got to do later, or however they're doing it. You hear the chatter in the neighborhood how, um, a lot of fathers are doing more for families because they can't afford not to and that one can't survive on their own.

Another teacher pointed out that it is difficult to figure out the relationship status of these couples.

Teacher: Well I've always seen like both the -- I've been to all ten sites, and in two years, as a aide. And I couldn't say like I did -- do see the fathers in and out, you know. Like we do see them. Is it, let me keep my opinions --

Me: No! Don't keep your opinions to yourself.

Teacher: I see them. I do, I do see more two parents and everything. But then it's like, you might. It's a lot of things that you do see with the two parents. As far as you can see two parents together and you would think oh that's so sweet, but --It might not be. It's not. Not -- and I ain't going to say it might not--know it's not.

It is difficult to tell whether a couple is indeed a couple, but employees at the Head Start have the advantage of seeing families over time and can detect the actual relationships of parents. Their explanation for the increase in couples at the Head Start was that more parents were in cohabitational relationships and more parents were trying to work things out for the sake of the child. Couples reflect pairs trying to stay romantically involved and pairs trying to keep



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amicable relations while working together, albeit separately, to raise their child. The former explanation is unlikely to hold, as there is no reason to believe that Head Start parents are more likely now than in the past to be cohabitating, although perhaps it is less likely that they would feel the need to hide it. A more reasonable explanation brings us back to the present day public nature of fathering. Because men are escorting more, they are visible to the teachers at the Head Start. Many come along with the mother. That couples are trying harder to work things out for the sake of the child is also a factor.

### Child as center

As I sat in the office with three moms and the family worker, I watched as little Toya stood leaning on one foot hanging on to the back of the chair in which the family worker was sitting. Toya had been sent out by the teacher for misbehaving in class. Forty minutes went by as all the mothers and grandmothers chatted. Not one word was uttered to Toya and Toya did not utter one word to the adults though she was actively listening to their conversation. Eventually, it fizzled out. As the mothers began to leave to begin their day outside the Head Start walls, the family worker noticed something. “Oh, Toya. You still here [sucks teeth]. Come let’s get you back to your teacher.”

When I attend playdates with middle-class parents, I have a difficult time holding a conversation without the constant interruption of a child. Yet, at playdates with lower-income families, uninterrupted adult conversation presents much less of a challenge. The old adage, children should be seen and not heard, is no longer appropriate in the American family. Gradually, children have found themselves at the center of the mainstream family, where before they may have been relegated to the periphery. The central place of children in American

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families affects the relationships of all family members. When bonds between parents come undone, parents are impelled to work things out for the sake of the children since these are recognized to be the center of the family. Working things out can mean staying married for the sake of children or staying cordial so that both parents can sustain intimate relationships with their children. Each parent's connection to the child forces an association between the parents so that some semblance of a family may remain.

Within the African-American context, the child-at-center family construct is having significant implications for the ability of fathers to manage the hurt feelings around failed relationships and maintain relationships with their children. While in the past fathers had to rely primarily on smooth-talking, now there is more of an impetus for them to work things out with mothers, regardless of whether they can offer them love or commitment. Phrases such as “a child needs a father” and “it’s not about you” are now more commonly communicated to mothers not only by fathers but also by friends, family, and community members. One father shared his experience of trying to work out problems with the mother for the sake of his child.

Father: That’s why, to this day, that’s why the main purpose and I say – I share it with their mother, I say, “Despite, if we don’t agree on nothing, let’s agree that we must agree on something. Let’s just agree that we know we have to agree on something. Let’s not disagree just for the disagreement.” Then okay, we’ll agree that if I can pick him up at this time, fine. Do not try to take advantage of something that we both brought in and you and your benefits. I love that child. I made that child. I was part of that child’s birth at the same time when the making was there, so I want to be there to see it and be able to grow up with it. So that established the foundations for both; if need be. You know, I didn’t have to yell, argue. I just said I understand. Resentment and feelings and just attitudes can take

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over and then you don't want me around your child; which you say, "your child", I say, "our child".

A teacher spoke about her former daughter-in-law and how she at first tried to keep the father away from his children.

Teacher: I love all my grandchildren. I don't always – one of the moms, we don't get along but I still respect her opinion and she still respect mine so some of the things she do, I don't like. I don't think she should do, but that's my opinion. I don't, I just, I voice my opinion to her and she voice hers to me and we meet in the middle cause my granddaughter has to know me, has to, definitely has to know her mom. When it comes to her education I felt some stuff was going on that shouldn't have been going on that, there's other ways of if I do things. There was so much friction till she didn't put any information in school that he will pick her up and go with her. Even though his name is on the birth certificate, they didn't, it was just kind of hard. So some parents do things just for meanness. But, now, that the child is older, the mother kind of gets it because it always doesn't weigh in your favor. The little, she just said "look I miss my dad and I want to spend time with him." And, so, you know, it has gotten better from her seeing and hearing and things going around at her job or where she takes them to play and stuff. But, she understands better now. She said "I didn't see it because I was young, and I didn't want to see it. But, now that I'm older, I kind of get where you were coming from and I apologize."

Her former daughter-in-law was constantly hearing other people telling her to place the child's feelings before her own, and in time she felt less justified in keeping the child away from her father. The child grew older and was also able to express the need to see her father.

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As more women begin to see that their child's relationship to their father is separate from their own relationship with him it becomes easier for a family to be constructed. The form of the family no longer needs to rely on the romantic relationship between two people. The placement of the child at the center of the family redefines how a man is connected to his family as well as to larger society. It also encourages everyone, especially mothers, to place children, and not feelings, at the center of the conversation when negotiating roles in a relationship. A father's relationship to the mom is no longer a recognized prerequisite to an intimate relationship with his child. This is especially important for men who, for various reasons, have to father from another household.

The structure of low-income families is often a reflection of limited resources. Who lives in the household often depends on where there is room or who is willing to pool resources. Because the resources of many low-income urban families fluctuate, their members move often, so the household varies over time. Often, family members of parents try to chip in to help a couple that may be struggling, so children frequently reside in multiple residences at once. Households then, exist among various sets of walls.

Fathers are usually the hardest for family members to feel comfortable supporting and often wear out their welcome the most quickly. The reluctance to support a man as opposed to a child or mother derives from the belief that a man should be self-sufficient, an ancillary of the belief that a man should be, first and foremost, a provider. Cool performances of masculinity also make it challenging for kin to feel an intimacy that will lead to support. Children and women evoke a sense of vulnerability that encourages obligation to help while men appear less deserving. So, when a family in financial trouble tries to find a household to join, black men are

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usually the least welcome, sometimes even in the homes of their own family members.

Households of the mother's kin are even more resistant. Men who find ways to contribute to the household and respect the rules of the head of household may better navigate the inevitability of wearing out their welcome. It is often just a matter of time because sooner or later it becomes quite apparent to everyone that resources are limited and one becomes less willing to share. One of the custodians, an older father, shared his experience of constantly moving his family around while searching for a stable household. Eventually, his children and their mother stayed with the maternal grandmother, but he bounced around until he ended up staying permanently with a cousin.

Custodian: After a while, family and friends—the past two weeks, you're staying in my house the past two weeks, maybe they tired of you now you know. Maybe they tired of you now you know because you done came in and changed the dynamics. And so do you move on to the next one? But now if you've got you, your girl and two kids, that ain't one person. That's a lot of people in transition living with you. You see families. Like I said I seen families go together with all—it's like you ain't going to go in there and mess up kids or they like I'm not conflicting to the rules and requirements you got to, curfew and all that. I'm a man, nobody going to tell me when to come in and go out. And—and say if you was in housing and you got caught selling drugs or with a gun and you might not have done that for years, you can't go and stay at their mother's house. So now if you can't go stay with your mother, who you going to stay with?

The custodian meets his children at the corner of the block everyday to take them to school. Currently, he and their mother are “not together, not really.” Unfortunately, a temporary split within the family unit due to means can easily become a gateway to more permanent

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separation. Men must take active measures to maintain a daily presence and contribute to the needs of the household in other ways. Some fathers learn how to be part of the family and contribute to the household even if they live elsewhere. These arrangements put additional strain on a low-income father as he must find ways to support himself and contribute to the household of his child. When faced with inadequate resources, he will often choose to support himself and feel comfortable that his child will be supported by the household she/he is in. Extended family then, becomes a gateway for staying involved in the family.

Because historically black families have consisted of extended kin, a lifelong commitment between two people comes with the support of their families. If men maintain any connection to the family, the child benefits not only from support from the mother's side but also from the father's side. It is well documented that black families tend to operate within an extended kin framework, often with multiple generations and nuclear family units cohabitating in one household. While pooling resources for economic survival is a practical solution, as can be seen from the recent increase in intergenerational households among all races due to the recent recession, black families have long adopted this model of family structure. Since the days of slavery, the often marginalizing and alienating context of America has pushed black families to reform vital community institutions, such as family and religion to better suit their life experiences.

Parenting roles are often dispersed throughout the extended family. Low-income black families tap into extended kin networks not only because they need to pool resources, but also because they are influenced by an enduring cultural tradition. If a father cannot contribute directly, he can bring resources to the child indirectly through his family. This depends on his

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ability to maintain ties to his child, a process that often requires him to convince the child's mother and other family members of his relevance. One older sister told me about how she supported her younger brother who fathered a child when he was fourteen years old.

Sister:           The girl wanted him to do certain things, and her mother wanted him to do certain things, and I'm like, well he was fourteen. Take care of the child, and be there. But, at fourteen, how you gonna be a father, especially when your father didn't show you how to be a father. He calls and stuff like that, but that's not being a part of it, you know. It bothers him, it bothers us, 'cause they're not only his, they're our godchildren. It bothers him to a point. Not enough because like, for example, Christmas we'll go out and we'll buy toys for them and we'll tell them he bought them.

This sister, a mother of four children in her early 30's, tries to keep the doors open for her young brother. According to her, when he is mature enough to deal with being a father, her ongoing support will give him inroads back into his child's life. When I asked her if her little brother appreciates it, she rolls her eyes. She and her mother accept his use of them to provide for his children and to be able, with his child's mother, to maintain a sense of respect because he brings in, albeit indirectly, resources for the child.

### Changing benefits of fatherhood for black men

If the child is understood to be at the center of family, then a father who sustains a relationship with his child is never without family, he remains connected. With changing ideologies of fatherhood and family, maintaining a connection to one's child offers many more benefits than it did in the past. In earlier generations, being connected to one's child was primarily a private affair, especially when men could not provide. So, attempts to build an

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intimate relationship with a child had to be driven by an intrinsic need to be in the child's life. However, if a father could not provide, a child became a sort of scarlet letter, a symbol to the world that his father was not a "decent parent."

A father trying to stay connected to his family often faces an ongoing struggle, especially if his relevance to the family is doubted by the mother, her kin, his friends, his kin or even himself. The one person not doubtful of his significance is generally his child. Fortunately for many low-income black fathers, children have not learned to judge their fathers by their ability to provide. A father can come and go and still be seen as relevant by his children as long as he is there for their emotional needs. This offers an explanation for my finding in Chapter 2, namely, that a large percentage of adults at the Head Start consider their fathers as highly involved in their childhoods. But, the unconditional love and faith of a child that adds to a father's psychic wellbeing is often entwined with the constant conflict and tension that poverty brings to relationships. Consequently, a man's persistence to keep hold of his family wavers; his behavior is often inconsistent and inadequate as he struggles to figure out how to fulfill the obligations of a decent man without the necessary tools.

While the implications of structural inequalities for black men still exist today, the loosening social norms of fatherhood have made keeping hold of family slightly more workable for fathers. Men can openly embrace non-economic roles and feel less shame about doing so. Additionally, due to growing attention to fatherhood, fathers are slowly gaining more rights to their children both in the court of law and public opinion. A man's desire to maintain a relationship with his child is less at the mercy of women. A man does not have to commit to a woman in order to commit to his child.



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Not only does fatherhood have fewer penalties, it also has more benefits. Whereas fatherhood may once have been a scarlet letter, fatherhood is now a badge of honor. Anderson (1990) discusses how black men in the public domain use emblems, such as ties and carrying books to be seen as safer than their street counterparts. Children act as such an emblem for black men. Children now also offer ways for the man to gain a status and respect in the community that he would ordinarily not be given. One father commented on how people in his building see him with his children and how this has helped him find job opportunities and has even counteracted the negative things the mother of his children say about him.

Father: I hear stuff -- like a lot of people, they see what I do, like I take care of mines. They see me with my kids and stuff. So, sometimes people just see that and they just volunteer information to me. Like one lady, I was speaking to her yesterday. She was like, the park department should be opening soon, definitely by March. You should talk to your public assistance worker so I could go to work and stuff like that to take care of bills. She's like talk to your worker; see if you can get a job that way. And I'm like okay. I'll speak to her and I'll say hi and bye, whatever. And then every once in a while they'll stop me -- hey, you looking for a job? You need a job -- stuff like that. People just stop me. I know it's very rare. I'm blessed when it comes to certain things like that. I'll just be minding my business and people will just be like yo, here you go.

There's guys in the building now that like seen me over a few years, and now -- they're older guys, like in their 40s and 50s, they look at me like how you doing? Automatically they say hi to me because they seen me. They know I'm with my boys, I'm with my daughter; I'm in and out. They're like, okay, he's taking care of his. They could tell; they know. They know from people that I -- my brothers -- that's my brothers or people that I've been around they'd probably be like well he's not like them. Yeah, as far as my building goes, like a lot of people are looking at me probably like oh, he takes care of his kids, he's a father. He's not

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out here, you know what I'm saying, running around crazy. If he's running crazy it's because he's running to an appointment or he's running to a job or, you know what I'm saying, they know. I'm not no bum dude that doesn't care. That just bothers me when they might know my son's mother or my daughter's mother wants to call me a sperm donor, it's just like wow, ya'll really want to say that when I'm not, you know what I'm saying? You already know I'm not that person.

Mark also relates how being with his children has changed the way people interact with him.

When I am with myself people are rude or ignore me but when I take my kids, it's totally different. People is willing to do more, work with you more, help you more. I feel like its abusing the situation.<sup>16</sup>

Another father discusses how public approval of him helps fathers like him stay involved.

He specifically mentions the honor of being an escort.

I feel very supported in a lot of ways with that. Just as the presentation of coming and entering the building. My appearance, they see as a person with authority to pick up a child as an adult and as a parent as well. They really respect me as that and they encourage me. They see I have children in the neighborhood. Those parents that know of me, or my kids, they know of me because I'm involved in doing activities and we see each other in different areas sometimes. "Hi! How you doin'? That's your youngest?" "Yeah, that's my youngest" and years keep continuously going by and life has what it's offering in giving me the opportunity to take that role and to become a good person in that role. So every day, I look initially to discover more about being a parent as well as a man in a world that we

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<sup>16</sup> Mark is bothered by his experience that people are nicer to him when he is with his girls. His description of them "abusing the situation" is his way of expressing his discontent that although he is the same person, people do not want to help him unless he is with his daughters. When I suggested that perhaps people may feel they can relate to him more when he is with his children, he responded that it still was not right.

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live in, where there's a lot of obstacles working against and there's a lot of systems working against, and there's other issues that come with as people want to do better so they don't know how to cope with it. It's the feeling you deal with and that you need to separate from the fact that you have a child. So for me to use a drug because I didn't like what the mother said, now the child doesn't get a chance to see me because I'm indulging in this or I'm doing something here or harmful, or you know, so everybody's effected by a decision. That's what comes with parenting.

Children have also become a way for men to reconnect to the larger society and to access resources such as shelter and welfare benefits—formerly only granted to women—that they would never have been able to receive in the past. For example, as I hung out with Charles, I realized that one of the original reasons that he had taken on the role of caretaker was because it was a way for him to support himself. Charles also stated that he believed his child's mother knew that “he was just the better parent.” He and J's mother agreed that he should be the primary parent because she was focused on her career in reality television. Moreover, Charles could get more support from the government than she could because she lived with her mother. Although he still tries to find a job or earn money through hustling, the benefits he gets to support J also help him support himself.

Finally, children offer an opportunity for black men to practice new forms of masculinity and adjust cool poses that indicate toughness or indifference. Children are always ready to hug and kiss and play. Black men may have a hard time relaxing their poses before adults but children offer them safer opportunities for dropping the hard "mask" of the cool pose and showcasing a warmer, less self-conscious side of themselves. Two teachers spoke about one

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father in their class who was simply difficult to engage, but they both noticed how affectionate he was with his child.

Teacher 1      One father, everything is the mom. Usually we ask him if we can see the mother because it doesn't look like he deals with anything concerning her. Well, when he comes in the morning, he does bring her in, but if we have something to share we'd ask him to see the mother, because it's like he just dropping off and running. So that's what it seems like with her father.

Teacher 2      During -- during parent teacher conference, he was just like, kind of like, kind of like he didn't know what to do or really want us to sit down and talk to him. He didn't have --

Teacher 1      He didn't have anything to say.

Teacher 2      Yeah.

Teacher 1      He didn't respond to anything we was sharing parent teacher conference with him. He said okay I'll -- I'll tell the mom.

Teacher 2      Yeah.

Teacher 1:      That -- that's what he said to me, I'll tell the mom.

Teacher 2      But when he comes to pick her up, he's very affectionate with her. He's just like hugging her and walking around the classroom and she's showing him things. Mom is just about business. You know, she handle the business and leave. But he's very affectionate with her.

Me:              So the mom talks to you guys.

Teachers:      Yeah.

These added benefits make fatherhood a much more worthwhile endeavor for black men as well as one easier to pursue. Contrary notions of norms around marriage, family structure, gender, and fatherhood create a grey space in which fathers can define their role in their children's lives. However, such ambiguity also grants a space for capitalizing on and trying new

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benefits while not necessarily embracing responsibility. This makes it difficult to assess what are excuses and what are real reasons for not being a consistent fathering presence in a child's life—especially when it comes to managing tensions with the mother in order to be involved with the child.

A considerable number of fathers I met were older fathers, men who had fathered children in their youth and then again 15-20 years later. Many of these men had not been deeply involved with their first child a generation ago, but were so in their children's lives now. Below is part of an interview with one of these fathers, who confessed how he had come to understand why his girl had not let him see his children and how he had sometimes used her objections as excuses. He believes his insight had been influenced by being “forced to think” while he was in jail. Yet, looking back, despite all the wrongs that he had done and all the wrongs that his girl had done, he had never given up.

Father: These are the areas that I pretty much touch base with being in a prison. I've learned through of experiences because feelings come like that in the prison. They say feelings come and go, but feelings come, come, come, come, come when you're locked away and you're confined because it's like, now you got nowhere to go. You have nothing to do. You've got to think. You're forced. See, out on the street, you're able to -- oh, I could leave here. I can go to the park. I can go anywhere. I can go to the movie theater if I chose to right now. You know, like I can get away. I can escape. So, with that came learning the hardest thing in life to try to understand; what is D--- S--- like? What could you do? Despite what society has deemed you, or what could you do to make a difference if you had to do it all over again.

I'm dignified in my choices today. It was me just going through what I'm going through and being selfish towards my needs and blaming, you know, there

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goes the blame game. You know, and I realize in a relation, there's two people that play a part. And my part might've been so -- their part might've been so small that I tried to engross it to make them think that you played just as a big a part. But it was just me acting out, the feelings that I don't know how to talk about or don't know how to cope with reality. But there's that, you know, and like I said, I was young. I'm learning. I'm a parent and it's a process, and it's an ongoing and it's a healing process.

[Referring to his children's mother] I don't want to say "you're wrong". I just know there's a process and there's always choices. When you're dealing with a child, there's choices. And then there's times to say, "well, let me just leave it alone for a later time". But sometimes, I mean, you want to do it right now, now, now. You want to be heard. You want to be felt and the child is crying. "You don't want to -- you want to be -- but you stopped from doing with the child. I went through stuff like that. But you know, those are years of experience in growing, but I never threw the towel in. I would never -- and I'm never going to. And I know, people say never. I'm never going to leave or abandon my kids, mentally, physically or financially. It's not happening. It's a part of what I made. I'm a part of my family.

### Summary

Notions about family structures and the roles within them have changed dramatically over the last three generations. The economic empowerment of women has liberated many from the dependency and control of men and their correlated subservient position in the family. However, the image of the dominant male breadwinner and the submissive doting stay-at-home wife has long been abandoned by the black community. Due to the effects of slavery and lack of resources, black women took on work in addition to domestic roles in order to supplement their income. While, the public was still discussing whether or not women should work, black women,

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like many poor immigrants, took on any job they could find to contribute to the financial resources of the family.

Women now make up the majority of the American workforce, yet the ideological constraints of men assuming more work at home are just beginning to unravel. While black women have a public history of working, black men do not have a public history of taking on non-economic roles. Just as being a working-woman is less of a choice for poor woman and more of a necessity, taking on a caretaking role is more about necessity than choice for poor men. Because black men are more likely to feel subjugated and powerless, being a stay-at-home dad is marked by a dishonor that middle class or non-minority men may not feel as much. Still, since reality eventually trumps ideology, black families have tried to work out a structure that allows them to play a role that suits their circumstances but softens the shame of not measuring up to the ideal American family.

As society has grown to be more accepting of female-headed households and non-providing fathers, the practices of the black family and the behaviors of black men within the family unit are slowly coming to public light. Somewhere between the traditional two-parent family living in one household unit and a single mother-headed family with no father, are a myriad of family formations. Given the often fluctuating situations of those living in or close to poverty, families take on varied and fluid forms. Structuring a family becomes a dynamic process in which change is acceptable and probable and everyone learns to be comfortable with uncertainty. You may not be committed forever, but you are together for now and for the foreseeable future. Or you are not together for now, but you live with the possibility that you may reconnect in the future. Or you are together but not living together because of

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circumstances. Family becomes planned with now as the most important unit of time. Family shifts from being spatially to experience oriented. A family is bonded by events and experiences and not because it occupies a specific location or holds a specific structure.

Such a family is not easily defined and depends heavily on the ongoing negotiations between parents. Families have room to explore structure and define roles within it. While this is not new for black families, the social acceptance of this reality is a bit of a novelty. Social acceptance is not only bringing these varied and mutable forms to public light but also encouraging their prevalence. At the heart of this social acceptance is a major cultural shift in mainstream social norms that is changing the way all families operate and redefining the cultural tenet regarding the core of the family, from parents to child.

Children, now moved to the center of families, offer a way for men who live at the margins of society to stay connected with their families. The placement of the child at the center may help mitigate disagreements and keep families together after separation. Fathers today thus have an easier job finding and maintaining their place, if they want it, in both intact and non-intact families. Children keep fathers connected not only with their families but also with the community and society. Public knowledge of a man's status as father reconnects him to the mainstream while distancing him from fathers who have truly abandoned their role. Privately, men are no longer beholden to rigid notions of the breadwinning role so their assertion of their place in the family in both intact and non-intact families is less conditional on whether or not they are able to provide.

Regardless of their ability to provide economically, fathers are being encouraged to maintain involvement. More nurturing aspects are being celebrated in popular media and



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acknowledged in hip hop culture thanks to reality television. Still the transition to non-economic roles is not a smooth one and comes with problems and consequences as men still try to find ways to feel like decent fathers. The ritual of buying junk food and brand-name wear for children may appear irresponsible but it satisfies the need of a father to feel like a provider and to display this function to the outside world. Brand-name wear, also combats the stigma of race as a signifier of poverty. It is not just that they can provide clothing, but they can provide well by providing clothing of value.

Many black men cannot yet admit that being a stay-at-home dad is a permanent position. Instead, they claim that being the primary caretaker is a short-term convenience as they look for ways to earn income. This narrative, whether true or false, enables a father to be comfortable with the stay-at-home role and use it both as a psychological rationalization and as a public narrative that can be told to family and friends. It is also a useful leverage tool and can grant a man some time and leeway to use his informal networks to locate a job or hustle. Men with little or no work history, limited education, and possibly a criminal history definitely need time, personal references, and luck in obtaining employment.

New opportunities and benefits for embracing fatherhood have been created and perceived while costs have been minimized. A link to their children can also grant marginalized men some sense of control and authority over the lives they have created. As gender norms and ideas about masculinity are challenged, day to day nurturing interactions with children offer black men stunted by performances of masculinity a way to loosen their pose and exhibit actions and feelings that they have long learned to hide.

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The growing presence of couples at the Head Start may be a sign that parents are recognizing the importance of getting along together for the sake of the child and are benefiting from new roles. Working out relationships with a child's mother is an ongoing process and changing social norms create ambiguity in the father's rights and responsibilities. Some fathers will use these ambiguities as excuses or as cover ups for faltering involvement. Regardless, women control the ability of fathers to keep hold of their families and the extent to which a father will be involved in his child's life. The mother, connected to the child by the universal norms of motherhood and nurturing, is forced to take the lead in defining her family. The esteemed and, at times, formidable position of the mother in the black community will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 5- The Black Maternal Garden**

### **The Black Maternal Garden: The context of kin & fictive kin ties on the maternal domain**

Maternal gatekeeping is the regulation of paternal involvement by the attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of the mother. Originally a theory to explain relationships within marriage, it can occur both inside and outside of it (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). In terms of black low-income communities, the theory of maternal gatekeeping can be further developed to reflect the particular context within which these families often live. I place the theory of maternal gatekeeping within the context of strong kinship reliance (Stack, 1974), multiple and fluctuating residence statuses (Bengston 2001; Billingsley 1988; Hill, 1972; Stack, 1974), and high involvement from community and social service institutions (Appell, 1997, Boyd-Franklin, 1989). The parenting of children in low-income families can be heavily influenced by extended family members, both kin and non-kin, as well as the community institutions these families access for support. For the purpose of this dissertation, I apply the concept of maternal gatekeeping to the lives of predominantly black, low-income fathers residing in an American urban community. Before doing so, I must first discuss the cultural context of the black family.

Studies of families have long documented the distinct organization of family life in black communities. One clear distinction is the prominent place of the extended family both historically and in the present (Gordan and McLahanan, 1991; Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Franklin, 1997, Johnson & Staples, 2005; Sudarkasa, 1997). While there is evidence of a connection between extended family structures among African American families and African traditions and values (Johnson & Staple, 2005; Sudarkasa, 1997), the prevalence of extended families in black families may also be a reflection of socioeconomic status (Stack & Burton, 1993; Edin & Lein, 1997; Coontz, 1997).

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Since household formation may be a response to economic necessity, black families arrange their households in various ways that allow for flexibility. Consequently, black family structures have sometimes been mislabeled due to their inability to fit mainstream molds. For example, until 2007, a child living with unmarried parents was classified as living only with the identified head of household. The other parent often went undocumented by the US Census Bureau (Roberts, 2008). Additionally, household members may have gone unreported by the head of household because their stay was considered provisional, even if such arrangements might last for years. Despite their transient and unobserved household membership, such family members may contribute to family activities and processes.

The bulk of research on kinship ties in the black community focuses primarily on single-mother headed household and center on mother and child interactions (Billingsley 1988; Hill 1972; Stack 1974; Sudarkasa 1988). Less is known about how family processes work within alternative household forms, such as multi-generational households or households with cohabitating partners, both of which are found more often in black communities. Single mothers overwhelmingly list another adult when asked who helps with childrearing. The maternal grandmother and biological father are the most reported co-parents (Hunter 1997; Jones, Shaffer, Forehand, Brody, & Armistead, 2003). Although men and women do not differ in their overall reliance on their mothers for support with the rearing of children, the influence of paternal grandmothers has been less studied (Hunter 1997).

In addition to understanding the role of extended family on parenting attitudes and behaviors, childrearing support in black families is not limited to physical residence. Family members who provide extensive support for child care may or may not reside in the household.

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Furthermore, reliance on fictive kin is also distinctive of black communities (Chatters et al. 1994). Friends and neighbors can quickly become a critical part of a family network and resources (Stack, 1974). Community organizations and institutions, such as church and agencies that provide social services, have also been found to play a significant role in the lives of low-income black families (Boyd-Franklin 1989, Appell, 1997, Jewell, 2003).

Thus, a family's internal processes may be deeply influenced by the actions and attitudes of those providing support, including immediate family members, extended kin, fictive kin, neighbors, and community institutions. Along with tangible resources such as money and babysitting time, come advice and mentoring on how families should operate and how children should be reared. Ideas and actions beyond those of an individual mother contribute to the regulation of paternal involvement in black communities. Maternal gatekeeping can thus be expanded to include the actions and attitudes of extended family members, community members, and community institutions, given their significant function in low-income black family life. Before delving into the effects of kin and non-kin on father engagement, let us first discuss how mothers influence the participation of fathers in the lives of their children.

Ms. M shared with me her personal experiences about earning more money than her boyfriend does. Although she is not a formally trained social worker or therapist, she counsels many women, who, she feels, unfortunately do not understand how to manage this situation and instead end up pushing men out of the household.

I have a boyfriend that lives with us. And he doesn't have any children because he was a crack head for like 25 years on the street. The nicest man I've ever met in my whole life. I'm a widow as well, my husband died. And I thought I'd never probably even be bothered and I had different opportunities and I always tell him

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I don't know why I picked you out crack head, in the street, you know, I don't say that in a derogatory way.

But then I say you know, you could have been a man with money but the money don't do what you do at the end of the day. Because I say before I can think of what it is I want he knows and he's doing it. If it's rubbing my feet or cracking my head<sup>17</sup>, he's done it, I don't even have to say do it. And affectionate, I was like, you know, maybe in this point of my life that's why I gravitated to you. I'm affectionate so I like that and he's very affectionate, always caring.

I don't ever make him not feel like he's a man. If he brought me \$10, I'm so glad you gave me that \$10, that's \$10 I didn't have. Because if your my man I want to keep your esteem up. And I don't want to do anything that's going to make you go back to being inferior. Or go back to the life that you lived. Not on my account. If you truthfully do that, then you know you can't be with me because I'm not going to condone it.

But not all women do that. You know, you ain't got no job? He didn't even have a job when he first came here. It's not easy. Everybody—you've got people with degrees that can't find a job. So whatever it is they doing, if you're picking up bottles then you bringing something into the family. You still got to lift the man up because a man ain't nothing but a little boy in a big body.

[But,] You still hear women saying like--you ain't no good. You don't do shit. I got two or three baby mommas now or girlfriends and so they put in and so that's their m.o. You ain't doing nothing. You ain't did nothing, yeah. They don't—that's the nurturing stuff I'm talking about. Not only do you got to nurture your children, as women you got to nurture your man too. You got to train him just like you train the children. And the best way they said, they say you get more with honey than with vinegar. Or you go through the stomach or whatever avenue you got to go.

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<sup>17</sup> The phrase “cracking my head” means that her husband helps her crack her neck.

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Because I believe a lot of men, especially black men are intimidated with women because women are doing the education thing, you know? They can make it and they tell you I can do this for myself, I don't need no man. I don't know white people, I'm sure they still got some similar experiences. People may be telling them no good but if they go to the place, all things being equal, they'll probably get the job before we will. And so I can't talk to their experience. If they have a high school diploma, they may take them but tell you, you need college, you know what I'm saying?

I know black men. And so your girl got a B.A., you ain't even got a high school diploma. She get and start making money doing different things, tell you you ain't nothing. I ain't, you know, I ain't got to do nothing. I'll take care of myself, blah-blah-blah. How do you feel that's fair? You don't feel like you're a man. Tomorrow I'm having a session supposedly. I got to check, with an older woman and her mate and a younger woman and her mate. Two different ages, same problem, men are insecure. The same issues, always, you know?

Two teachers, one older, one younger also share their experiences with how mothers influence the involvement of men. Like Ms. M, they believe women have the authority to get men to assume more household and child-care responsibilities. The older teacher, however, feels that the father's effort is limited.

Older Teacher: I said the mothers got smarter. Throw it on the father. I mean every time it's always mom, mom, mom. Push the kids on the father to make them be a father to their child. Now the women's got the jobs so now we have no choice. Some women are working now. Before women didn't work. They was on public assistance, stuff like that. Now, they're working, some dads aren't working. Let the child be with their father.

Young Teacher: It's according to the mindset of the parents. You get, you know, some people come from broken homes, some stay around, some run around. I came from a

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broken home. And I still and guess what, I didn't do that to my kids father. He's going to take care of them. I was going to help them learn how to be a father to their child. It was my vow. I mean sometimes fathers don't know how to be a father, they don't know. You -- I mean I was in a relationship where I know he didn't have a chance to be a father to his child. So I helped him through my children to be a father to their child, to his child. Like you got to -- people only going to -- that's just like if you , if per se, a woman have a child, a baby and she don't tell him well you got to do this and you got to do that, they won't step up and say oh I'm going to do that, because they won't feel comfortable.

Like some kids, like when I first had my daughter, my -- even though my daughter's father has another child, he wasn't involved. So when I had her he was like real particular like how to hold her, you know, different stuff. So, for a long period of time he didn't want to pick her up, he didn't want to change her, he was like I don't know how to be gentle. So I was like you got to just -- like, you would ha -- I had to like, really instruct him like how to do it, because he wasn't around for his first daughter when she was young like that. So, you have to open them up. To teach them how to do it. Because like, even though like me and my daughter's father, we go through things, I want him to be there. So, he got a understanding of that now. Like, you know, like when two parents can put behind like, their mixed feelings, for the child.

Older Teacher: I'm being honest, these male parents. They leaving the role model up to the mother, and not the dad. They leaving everything -- and, I'm sorry, but maybe the mother's just trying to push them and not help or not -- I have a family here too like, oh the dad's going to go on the trip. Next thing you know, the parent calls and says oh he's -- his leg is hurt and he's not going on the trip, the -- this boy is not going on the trip. But that's because the father. I just think that they don't, they leave it up to the mother. And then the mother just let's -- They let them -- they let it go like that. It shouldn't be like that.

Me: But you -- you said earlier, before, that you felt like mothers were getting smarter.



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Older Teacher: Yeah, as far as babysitting. That's what I mean.

Men respect women's authority in the maternal domain so many do not assert theirs. Yet a mother's demands may push a man to do more. One mother compares her husband's role to her husband's father's role and talk about the little ways she pushes him to take the lead in some house and child caretaking tasks.

Mother: I see a difference 'cause even with my mother in-law, that's her son, [she refers to the cook at one of the Head Start sites who has been standing in the hallway while we talk], his father would come, "You cooking, women supposed to do that." [He would tell his dad] "But I like cooking, and I'm a better cook than she is."

Me: So he's explaining to his father that –

Mother: Yeah, that I don't mind cooking, I don't mind helping. I don't mind she's better at cleaning than I am. The house is a mess, but still, she's better at certain things. Yeah, we work together. He watched how his father let his mother do everything, because he felt, oh, I work hard, I don't have to do anything. You know, on the weekends, he [no referring to her husband] comes home in the morning, I tell the kids, I'm off-duty, you want something, you need something, go ask daddy. I do have to take her back and forth to dance class and girl scouts, I may have to take her, I might have to do this, whatever –

Me: But you guys have talked about it and you know what you're gonna do, and what he's gonna do –

Mother: And he goes home shopping. I do not, can't tell you what's in my freezer, 'cause he goes and, he puts the food, he goes and buys the food and he puts the food away. He can tell me certain things that needs to happen that I don't know, but then I tell him, this needs to be done, that needs to be done, this is what's going on at the school, my old school has this thing happening, this is what the, I do those things, I do the doctor's visits and stuff like that, but that's because he sleeps

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during the day because he's works. But you have to have that sit down and communicate –

During the course of our conversation another mother realized that she and her partner had never really had the conversation.

- Mother: So, I started working then, and I in my mind I said okay, well let me try to make this transition to working a little easier where he won't really notice that I'm working. So I tried to make sure that I kind of maintained everything that I was doing, plus working. Which didn't always work well, because of the fact that I'm out of the house, so it's not like I'm, yeah. But anyway, so it really wasn't much of a negotiation, just like okay I'm going back to work.
- Me: You just continued to maintain both.
- Mother: So yeah, I just continued on doing all the stuff that I did. Oh my god, how did I do that?
- Me: So you never -- you guys never have been --
- Mother: Wow -- you know what, oh my god, yeah, oh god. This is very interesting, but I said, you know what, if I go back to work, I will not be doing the same thing.
- Me: So you never had the conversation --
- Mother: No.
- Me: You never were like, look I need you to do more around the house, I need you -
- Mother: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Oh my god, I never really had this conversation with him.
- Me: But can you imagine if you had that conversation, what would his response be? What do you think?
- Mother: I think, out of spite, like oh what, you want to do what now? I'm going to be the provider. Oh my crazy husband and my crazy self, okay. I guess that's why we're together. Okay, yes, okay, next question. Now this has been very eye opening, oh my god.

During this conversation, this particular mother expressed disapproval of the stay-at-home father as a permanent solution for any black family though she did feel it was okay for white people because they could "afford to do that." Although she realized she needed more help, she assumed he would be unwilling and did not request that he do more now that she was working. Her and her partner's traditional values may be making it difficult for them to envision different roles.

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In non-intact families, when a father's involvement is unwanted, he may rely on time, hoping that the mother will eventually allow him to be involved or that once the child gets older the mother will have less control over the child's behavior and he will then be able to reach out. Ralph has four kids; he recently got custody of one. He is seeking custody of two and has resigned himself to not being involved with another daughter until she becomes a teenager. This decision is based on the contentious relationship he has with her mother.

Ralph        I have a daughter down in Florida, and she [the mother] knows that bothers me so she tries to say stuff<sup>18</sup> all the time. But I keep no contact with her. I haven't spoken to my daughter in a while now because of that. Like there's too many issues me and her are having, so I feel like it's best that I stay away because we argue too much. Like we have a good moment here and there where I get to speak to my daughter, but it's been years, you know what I'm saying? Like I didn't really see my daughter until recently -- two years ago almost. And she kept me away; you know what I'm saying? Oh, I got a new husband; he's going to raise your daughter, that's her father and stuff. Oh, I'm changing her last name; just, you know just ignorant stuff. And it was like you know what? When she gets older, we're going to have a long talk because I will contact her. Or if not, you know what I'm saying; my goal is to still contact her. Once she hits the teens, it's over. I'm going to contact her, because I want to. I want to have that -- I've been wanting to have a relationship but she [the mother] just didn't want that to happen.

Mm-hmm, she will have more of a -- she can sit back and really think and then say she'll have her own mind to sit there and say I don't have to listen to what you're saying. I'm hearing both sides now. I know what's going on. Oh, this wasn't really happening? Oh, this wasn't really happening? Okay, well I get to understand his side now; you know what I'm saying? I just want to, you know, not even get my side across; just want to let her know this is what I was trying to do, this is what I want to do, your mother stopped that, okay. This is what happened because of that, you know what I'm saying?

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<sup>18</sup> Ralph feels his daughter's mother purposely tries to make him feel guilty because he lives a long distance away from his daughter and cannot be around as much as he would like.

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I took trips down to Florida -- oh, I can't drive, you know. I can't get over to you but I just flew -- I just got my money and flew down to Florida, and I can't come see her? She has excuses and stuff like that. All right, I'm going to go party; I'm going to a club now, you know what I'm saying? I flew all this way to come see her, and now I'm going to party because I -- it's messed up, so you know what? I'm going to party. I'm going to have fun. And then when you see or you hear about it, don't get mad at me, you know what I'm saying? See me in South Beach hanging out on the strip, then the VMAs -- don't get mad at me; don't get mad. You chose this path for me. I went to go see her, I couldn't see her, so I'll party hard.

She would just do a little bit -- oh, you can go party, but you can't take care -- yes, I could. I was trying to take care of -- I came down here, I had a box of stuff. You didn't know that, did you? I was going to give it to you. Now it just went to waste, you know what I'm saying? It's just crazy stuff; madness -- madness.

Ralph and his daughter's mother both use their contentious relationship to prove the other wrong and justify their behaviors. Although Ralph went to Florida to see his daughter, he refused to swallow his pride and overcome the hurdles the mother set to see his daughter. He used her behavior to justify his lack of effort though it was his decision to have fun and party hard rather than resolve the conflict. He has accepted his inferior standing in his daughter's current life and has decided to embrace fatherhood with his other children because it presents less of a battle. Edin and Nelson (2013) developed the term 'selective fathering' for a case when the resource demand for multiple children compels a father to choose which child to father and to marshal his limited resources to particular children while ignoring others. Who Ralph "selected" to father was not about money, but about availability.

Trying to disentangle how much of a father's noninvolvement is due to the mother or to a lack of effort on the father's part is impossible. Each relationship has its own nuances and factors. What is important here is that regardless of individual idiosyncrasies, mothers as a whole

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do wield authority over children and this authority is sanctioned by the fathers as well. Men are just beginning to feel comfortable in asserting their voice in the development and caretaking of children. Trying to stay involved without the mother's approval, however, is an uphill battle that men do not feel they can win. For men who are in amicable relationships with their child's mother, romantic or not, the depth of their involvement still depends on the mother. A mother's ability to "teach" or "train" her children's father to take on more responsibility is integral to his involvement over time. Some men are not interested regardless of a woman's actions, but many are. Most of the older women I have spoken to believe it is up to the woman to learn how to get fathers more involved and increase their non-economic contributions to the household.

I spoke to Charles's mother, who talked about how proud she was of Charles and his involvement with J.

Charles Mom: You know, because I know like with Mr. S and the way he works with them, because I have my son. I have my grandson is here now. When my granddaughters were in the program, you know, their dad would come and, you know even though he lives elsewhere, but every so often he would come and spend time with them. He went on a trip with them at one time. And then now my son, whose my oldest, my grandson in the program and he's involved. You know, and I'm like yes. And, plus I get on him about that. You better come here and participate! Because my son has custody of my grandson. So, you know, he's one of those, he's a single parent and it's not many male single parents, compared to women. So he has become very involved. Which I'm kind of proud of because we need more men in these children's lives. The children need both of their parents, you know. But I think one of the things are because, you know, just in society as a whole, all men have a difficult time fitting in or giving in. You know, and it's very-very discouraging. So, you know, the self-esteem, you know, and if they don't have you in their corner to encourage them, to push them, to let them know, look hey I believe in you. You know, and it's sad because, I mean, even you know us as women sometimes you know we have a habit of I don't need a man to do this. And it's not about having a man do things for you, but being a part of what children do. That's, you

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know, that makes a dif—include them. But, you know, we got to this point where we're so liberated, like I can do this, I can work. I can take care of the bills, I can raise the children. Because I think a lot of—you know, I see a lot and I hear a lot of women, you know, just you know, passing by. You know how they talk about how, you know, don't do this, he don't do that and you know, he gonna have to get out. And it's like, it just makes me cringe because something got to give, you know. We got it much better but then even us, you know, as women, we have to be taught how to implement things. But, you know, we are what we live.

The idea of black mothers being partly culpable for lack of involvement on the part of black fathers is a hard pill to swallow, especially when it has been black women who, by accepting all responsibility of their children's care, both economic and non-economic, have kept the black family afloat over the last two generations. Changes in mainstream norms are making it possible for men to reclaim a place within the black family by negotiating roles and responsibilities based on the circumstances of the family. However, this renegotiation depends on the willingness of women to release their tight hold on all aspects of the family, particularly those falling within the maternal domain. This is a challenging feat, given the historical experience of black families in America, especially over recent generations. Mothers of the past, who have now become grandmothers and great-grandmothers, have long assumed their position as heads of their families. Grandmothers have a hard time relinquishing this role to their daughters and especially to their sons.

### **From maternal to grand-maternal**

A mother's say and influence on her child's life gradually dwindles as the child journeys toward adulthood. Yet once a mother becomes a grandmother, her ability to influence the behaviors of her adult child's parenting may become significant perhaps because grandmothers

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are also mothers and, as such, have implicit credibility and experience in the eyes of their children. This may also reflect ambivalence and insecurity about being parents on the part of the children, who see this as a difficult and exhausting challenge. Grand-motherhood is a natural gateway for mothers to re-assert themselves as authority figures in their children's lives. In mainstream nuclear families, a grandmother's role is often easily managed by the parents. A grandmother's support is naturally regulated by the boundaries created by marriage and separate residence.

For parents who have not yet attained economic stability, a grandmother's support is often needed, requested and accepted by adult children who are faced with the hardships of parenthood. The extent to which a grandmother is willing to take on caretaking duties as well as her adult children's readiness to accept her support have implications for the father's short-term and long-term involvement. Additionally, a grandmother's beliefs about the role of fathers in the family, which are influenced by her past experiences, also determine whether a father will adopt more nurturing aspects of parenting.

My fieldwork showcases four distinct roles that grandmothers play in the rearing of grandchildren: the Intervener, the Moderator, the Evader, and the Supplementer. These roles have different implications for the behaviors of parents in general and for fathers in particular. A grandmother who intervenes, steps in to take over what she feels is lacking in her child's parenting. A grandmother who moderates, steps in and tries to change the parenting behaviors of her children. A grandmother who evades, avoids or tries to minimize her supportive role in the caretaking of her grandchildren. A grandmother who supplements, merely supports the parent, often at the parent's discretion. The latter is the most typical role played by a grandmother in a

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nuclear family. In families where the parent is unable or unwilling to parent actively, the supplemental role can take on a different, more involved form closer to that of an intervener. The role a grandmother plays is shaped first and foremost by the extent of parental involvement on the part her own children. Her role is also influenced by her desire to take on added responsibility and the extent to which being a mother and grandmother is a core part of her identity. Since these factors can change over time, these roles are not static.

### The Intervener

Ten minutes with Ms. W and you know she is a person who gets what she wants and expects a whole lot. Two years with her and I could easily see her influence over the lives of her adult children and grandchildren. When I first met Ms. W, she was working as an Administrative Assistant for the Head Start. In time, I slowly got to know her while we shared an office together. One day early on in our relationship, her twenty-year-old daughter and her three-year-old grandson came by for a visit. She and her daughter spoke quickly about a new job opportunity. The highly anticipated Barclay's Center was soon opening to house the new Brooklyn Nets. Along with the fanfare of a team representing Brooklyn, was the excitement over the new employment opportunities that a stadium would bring. Word of a mass hire of security guards, concession-stand workers, ushers, custodial workers, and retail workers was on the lips of many. Ms. W was advising her daughter on the best way to ensure she was selected from what she knew would be a highly competitive pool.

While they spoke, Ms. W's grandson, Gary, sat quietly with wide eyes and wild hair. I said hello to him and asked him about the car he was holding. He responded with something that



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I could not understand; his speech was high pitched and garbled. I asked him to repeat himself, but I still could not understand, so I simply smiled and told him how nice I found his car to be. Ms. W and her daughter continued to speak for about fifteen minutes while I entertained Gary. Ms. W did much of the talking.

As soon as her daughter and grandson left, Ms. W turned and said to me. “They are a mess, a hot mess!” She was referring to her daughter and Gary’s father. She did not approve of the way they were raising Gary or their newborn son. “He’s [Gary] still in diapers and he can’t talk. He’s not talking properly.” Pause. “And still in diapers. Mmphf...all my children was out of pampers as soon as they can walk. Once you can walk, you better walk yourself over there to that toilet.”

Over the next few months, Ms. W’s daughter and Gary stopped by to visit regularly. Ms. W’s other daughter and son also stopped by from time to time. On days when they did not visit, Ms. W was in constant phone contact with her children. Overhearing her end of the conversation, I could tell when she was talking to her children. Usually I would hear her giving them advice or berating them for their stupidity. Her conversations would often end in either of two ways: “I love you, baby,” or, while throwing her hands up in exasperation, “I’m tired, do what you wanna do. I gotta go. I gotta go. I have too much to do.” Once she hung up, she would tell me about the particular situation from which she was trying to help one of her children out.

One day after a long phone call, which left Ms. W visibly upset, she told me, “I’m gonna have my grandson come live with me.” “Why?” I asked. “They just not raising him right and they have this new baby. I can’t take them both, but I am going to take Gary.” She shook her head. “They just not doing right by him. They just not doing for him, the right way.” Ms. W was

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true to her word. Over the next few months, Ms W enrolled Gary at the Head Start. Within a short time, she was able to get him a speech therapist even though NYC's Department of Education is notorious for the time it takes it to review a child for specialized education services. In less than three months, Mrs. W was able to complete a process that often takes parents at the Head Start six months to a year to complete. Within this time I witnessed her call the Department of Education almost every day to check on her grandson's case.

While Ms. W secured educational support for Gary, she faced little resistance from his parents about letting Gary live with her. He quickly moved in with her and her current husband. At that point I began to see Gary nearly every day, but Gary's mother less and less frequently. Finally, one day, after another phone conversation, Ms. W announced, "I am going to get formal custody. I can't make no arrangements for this boy." Ms. W had joined a local grandparent association. She told me that many of the grandparents were in similar situations and found it difficult to get support for their grandchildren without formal custody as they often met with a lack of cooperation from their grandchild's parents. "For her protection," she got both her daughter and Gary's father to sign a notarized letter stating that they were handing Gary over to her.

While Gary's parents did not offer much resistance to Ms. W's attempts to take care of Gary, they were not exactly supportive or helpful in the transition, either. Ms. W attributed this to the fact that they had their hands full with the baby and were "just lazy." When I asked her about her younger grandson, she shook her head. "All I can do is pray for him. I can't take another." The younger grandson and his parents all reside with the paternal grandmother. Ms. W and the paternal grandmother are not on cordial terms. Ms. W is still upset that years ago the

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father's mother petitioned the court to become the legal guardian of Ms. W's daughter who was sixteen at the time.

Ms. W parents Gary informally until she is able to secure legal guardianship. She has noted to me that over time Gary's parents call and see him less and less frequently. While Ms. W raises Gary, the paternal grandmother helps Gary's parents raise their youngest son. Ms. W's has told me that although she is gaining guardianship of Gary, she believes the parents must stay very involved. On some occasions her behaviors corroborate this belief, but over time her efforts to encourage their involvement has diminished. Before going on vacation to visit her family in North Carolina, she called her daughter to arrange for Gary to stay with her. After the phone call, she told me that she was not planning on taking Gary along on the vacation because she "needed a break." Along with the challenges that Gary was having with his speech, he was often unable to communicate his anger. Trying to deal with tantrums was a constant struggle for Ms. W. Although Ms. W was looking forward to going on vacation, she was also worried about Gary's well-being while she was gone.

Ms. W: I know they are not going to take him to school. They just not going to do it.

Me: What do you mean? Why not?

Ms. W: Cuz they lazy. And they're going to say they don't have carfare. But I gave them carfare last time and they still didn't take him to school. They just don't want to get up early and take him.

Me: Really. What are you going to do? Are you going to take Gary with you?

Ms. W: No. No. This is my vacation. I don't know. They're just going to have to do it. But they not. I know they not.

Me: Even if you give them the money to get him here?

Ms. W: Maybe if I give them the money, they'll bring him late but maybe they will bring him.

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- Me: Well if they don't bring him, they'll have to watch him themselves. Sometimes, it is easier for the kids to be in school.
- Ms. W: She laughs. They don't have to do nothing to watch him.
- Me: What do you mean?
- Ms. W: They'll just put him in front of the TV or leave him with someone (Later I found out 'someone' meant the paternal grandmother). But, if I give them enough carfare then maybe. Maybe they might get him here.

Over the two school days that Ms. W was away, Gary was late one day and did not come the next. The next time Ms. W went down south, she and her husband decided that her husband would stay behind so he could take care of Gary while she was gone. Over time, Ms. W's role as an intervener discouraged Gary's parents from staying involved with their son. She felt compelled to step in because of their irresponsibility and his delayed growth and development. Ms. W's intervention was also a result of her belief in a mother's duty. She strongly believes that a mother is more important than a father to the wellbeing of a child. "Men come and go, but mothers are the ones to keep it all together." Ms. W feels that because her daughter is young, she lets her boyfriend make all the wrong decisions.

### The Moderator

Ms. M is similar to Ms. W in many ways; she is an outspoken, charismatic woman who gets what she wants. Also, like Ms. W, she became a parent at a young age. Similar in their personalities, these two women's have analogous life histories. One major difference between them, however, is their approach towards their children's parental involvement. Ms. M lives with her boyfriend. Her adult son and daughter and her daughter's nine-year-old son live with them.

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Ms. M blames her daughter for her grandson's father's lack of involvement. From the time of pregnancy into the child's first year, her daughter wavered back and forth as to whether her on-again-off-again partner was the child's biological father. To Ms. M, whether he was or was not the biological parent was the condition that would determine whether they remained together. When they permanently split up she made it difficult for him to see their son. "She's wrong for that," Ms. M remarked. Her grandson's father had recently had another child. Ms. M noted that he was very involved with that child. "Now she wants to be all upset and compare his relationship with that child with her child. But look how long it took. Just cuz she's ready now... he don't have no bond."

When her grandson was younger, Ms. M often went against her daughter's wishes to include the father. While her daughter had been wavering back and forth, Ms. M encouraged him to get a paternity test. She believes that her stance helped prevent the father-son relationship from getting completely severed. Ms. M is a staunch supporter of father involvement. Indeed, ten years ago she compiled a booklet of fathering stories from fathers at the Head Start. As she told me, "Fathers make all the difference." She bases this conviction on research about fathers being critical to child development that she has come across.

While Ms. M and Ms. W differ in their outlooks on the importance of fathers, their takes on their adult children are very similar. "There's something about this generation, she says. They are so independent-minded. They only care about themselves." Ms. M was referring to the fact that although she and her partner work full-time, her adult children, who are both currently unemployed, do not contribute much to household responsibilities. Her daughter also does not fulfill her responsibility as a mother. "My grandson waits for me to come home to feed him.

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Because he knows grandma will do it.” “Why? What about his mother?” I ask. “His mother is like, ‘I’m not going downstairs and make no peanut butter sandwiches, go make them yourself.’ And then I have to tell her go head and get that boy something to eat.” When I ask her about her daughter’s parenting behaviors, Ms. M says that they raise the boy together. “Everyone. Especially my son. He’s a little more responsible. I tell him how important it is for him to be an uncle and how he is like a father figure. I don’t understand my daughter, but how she lives her life is her business. My grandson is my business.”

Although Ms. M takes direct care of her grandson, she also demands the active involvement of her daughter and grandson’s father. She even insists on the active participation of her younger son, the child’s uncle. Her daughter’s lack of active parenting and prohibitory gatekeeping behaviors toward her son’s father have compelled Ms. M to step in. Moreover, her belief in the importance of fathers to the family has also influenced her role in supporting her grandson’s development as she attempts to mediate the behaviors of her daughter and the child’s father. In her role as Moderator, she has maintained involvement, albeit limited involvement, in her grandson’s father.

### The Evader

Mark lives with his mother and he hates it. He has two girls, age two and four and is saving up money to try and move out. However, with increasing rents in Bedford Stuyvesant and no formal employment, this is a challenge. So, he stays with his mother. At his mother’s encouragement, Mark recently filed for public assistance. This package includes a rent subsidy that goes directly to his mother for the two-bedroom apartment in which they live. Mark’s

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mother has one bedroom and Mark's sister has the second bedroom. Mark and his two girls stay in the living room.

Mark's mother is wary of Mark trying to "use her" to take care of his kids. Because of this, she limits her support. When I first met Mark, his youngest daughter was in a home daycare and his older daughter was in the Head Start. Although his mother is retired, she refuses to watch the children. Mark has learned to make the best of the support his mother is willing to give. He does much of his errands and networking for work while the children are in child-care. Once he gets the girls to sleep, his mother will fuss but will allow him to go out at night to work the New York party scene. Mark is an aspiring photographer/videographer and he often goes to nighttime events to network.

Mark's mother, through her purposeful resistance to providing support, has forced Mark to take on a highly active role. When he desires to go out without his children, he often has to pay for a babysitter or negotiate a payment with his mother. For Mark, the constant negotiation and "humbling himself" to ask his mother to watch his girls has compelled him to use that recourse only as a last resort. Consequently, Mark is hardly ever without his children. He plans everything around his daughters, and although he knows it is "not professional" to do so he has even taken his children to potential job opportunities. "I can't depend on my mom or the girls' mom, so I don't. I've learned to depend on myself."

### The Supplementer

Justin and Ashley are married with two young children. Ashley's mother lives about ten minutes away. Both Justin and Ashley work, and Ashley's mother will watch their children when

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they ask her to do so. She usually watches them every Wednesday for a few hours after school. Although she is around, Justin and Ashley have worked out a schedule that allows them to manage the caretaking of their children on their own. Visiting Ashley's mother every Wednesday is more the result of their wanting their children to maintain a close relationship with "Nana" than of their need for a babysitter. However, they know that if they need it or if they ask, the grandmother will be there. The supplemental role that Ashley's mother takes is typical of many grandparents of cohabitating, financially stable couples. Her support is at the discretion of Ashley and Justin. However, the supplementary role can take on an entirely different form when the grandmother is constantly sought, as in the case of Shawn.

Shawn, like Mark, is a single father with informal, full custody of his child. Over the years that I have known them both, I have seen Shawn many times without his son while I have seldom seen Mark without his girls. Whenever I checked in with Shawn, either on the phone or on IM, he would often tell me, "King is at my mom's." Often at night or on the weekends when we made plans to meet, his son's care was rarely an issue. Unlike Mark, Shawn enjoys much supplemental assistance in the caretaking of his son. Shawn's mother is deeply involved in raising King, as is the child's maternal grandmother.

Shawn lives in a two-bedroom rental with his son. His mother lives nearby with his sisters. King's mother lives in Queens with her parents. King splits his time in these three residences, although on paper he lives with his father. He often spends entire weekends and random days during the week with each of his grandmothers. Shawn has no problem at all finding someone to watch his son whenever he needs it. Even when he is at home and simply wants a break from King, he feels at ease asking someone to take him.



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At King's fifth birthday party, Shawn hung out with his friends in the back of the storefront event space while his son was coddled by the numerous women who make up his extended family. At the end of the birthday party, Shawn's mother took King home and Shawn and his friends continued the party into the early morning. When I first met Shawn, he stressed to me the fact that he took on all the responsibilities of taking care of his son. Yet, unlike Mark, what he told me did not match up with his availability. In the days that I spent at his son's Head Start site, I saw King's aunts pick him up on most days though Shawn had told me that he generally escorted his son. By contrast, the days that I spent at Mark's daughter's site, Mark picked up and dropped off his daughter every day. The women in Mark's life are unwilling to relieve him of his parenting responsibilities and therefore force him to maintain an active role as primary caretaker. Shawn, however, fathers when he wants to and frequently uses his mother as a supplemental caretaker.

These roles have different effects on the day-to-day involvement of parents in the rearing process. The Intervener weakens the parental involvement of parents, while the Moderator strengthens it. The Evader can strengthen the involvement of the parent simply because a parent cannot easily pass responsibilities on to her. The Supplementer can weaken day-to-day involvement if she allows the parent to abuse her assistance. The presence or absence of grandmaternal support may influence the degree of the father's involvement with his child both at the moment or even in the long term. Grandmothers are influential in the lives of their adult children and grandchildren. However, what determines the amount of support grandmothers give to their adult children in general and to their sons in particular? A combination of the parent's active involvement and the grandmother's belief in the importance of the mother's role (and by

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extension, the grandmother's role). Less subjective factors such as residence and whether the grandmother is maternal or paternal are also decisive factors. Although my fieldwork indicates that residence and lineage play less of a role, they do affect opportunities for grandmothers to wield influence when they see fit.

Brandy and Rob live with Brandy's parents and frequently argue about her parents' involvement in their personal relationship and childrearing. Rob will often leave and sleep at a family member or friend's house when conflict becomes too difficult to manage. Brandy, who is 23, admits that her parents, especially her mother, have a strong influence on her actions.

Brandy: I've always listened to them.

*Rob shakes his head and turns his head away. He then looks back at me.*

Rob: It's our family and we need to be together on this but she lets her family rule her. It's not even like they be giving her the best advice. But her mom, her mom don't wanna hear it. You can't tell her shit."

*Brandy is quiet.*

Me: Does your mother have a heavy influence on you?

Brandy: Yeah, I do. I do listen to my mom a lot. I am trying though. She looks at Rob for confirmation. We're working on it, right."

Rob: He just shakes his head and sighs. It's just hard with her family.

Brandy and Rob have one daughter who is five years old. They have had a tumultuous relationship, partly because at first Brandy's family did not really accept Rob. Rob, a mild-mannered man, is active in the Father Initiative at his daughter's school. He does not have much family as he grew up in foster care. When their daughter was first born, he was living with a friend. Over time, Brandy's parents accepted Rob and allowed him to move in. Rob feels as though he had to prove himself in their eyes.

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Rob: They immediately thought I was just some guy getting their daughter pregnant and just going to leave. My father did that to me. No way was I going to do that to my daughter or Brandy. But she's young.

Me: You're only one year older.

Rob: Yeah, I meant in experience. She's lived a sheltered life, her parents take care of everything. I've been on my own since I was sixteen. They really hated me at first, but I just loved my daughter and I was always there and they couldn't ignore me anymore. We're okay now, better than how it was, but they still try to run our lives, sometimes. They treat her like a daughter. I want her to be a mother.

Although Brandy's mother tries to take on the role of an Intervener, Rob's persistence in establishing his role as father forces her to remain a Supplementer. This is a tough balance for Rob to keep given the fact that they all live within the maternal grandmother's household and Brandy is often willing to allow her mother to intercede. Yet, because of his independence and strong fathering identity, he actively works to manage the grandmother's support.

When parents neglect their responsibilities, a grandmother's active role may not seem a choice at all. While Ms. W aggressively took on the caretaking of her grandson, she did not want to parent again. She looked forward to living alone with her husband and at times felt resentful that she had to take care of a little child. She struggled with the possibility of having also to take on guardianship of Gary's little brother. On the one hand, she felt that it was unfair to leave him under the caretaking of irresponsible parents, but on the other, she could not "keep taking care of babies while they keep making them."

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A grandmother's role is also influenced by her belief in a mother's duty and domain. As she came with her partner to Head Start to pick up her son, one mother related to me how she and her child's father split household duties. I saw the father regularly but her only once in a while, usually with him. They were both in their early 30s and had a 3-year-old son at a Head Start and a five-year-old daughter at a nearby school. While the father was filling in the survey, she and I chatted for a bit. She was in school part-time and working while her partner was fixing cars here and there, but mainly stayed at home with their two children. Her mother lived close by, but it was a hassle to get her to babysit. Her mother would tell her that she had a life and did not want to babysit her kids all the time. Sometimes, when she and her partner wanted to go out, she would purposely make her partner ask her mother to babysit because she knew her mother would be more likely to agree if the request came from him.

Like when I go away, like out of town she'll make me feel real guilty about it. But when I am gone she will be really helpful to him. I've heard her say, 'Men don't know how to take care of children.' And when I come back, forget about it. Last time, I found out that the kids was with her the whole time, which he didn't even tell me, and then she complained to me that they looked a mess going to school and she had to do something. "You can't trust men to know what to do?" What is she talking about. He's been doing it this whole time.

After the father completed the survey, I asked him if it was true that his partner's mother was more likely to help him than her. He laughed and agreed. He also admitted that when they were younger he used to drop the children off at her mother's house during the day without telling her. Nowadays, if the mother is not around because she is at work or school the grandmother helps out. However, if they try to get her to watch the children so that they can go

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out on a date she always says she is busy and has a life. The mother finds this upsetting because, as she says, “She doesn’t even go nowhere. She stays in the house days at a time.” The grandmother’s willingness to help out only the father stems from her belief that men cannot raise children.

Ms.W also has a strong belief in a mother’s duty. Her guardianship of Gary is “temporary” because her daughter must get it together and take care of her children. “I’ll help her out now, but she will have to learn the same as I did.” When I asked her specifically about the role of Gary’s father, she told me that she does not think about him because “He don’t matter.” Ms. W believes very strongly that men should be financial providers. She does not understand her daughter or other women who will choose to be with a man who is not working.

When grandmothers live in the household it is easier for them to influence the childrearing behaviors of parents. Brandy and Rob make a conscious effort to try and carve out their family unit while living under Brandy’s parents’ roof. For Rob, it is critical that Brandy stay “on his side” and that she not include her mother in their disagreements. Neither Brandy nor Rob work so they cannot afford to move out on their own. Brandy’s mother thus has many opportunities to assert her often invasive support.

Rob:            Because they pay for everything, sometimes I have to just go with it. But Brandy is in school and when I find work, we will move out.

Me:            Does Brandy want to move out?

Rob:            Yeah, but not as much as I do. They’re her family. She’s always lived there.

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Although residence is a contributing factor, it is not as essential. One would think that Shawn would have less support than Mark because Mark lives with his mother. However, Mark's mother watches her grandchildren less frequently than does Shawn's mother, who lives elsewhere. Much of the research on grandmothers in black families focuses on those who raise grandchildren in households from which parents are absent, as in the case of Ms. W. Yet grandparents are often called on when their adult children need support regardless of whether or not they reside in the same household. More research has been done on multi-generational households in the US as their numbers increase in response to the recession (Pew Report, 2011). Since multi-generational living arrangements often develop in response to economic circumstances, there is much variation in the form they assume from family to family and even over time in a single household. It is increasingly important to understand fathers as members of multigenerational extended families despite the fact that their residency in them may, at times, be in flux.

Multi-generational families are usually studied in the context of the maternal grandmother. Research on multi-generational families that include paternal grandmothers is less available. Black fathers have received little attention as members of multigenerational households even though mothers and fathers are equally likely to mention that they appeal to grandmothers for parental guidance and childcare assistance (Hunter 1997). Women usually maintain stronger relationships with their mothers and other family members into adulthood, so maternal grandmothers have more contact with their grandchildren than do paternal grandmothers (Chan & Elder, 2000). Due to more frequent contact and stronger relationships with their daughters, maternal grandmothers may assume a more assertive role in childrearing.

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Paternal grandmothers are less able to assert their authority especially when the mother is involved. Because mothers are the inherent gatekeepers of their children's upbringing, the maternal grandmother is naturally granted the right and authority of an elder and teacher of proper mothering. Since the father wields little power in this domain, his mother can only gain access by blessing the child's mother.

Grandmother: I love all my grandchildren. I don't always – one of the moms, we don't get along but I still respect her opinion and she still respect mine so some of the things she do, I don't like. I don't think she should do, but that's my opinion. I don't, I just, I voice my opinion to her and she voice hers to me and we meet in the middle cause my granddaughter has to know me, has to, definitely has to know her mom. When it comes to her education I felt some stuff was going on that shouldn't have been going on that, there's other ways of if I do things.

One mother admitted to limiting the paternal grandmother's involvement and why she has done so.

Mother: I'll put my business out there. My, I've been with my fiancé, he hates the word baby father. I was fifteen, he has a ten year old daughter, and we have our kids together, I just found out about her five years ago. Everybody knew, his mother and everybody knew, but nobody wanted to tell me, until his mother got jealous because he took care of my kids, but didn't take care of her (his daughter). So she felt, to be malicious she would tell me about her. I've never met the mother of his child, we stayed away from each other, we just let the kids hang together. So, at the end of the day, his mother told me while my daughter is two weeks old, because he was actually caring for her, signed the birth certificate, he was changing my daughter diapers.

Me: Why wouldn't his mother like that?

Mother: Because he didn't do it for the first. The first child came about, they were like fifteen, sixteen, stupid, cutting school, slept together, had no business, one time

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thing, no relationship, no anything, she ended up pregnant at fourteen, decides she wants to have the baby. You don't know her from Adam and Eve, and not only that, she wasn't even sure he was the father 'cause she had slept with four of his friends previously. So his mother stepped in and did the DNA test, but she heard that her son could possibly be the father, and it was, and to this day she helps to take care of her. She gets her for the weekend to have all her grands together. I mean we don't mind it, we're still trying to work it into our relationship, but at the end of the day, it's like a thing where the way she did it.

A tight-lipped family worker told me a personal story about her one son and how she felt about not being able to be more involved in his children's lives.

FWorker: She mad at him or she don't want him to see the baby. Because I personally, I -- I go through that right now. My son has two kids.

Me: So you don't even get to see your grandkids?

FWorker: Uh-uh.

Me: Are you serious?

FWorker: I'm serious.

Me: How old are they?

FWorker: One is two and the other one I think is three months.

Me: And what's the issue?

FWorker: She don't like my son. That's the issue.

Me: So what about getting custody and that sort of thing?

FWorker: That's was going to be my next thing to talk to him about because he really wants to see them, but she won't. Well, as a matter of fact, the last grandbaby born in January I just got to see her like in March.

Me: I'm so sorry to hear that. That's tough. I mean, people think about the dad, but they don't think about -- they also don't think about the dad's family and you know.

FWorker: Right. You know, the only reason I got to see her was because she was at my sister's house and I went to my sister's house.

Me: Does she have a problem with you though?

FWorker: Yeah because that's my son.

Me: Well sometimes, you know, some people are able to like be mad at the son, but be okay with the son's mother.



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- FWorker: Yeah.
- Me: Do you ever see that being resolved soon or do you think you're going to have to move it to like the courts or something?
- FWorker: That's what I think I'm going to have to do, because I don't know -- I don't know where she live. He don't know where she live. He wants to see the children. I want to see them, but I don't know where they live.
- Me: Well, I mean good luck -- good luck with that.
- FWorker: Yeah.
- Me: The Family Courts, do you think that they would be helpful? Do you think they would see your son's side?
- FWorker: They would -- they would have it where that he would get some kind of visitation rights or something. So I think that would be my next step to go through the courts.

Paternal grandmothers are often called on by their sons, especially by those who are single fathers. Malik has custody of his twin girls every Wednesday and two weekends of each month. He has his girls on weekends, of which they spend one night with his mother. His mother is a huge support to him, and he believes that he and she have become closer ever since he and his girls' mother got separated. She often helps mediate highly confrontational situations with the mother of his girls. Once, when the mother called the cops on Malik, she later apologized to his mother and sent her flowers. Malik simply shook his head as he recalled the situation, saying incredulously, "I didn't even get a simple sorry and my mom got flowers." As more children are raised with parents who are not living together and more fathers begin to embrace a fathering role, it will become more important to study the influence of the paternal grandmother in addition to that of the maternal grandmother. Ms. O tells me her experience with her thirty-year-old son and her role in his relationship with the mother of his child as well as how she makes him embrace fathering.

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Ms. O: My son has three children, two different baby mamas. I took off work and I went to the court. He had all his paperwork, the judge didn't want to see it. She took him for child support. And the reason why she took him for child support was because she told him in front of me one day she said, you gonna marry me. I said, over my dead body. I said that because she was very possessive, you know, and I know my son. He's not that type. He's not. You can't own him. You know, you went to the store. Why you have to go to the store? What you bought at the store? That's not – if you trust somebody you have to give them some leeway. And she took him to court. He has to pay \$369 a week for those two kids child support. And he has another child that he pays \$123, I think. So, all together, it's close to \$500 he got to pay for child support. He was trying to, you know, you have to submit, you know, okay even though you the mom, she wasn't pay – let's say you have to pay rent, light, gas, food – you got to eat. He didn't want to see that. He came out of there crying.

I slapped him so hard. He said ma, you slapped me. I said, yeah I had to bring you down to reality. Two years ago.

I mean, he loves him but I had to let him know, when Jaden comes, Jaden comes to spend time with you, not to stay with grandma. You understand that? You have to make sacrifices. When you have children it's no longer your life. You have to make sacrifices. No, you can't go tonight because you got to watch Jaden. I have a three family apartment house. He has his own apartment, living room, bedroom, kitchen, everything. And I have, right, I'm downstairs. No but he – I set down the rule. I said listen, I love you dearly son but you got to do this. I'll help you but you got to do this. I said, I spoil you all a lot, I know I did.

So, I mean. Yeah, so, you know. But I'm not saying that 'cause he's my son. You're supposed to pay child support. I don't care who you are. But it's not as if she wasn't getting – even us, Christmas time, work day, I was going shopping. You should see how much stuff they would have, bags and bags of stuff. I still have last year at Christmas stuff in my house because I'm not going to take it and I don't want him – she is, how should I put this. She wants him. She said if she can't have him ain't nobody going to have him. I told him to stay away from her, she's trouble. You know, he has to pay the money through the courts. You're supposed to take care of your kids. She took him for child support, And you know what, even then I didn't blame her 'cause sometimes, sometimes we women can be very vindictive, you know. I mean, you know, my son he lies too. You know, where were you coming from? Oh mom – and that's all you get is, oh mom. So, then you read between the lines. Okay, and I used to tell him. I'd say, you keep doing that, you know. But I think he has matured a lot because I made

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him mature. You know, Jaden would come to the house and he'd say, ma I got go. No, take Jaden with you. And then threaten him. I said, I'll call DCS on you, I kid you not. I threaten him a lot. Oh you, no he's your responsibility. You have to make the sacrifice instead of party, you take care of Jaden. He has him, I don't know what the arrangement been made. Look, I got off the bus last week and I see this little boy walking and I said, this look like Jaden. I said, Jaden – and then he turned to me and said, hi grandma. I said, what you doing around here on the bus by yourself? I said, go have your father take you home.

Some paternal mothers refuse to relinquish their ties to their grandchildren after the parents' split. One mother related a story about how instrumental her husband's mother had been in ensuring that he stayed involved with his child from another relationship:

My fiance's oldest, her mother and father are Dominican, pure, and she is too, but they're racist because they don't like Puerto Ricans or black and they always told her, don't you go out there and have a baby with no Puerto Rican or black man, and she did, and so they were ready to write it off. As soon as they found out he was the father as whatever, it was his mother who did the grandparents right, took them to court, she kept showing up on their doorstep.

They didn't want him to be bothered, they didn't want a penny from him, nothing. They just was like, thank you, whatever, leave us alone. So his mother stepped in, like, that big momma role and she still does like, you know, even though they can take care of her, and the mother, the oldest mother has two kids prior to her, she's able to take care of them, but she still steps in and you know, do little things that's not necessary, but they let her to make her feel a part of it.

One father shared with me his attempts to be a father-figure to his new girlfriend's children but also how he was hindered in this by the children's paternal grandmother. This paternal

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grandmother, whose son was in jail, had been so influential that she had been able to assert her demands in the mother's new relationship.

Father: Because she wanted her to stay with her son so she was caught like saying little things and you know just trying to literally break us up because her intentions were for when her son came out of jail she wanted her son with the two kids. So I noticed like I would do everything for her with the children. You know, just to support her, you know, and even if it was just feeding the baby and burping the baby and just holding the baby while she got a little bit of rest or whatever, you know, I would try to help her. But then I noticed like the guy wrote a letter and the letter said I don't want no guy holding my kids or not hold my children, nothing, and that just basically made me step to the side like from doing too much with them to where you know if she needed anything I just told her what if like I wasn't going out of my way doing anything like that.

There are factors specific to the African-American context that influence the types of roles grandmothers assume. Black grandmothers are often more authoritarian in their style of parenting and are more likely to be the primary breadwinner in the household. Scholars have documented the authoritarian parenting style of black mothers (Anderson 1999; Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1985). This parenting style not only encourages grandmothers to take on more active roles of grandmothering such as those of the Intervener and Moderator, but it also makes it difficult for parents to assert their positions in the face of their own parents when they do not desire such aggressive support. Brandy is used to her mother telling her what to do, and, even at the urging of Rob, finds it quite difficult to stand up to her. Like Brandy, Mark is also reticent. His mom does not support him in a way that he likes, and Mark feels that she can be overbearing in her advice about his girls. Mark has been trying to wean his youngest off the bottle, yet his mother will go behind his back and give her the bottle. "She just gave it to her anyway. What? You just look at your son like some man and just don't listen to me."

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Although Mark contributes to the household income through the rent subsidy that public assistance provides, his mom refuses to let him participate in household decision-making. One day, Mark chanced upon an eviction warning stating that the mother was three months behind on her rent. Mark was confused and upset, knowing that the rent subsidy he received covered a substantial portion of the monthly rent. “I can’t ask her about the money, what she’s doing with it, how she is managing it. I know she hasn’t been paying the rent with it.”

Mark admitted he was extremely uncomfortable talking to his mother about household finances. Part of his discomfort stemmed from his difficulty in asserting his adult status before her. He had always been expected to do without question what his mother instructed. The other reason for his discomfort was her general inapproachability. Mark finds her forceful responses too difficult to manage.

For children who have been taught since youth that their mother is never to be “talked back to,” asserting parental authority can be difficult. For Mark, trying to do the best for his daughters meant dealing with his fears about confronting his mother. A few months later, Mark finally got the nerve to ask his mom about the backed up rent and the rent subsidy. She was not straightforward with him and refused to show him the rent bill, but he was proud of himself for confronting her. “I felt funny asking, but I said, ‘When the money come in can I see it?’ But she said no.” Mark has accepted that he must leave in order to maintain parenting control of his daughters. “I got to get out of there. I can’t tell the girls nothing without my mom saying this or that. She doesn’t listen to me. She doesn’t see me as a responsible father. She treats me like...like she always treat me. I just gotta do everything she says.”

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Part of Mark's challenge with his mom is his unemployed status. Although he contributes money to the household when he gets gigs, his financial contributions are inconsistent and often insufficient. He believes that if he had more money to offer, his mom would support him more. When Shawn was unemployed he was a lot more worried about how his family perceived his involvement than when he was working. "When you do more, you can say more." For Shawn, doing more meant having more money to provide. For many young fathers, like Mark and Rob, their identity as a father is stunted if they cannot find the means to find a place on their own where they can establish themselves as the head of a household. They live in a household where their mother or partner's mother pays for their food and upkeep and thus struggle to assert authority while in a state of dependency.

The mother of Shawn's child allows Shawn to make many of the decisions for King partly because he is more financially stable than she is. Shawn feels comfortable asserting his authority because he has been able to provide. During the short time when he could not, he did not feel as comfortable. For many parents, a stable job and one's own apartment are markers of their adult children's maturity and level of responsibility. It is a challenge to see one's son as a responsible adult if one is still providing for him as one has always done.

In addition to authoritarian mothering, some black grandmothers are likely to have personal histories which make providing for their grandchildren redemptive. Ms. W looked forward to living alone with her husband and enjoying the new condo they had finally closed on in February 2013. It had costed them a long ten years of saving, and at sixty-four it was the first property that Ms. W had ever owned. She never envisioned that the second bedroom would become a toddler's room and that she would be parenting again. In the mid 1980s, Ms. W had

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succumbed to a life of crack addiction and abandoned her children. Her oldest son was sixteen at the time and had to fend for himself. An aunt had already taken in her oldest daughter, who was twelve. Ms W had taken her two youngest to their paternal grandmother's house and told them that she was going to the store. She never came back. For several years, she lived as a crackhead. At the age of 42 she found out that she was pregnant again. She could still recall being in the hospital ward. At the time, social workers used to wait in the ward for a toxicology report on each child. If crack were found in the baby's system, they took the baby. Her baby was clean and she was able to keep it. Ms. W tried to turn her life around and become a better mother to her youngest than she had been to her other four children.

Raising Gary is almost an opportunity for redemption. She has grown and learned to be a better parent. She has embraced her own demons of abandonment. As she had done with her children, her mother had also told her as a child that she was going to the store, to buy her ten cents' worth of cookies, and never came back. Although in one breath Ms. W is resentful of having to take on a small child, in another she expresses great pride in the stable life she is able to provide for him. Ms.W is not alone. I have heard similar stories from a few grandmothers who also succumbed to the crack epidemic that hit Brooklyn hard in the 80s. In his discussion of black grandmothers, Anderson (1999) discusses how they were forced to deal with their daughters who abandoned their maternal posts thanks to the lure of crack. Although he thought the successful return of crack-head mothers unlikely, these street mothers did find their way back to the revered position of grandmother in the black community. Yet, these are different grandmothers, whose new role blurs the once solid line separating decent and street-oriented grandmothers. They understand the wayward path of their children because they have walked it

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and are not as dismissive of structural explanations for societal ills as their mothers had been. Due to their dishonorable past, their relationships with their children have been blemished, yet their role is no less revered. They have made mistakes and are now watching their children make mistakes, often recognizing their culpability. They feel an urge to provide for their grandchildren what they did not provide for their children. Their desire to play a role in their grandchildren's lives stems from a sense of guilt and need for redemption. Or as another grandmother put it, "I've been to hell, but I got a return ticket." Ms. M also feels that her role as grandmother gives her a second chance at parenting.

The grandmother role is crucial. But see then you have to think about is the grandmother a grandmother? Some grandmothers are still teens. Teenagers.<sup>19</sup> They don't want to be no grandmother. You know, that ain't my grandchild. I'm auntie or what, you know? But they still have them hanging out, having fun. I love my role as a grandma because it's a second opportunity to do some stuff I didn't do the first time because I ain't know.

No, I've been a grandmother my—I'm 54 and my granddaughter's 15. And so in the 30s, in my late 30s I was a grandma. So it wasn't so much about age, I guess it's about a state of mind. Because I feel that's its important where I see my daughter lack that I build my daughter up. Where I see they have their squabbles now because they're teens, I don't have to be in that but I can talk to her from a different perspective and she respects me. So, but not every grandmother does that.

Regardless of whether the grandmother is maternal or paternal, or living in or outside the household, grandmothers in black families are often highly influential (Cherlin and Furstenberg 1985). In a traditional nuclear family, grandparent-grandchild relationships are easily managed. However, the context of extended families, multiple and variable households, and the socio-historical context of the modern day black family has sometimes allowed maternal gatekeepers

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<sup>19</sup> Ms. W means teenager in a metaphorical sense. In her opinion, many of the younger grandmothers want to go out and have fun and not give their grandchildren the support they may need from grandparents.



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to become grand-maternal gatekeepers. Although grandmothers have long been a central figure in African American culture (Anderson, 1999), their role and influence within the modern low-income black family may have been strengthened by the ubiquity of father absence. As more men seek to develop relationships and bonds with their children and to carve household roles for themselves that are not limited to breadwinning, they have not only had to contend with the mothers of their children, but with grandmothers as well. A man's development as a father is influenced by the mother and grandmothers of his child. The grandmother's influence is most evident when a father is left to raise a child on his own.

### Abandoning the Gate

Maternal gatekeeping is not simply about closing or opening gates to fathers. Just as gates can be shut so too can they be left wide open, sometimes completely off their metaphorical hinges. Some fathers have taken on childrearing simply because the mother has decided to relinquish her role and the father has been forced to step in as primary parent. I met three fathers (Mark, Charles, Shawn) whose circumstances illustrate this experience. Often turning to the women around them for support, they have allowed their long-term identity as fathers to be shaped by economic stability and their reliance on others for childrearing assistance.

Mark and Tasha met through Tasha's mother. Tasha's mother thought that Mark was a responsible person and introduced him to her daughter. At the time, Tasha had a three-year-old son, Jelani. Mark adopted Jelani as his own. At first they lived with Tasha's mom, but Mark was adamant that they get their own apartment. So they saved up and found a place in Harlem. They planned to have children but in the following years Tasha suffered three miscarriages, the last of

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which were triplets. Soon after, they carried a baby girl to full term. They had another baby girl a little less than two years later. Tasha took on full-time employment and Mark became the stay-at-home parent during the day. In the evenings, he worked on developing his photography and videography career. It was not long before their relationship became rocky. They argued frequently because Tasha felt that Mark was not bringing in enough income from his gigs. He was also out late into the night and Tasha often accused him of infidelity. Her suspicions eventually bore out. They could not manage the hurt feelings and eventually separated. Mark moved back to Bedford Stuyvesant to live with his mother.

At first, Tasha lived alone with her girls. Her older son was sent to live with his grandmother. Tasha decided that Mark should not spend any more time with Jelani. Mark was deeply hurt by this. “I was the one to take care of him. I did his homework with him. I made sure he did the right thing. Me. Not her.” With their children, Mark and Tasha worked out informal visitation. Mark would come see the girls every weekend at Tasha’s home. Eventually, Tasha began asking Mark to take the girls back with him for weekends instead. After a while, Mark began noticing that when he took the girls for the weekend, Tasha would postpone picking them up. Often the girls would be there at least a full week before she called to get them.

When they had first broken up, Tasha did not make it easy for Mark to see his girls, so Mark’s mother, who saw her granddaughters infrequently, would ask Mark about them and push him to figure out how to bring them more often. In time, Tasha went from making it difficult to see the girls to actively urging it. Mark began to feel that Tasha was exploiting his mother and her own. Mark warned his mother that she should not let Tasha bring the kids on weekends other than his because she would not pick them up, but his mom was “weak.”

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“Tasha called and left a message on the voicemail talking about I’m at the train station with the kids. Somebody need to come get them. What kinda message is that? So my mom came to me. She’s at the train station with the kids. I know she is ma, but you remember something I told you that I have to continue to work this coming week. You gotta work too. I’m gonna tell you something/Don’t go picking up the kids. It may sound bad mom, but you have to listen to me because she is going to disappear and I can’t. I am sorry mom I’m trying to give you the heads up before it actually happens. But you know, my mom, she went on to the train-station. She said, ‘Tasha said she’s goin to be back later on to pick her up.’ Once the day started going on she started coming to me. ‘You didn’t hear from her?’ My mom started to get real pissed.”

Mark’s mother, along with his nineteen-year-old sister, packed up the kids and hopped on the train to Tasha’s house. In a few hours they came back with the girls still in tow. Mark’s mother told him that Tasha was home, she had simply not answered the door. She knew this because as they walked to the door, she saw the lights turn off. Mark and his mother both ended up having to take a few days off from work the following week to care for the girls. He took three days off from the job he was working at the time and his mother took two. After the whole ordeal, Mark’s mother told him, “You know what ... I apologize for not listening to you. You really deal with this girl.” Mark told me, “I appreciate my mom for that.” It was one of the few times he felt that his mother had valued his opinion with regard to his children and children’s mother.

Not long after this Tasha shared with Mark her plans for her children.

“After a while, she started saying it subliminally. Like, I would catch it. I should send Jelani to go live with his father and you can take the girls so I can do some things. You know, probably go to school or something like that. I didn’t really pay it any attention at first-- you understand what I am saying? And then the reason I didn’t really pay it attention at first is because my family is all females. They have masters, are teachers, pediatricians and no matter what they went through it wasn’t a question of somebody taking my kids. It was so mind boggling to me, like why would you want that? So I didn’t

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pay it any attention at first, but then it got to be every time I came over there to visit she would bring this up. And then I was like okay, I'm getting on it now. What made me get on it now was when I do take the kids sometimes it would be hard for her to come get the kids. Like it was always something, so the kids would be with me for a week or two weeks."

Although Mark was taken aback by Tasha wanting to give up her children, he was not surprised. To him, her behaviors showed her declining interest in being a mother. He also started to think that maybe he would be a better parent. He remembered being the one to manage Jelani when they were together. He also did not like the way the girls looked when she brought them over. They both had severe eczema, for which Mark felt responsible because they had inherited the condition from him. Mark did not feel that Tasha was taking care of them by "greasing them up or buying them cotton clothes." They often came to him with their skin dry and flaky, wearing clothing made of irritating fabrics, and with uncombed hair. Mark's family, especially his aunt and uncle, began encouraging him to take on the responsibility. It was apparent from our conversations that Mark really respected his aunt and uncle who lived in New Jersey. They were middle-class and highly educated, and as Mark got older, he realized that they could give him advice his mother simply could not. Their encouragement was influential on his decision to assume full-time custody.

He started seriously considering taking the children when he "realized that Tasha just stopped caring." Proof of this was a huge gaping hole in the ceiling of the apartment in which Tasha and the girls were living that emitted a smell. He urged her to get the hole fixed because he was worried about his youngest daughter's asthma. Tasha kept delaying until one day she finally told him that she "just didn't have the time to stay home and wait for building

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maintenance to come fix it and her mother would not wait for maintenance for her.” Mark was disgusted; he felt that Tasha did not care about their health. So when Tasha asked him straight out, “So you think you can take the kids for the next 4 or 5 years?” Mark was ready and the girls came to live with him at his mother’s.

Life with the girls at his mom’s place soon became difficult. Mark’s mother became more and more unwilling to help and he often felt as though he was a burden. “Even with family, when you are not around them people miss you, but if you are there you just become a burden.” Mark started accepting the fact that he had to care for the children on his own. Managing care for his girls with Tasha was also challenging. Although Tasha had given up custody, their arrangement was informal and she still tried to exert control over Mark in certain ways. Getting documents such as their birth certificates or even their health insurance cards was difficult. She would ask him why he needed them and would come up with excuses as to why she could not give them to him. When his daughter got a ringworm and he was unable to take her to the doctor, he knew he had to file for formal custody. His aunt and uncle advised him on the right way to do it. Tasha was upset that he filed for custody, but she did not fight it. She did not want the kids, but she also did not want the kids to be taken legally from her. He went against the advice of his aunt and uncle and chose not to file for child support. He figured he could personally work that out with her.

Although Mark did not readily admit to it at first, he did not instantly want to take on the role of primary caretaker of his kids. He enjoyed his freedom. He cared about his girls, but not in the same way that he feels he cares about them now. “I was involved but not involved. When I was with my children’s mother, I was taking them to school and picking them up. But it was

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because mom had to be at work.” When Tasha came home, he would quickly leave. “Not going to say I didn’t want to, but when the wife and girlfriend’s around, yeah, dude may be involved but it gets tricky.” Mark’s embrace of his fathering responsibilities occurred gradually. At first, he was really resentful of Tasha’s freedom but eventually being a father became the core of his identity. When he and Tasha were together, being a father had been only at the periphery of his identity. He took care of the kids because “Tasha was at work and I had to.” Mark is pretty certain that if Tasha had not abandoned her role he would have never stepped up the way he had. The more challenges presented themselves, the more he had come to realize that he alone was responsible for his daughters. As he came to identify himself more and more as a father, he sought support from fathering groups.

Like Mark, Charles adopted the single father role gradually. However, his decision to take on the primary custody of his child was not principally a result of the mother’s unwillingness to be the primary caretaker, but was rather a matter of Charles wanting to be a good dad after missing the first years of his son’s life due to a jail sentence.

Charles and Teresa had never been a couple. She had “hustled” for Charles. He said that they had never really liked each other but things just happened. When Teresa told him she was pregnant, she was honest with him and told him that she was not sure whether the baby was his. The other potential father was a man whom they both knew and who often came by the house where they all hung out. She got tested and found out Charles was the biological father. Teresa was happy that Charles was the father since she thought he was more stable than her other sex partner. Ten days after J was born, Charles was convicted on a drug charge. This was his second time going to jail. “I only held him four times before I had to go in for my second bid. A six-five

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split.” At Charles’ urging, Teresa brought J to visit him. Charles wanted his son to know him, to recognize his face. He met a lot of other fathers in jail who told him how important it was to stay in touch with children and heard many stories about fathers coming out of jail and not being able to connect with their children. One day Charles called Teresa, and she told him, “Do you know what this little bastard’s first word was? ‘Daddy’.” Charles remembers that call making his day.

Teresa and Charles planned that when he was released he would take J, but when he did end parole, Teresa changed her mind. Charles did not argue too hard because he was trying to get his life back together. He was unexpectedly homeless because his mother had kicked him and his brother out so she could share her apartment with her daughter and that daughter’s children. Her daughter had recently met a man who could afford to pay some of the household expenses.

Teresa did not tell him where she was living as she did not want him to come and take J. By asking around he finally found out that she was staying in the Bronx with “some dude and her son.” That night he went over there. He banged on the door, upset that Teresa had made it difficult to locate. Teresa told Charles that “he was bull-shitting because if he really wanted his son it would not have taken him a whole month since coming out of jail for him to come find them. Yeah, she got me on that. You’re right but give him to me now. I’ll bring him back in five days or something.” Charles kept J for a week and then gave him back to Teresa.

Charles focused on trying to find a job and a stable place to live. He decided to move to Maryland to stay with a cousin. A few days before leaving he got the call he knew he would eventually get. It was from Teresa, who told him, “I can’t do this no more, come get your son.” Her babysitter had gotten deported and she was focused on work. She did not want him to move to Maryland with J so Charles stayed in New York and moved in with a girl he was seeing and

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her family. J came to live with them. Charles and Teresa obtained formal joint custody. On paper, Teresa was supposed to have taken care of J every weekend but over time that amount dwindled down to two weekends per month. Charles also thinks Teresa accepted the fact that “he’s the better parent.”

Although Charles embraced the idea of fatherhood early on, his actual caretaking of J developed gradually. Because his current girlfriend works full-time, once J came to stay with them, Charles was primarily responsible for his day-to-day caretaking. As Charles and I got to know each other, I could see his daily struggle with parenting. He could no longer take J when he wished and give him back when he did not. Charles’s experience of fatherhood moved from simply taking J to the store or to play basketball in the park to complete responsibility for his son’s care. His day-to-day struggles became routine and a part of his life and identity. Although Charles has three women he refers to as his “mom,” none of them are available for support.<sup>20</sup> Even though the circumstances with his son’s mother were not as confrontational as those experienced by Mark, Charles likewise feels completely on his own. His current girlfriend “hasn’t bonded” with J, and as their relationship is volatile, Charles and J’s residence in her family household is uncertain. At the time of my first formal interview with Charles, his guardianship of J was temporary. “When Teresa gets herself together and hits it big in television then J would go back with her.” However, over time Charles has begun to see J as a permanent part of his household. Part of this change is due to the fact that Charles’s life and identity is being shaped by the responsibilities of fathering he has had to assume.

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<sup>20</sup> Charles calls his biological mother, his stepmother he lived with as a child, and a long-time girl friend of his father “Mom.”



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Unlike Charles and Mark, Shawn has a history that has not developed quite as linearly. Shawn and Misha were in a committed relationship for two years before they found out they were pregnant with King. Shawn was astounded. “I couldn’t believe my first accident with a girl, and she wanted to keep it. I was shocked. Couldn’t dodge the bullet.” Shawn tried everything to convince Misha to have an abortion. He pointed out that they did not have a place to stay and she had neither finished school nor was working. Misha would not hear of it. “I love my son, but I was actually trying to find a way to manipulate her into not having him. She wasn’t trying to hear that. It went against her religious beliefs and she was scared that it might affect her ability to have children in the future.” Misha was two months pregnant before they finally went to the doctor to confirm. It was then that Shawn said that he had started to accept the situation and deal with the fact that he was going to be a father. “Once the doctor confirmed it, I had a change of heart. When the doctor said—Congratulations, I started to feel a little different, like maybe this could be a good thing.”

Misha was living in Queens with her family, while Shawn lived with his mother and sisters in Bed Stuy. For him, the hardest part about having the baby was not the baby but “dealing with her family.” At first, Shawn tried to stay with Misha and King in her family’s house, but he was really uncomfortable because he and Misha’s stepfather did not get along. Misha and King started living with Shawn and his mother, but Misha felt more comfortable at home. During King’s early years they lived in two residences. After a while, Shawn refused to go over Misha’s house. He did not feel welcome there. At the same time, he hated the fact that Misha would come and go from his mother’s place as she pleased. He wanted them to get a place

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of their own and be together as a family unit. However, though Shawn said that Misha claimed she wanted that too, he did not believe that she was committed to the same vision.

For about two years, Shawn and Misha both had stable jobs. Their expenses were lower because they were both living with family. Shawn contributed a large portion of the rent and utilities at his mother's house. He put the rest away in savings, hoping to invest or buy some property. On the other hand, Shawn felt Misha did not save enough. As she did not need to contribute financially to either of the households, Shawn felt she should be saving more. According to Shawn, however, Misha spent too much of her money on designer fashion and going out.

Shawn began trying to amass money in other ways. He ended up getting himself into a bit of legal trouble. He spent a few months in jail and lost his job. After he got out, he was still able to support his family because he had managed to save quite a nest egg for himself. After the first year, however, they began to struggle financially. Between living in separate residences and their financial troubles, Misha and Shawn's relationship went sour. They were raising their son in an on-again-off-again relationship. Their longest break occurred in February 2012. Misha gave her engagement ring back to Shawn. Although they tried to work out their differences over that summer, both finally faced the fact that their relationship was over.

Misha and Shawn agreed that King would live with the father. Shawn found a two-bedroom apartment not far from his mother. He felt that the decision that King would reside with him was an easy one because he had always been the more stable and fiscally responsible of the two. "I've always been a little more stable than her. It was easy because I was providing as much as I was. She couldn't have a problem with me taking control. She's not a bad person. I

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get good money. When my money comes, I do something significant with my money. But you haven't done shit with yours. I don't know what you do. It was easy. I was providing so she couldn't have had a problem. It would have been ignorant of her." Misha's informal decision to give up primary custody of her son was not due to a desire for freedom as in the case of Teresa or Tasha. Rather, she was convinced of Shawn's stability and his capability to provide King with his own room and space. Shawn was also very adamant that King stay with him until Misha "has proven to be responsible."

Although at first Shawn came across as a pulled-together single father who had embraced all the responsibilities of raising King, I soon recognized that his involvement was not as he communicated it. Shawn was highly protective of the information that he shared with me, but in time—as we got to know each other and I met his family and friends—he began to admit to a great deal more. For example, he told me that during the first two years of King's life, he had been what he described as a "cash dad." "My mom would call to say King needed this. I would give it. First two years, I was a cash dad. It wasn't until shit went sour that I started to build a relationship [with his son]. I know I was there but it was not the same. I'd go to Chucky Cheese with a girl and that's me watching him? If I hadn't got caught up I would still be like this. If I got money again I would stay grounded and keep my relationship with him."

Despite the abundance of help he gets from the women in his life, Shawn recognizes that his past ability to provide has kept him in the driver's seat when it comes to managing the wellbeing of his son. However, his current state of unemployment threatens this advantage. Once he began recognizing that his nest egg was dwindling, he launched a desperate search for formal employment. The struggling economy and his criminal record have made his search difficult. He

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has also changed his interactions with the women in his life—especially with Misha and her family—because he feels that his position is threatened. “People not gonna talk about me like I’m coming up short. I don’t want her to be leaving King with her people. People gossip. There’s malice when they watch your kids and you don’t leave something for them. They talk about you. I’m not gonna be a part of that shit. They have to ask me to see my kid.” When Shawn says “people,” he is referring to Misha’s mom, sisters, and girlfriends.

While he was a cash dad, he did not care what people thought about his relationship with King, but once he became unemployed, he came to be irked by what his girlfriend’s family members and even his own family members said to him. He told Misha that she could not leave King with her family. Shawn’s first response to threats to his dominant position was to exert greater control by forbidding Misha’s family from watching King. However, Shawn has gradually begun to relinquish his strong hold on the caretaking of his son. Part of the reason for this is that he feels unable to command the authority he once did due to his cash-strapped situation. He now also talks more about King going to stay with Misha once she gets out of school and finds a place to live. Before, he occasionally used to consider taking permanent custody of King.

Shawn and Mark’s stories provide examples of both sides of the coin. Shawn enjoys ample support from the mothers and grandmothers in his life, while Mark enjoys little. When asked about the future, Mark says he knows his girls will stay with him. Mark did not always envision the future in this way. His embrace of fatherhood occurred gradually and over time. According to Shawn, King’s residence with him is only temporary. Eventually King will live with his mother. As Shawn claims, “When she gets herself together, King will go back with her.

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He belongs with his mother.” Both Shawn and Mark are single-custody fathers and have stressed to me the sheer amount of responsibility they feel as the primary custodial parent. Fatherhood is salient to both their identities, but it is easy to see the difference in their parenting experiences from the conversations I have had with both of them. With Mark, he still often goes off on tangents with detailed stories about his daughters, what they did in school, or the positions in which they sleep. Shawn, on the other hand, talks about fathering King in very broad terms.

All three of these men admitted that originally they had not wanted to step into the role of primary caretaker, but had had to. In time, Mark accepted his new role and has come to embrace his single fatherhood status as a badge of honor. Charles still wavers back and forth, sometimes hoping for the day when he can give his son back to the mother. Nonetheless, within the last year he has made many preparations for his son to stay with him permanently. Although he sees the benefit of being “a good black father,” he sometimes looks at his son as an encroachment on his independence. Charles eagerly looks forward to the weekends when he gives his son to the mother simply “to get a break.” However, these opportunities have grown rarer. Shawn’s declining economic stability is slowly diminishing his control over the caretaking of King. Misha is beginning to assert her parental control while Shawn relinquishes his and refocuses his energy towards finding a job once again.

Despite the fact that mothers left these fathers room to dominate over the care of their children, each father first tried to rely on the mothers and other women around them. The extent of their caretaking and their adoption of fatherhood as the core of their identity has been influenced by the availability of the women around them to step in and provide caretaking help. The ability to provide financially has also influenced the development of their fathering identity.

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Like Mark and Charles, Ralph has also been asked by the mother to take his daughter for a while. But unlike the mothers of Mark and Charles's children, she truly meant 'only a while' and now wants the daughter back. Ralph, who has embraced fatherhood, is not only fighting for permanent custody of his daughter, but has petitioned the court for custody of two of his other children by a different mother.

Ralph: She's currently down South. She asked me over the summertime to come grab her, because she couldn't take care of her, so I went down there and grabbed her. But now, as of recently these last 2-3 weeks, she's been trying to get her, and I'm like it doesn't make sense for you to come to try to get her out of school, out of tap and ballet, all the good stuff that I got going on -- routine and stuff, I don't want her to mess that up. So we just, you know, went to court for that. And today she's been like trying to get information on how to get to her school and I'm like -- out of, you know, it's just a little weird. I've had her for -- since June 22<sup>nd</sup>.

Yeah, she was living up here -- first we were living together at my apartment, then she moved out. She went to a shelter. Then after that, after she left the shelter, she just recently moved down South.

Me: Okay. So how are you finding that this whole, you know, court situation with trying to keep your daughter?

Ralph: At first I was just like half and half, like I don't know; should I do it, should I not do it? Should I just give her back and just give her what she wants? But at first I was thinking about it really strongly, like I might give her back. But then I realized I'm like it makes no sense to give her back if she's not stable enough to take care of her. I took the time to come down there. I put a lot of stuff on hold to go get her, and now that I have her, I'm like I might as well, you know, keep raising her because she's having -- Fun and she gets to hang out with her brothers and stuff. She has brothers and sisters, you know -- I mean brothers up here, so -- No, but she just -- even though she knows she's not stable she just wants -- :

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She wants -- it's mostly because it's her mother -- her grandmother -- she used to kind of like raise her before, like whenever she was at work or I'm at work she would have her. So now she's bored; she has nothing to do. Her husband recently passed -- well like a year or two ago, so she's definitely bored now, and she wants Siena. And I can understand; I want her, too. But it's like -- and she's older so it's just like you need to just calm down; you're older. Let us work -- that's our child; let us take of them -- take care of her. She [The grandmother] was living in Virginia at the time. First they were living up here, then they moved -- she moved down to Virginia. They had a household full of people, so that's what kind of -- also everybody to move around. After Virginia, she moved down to North Carolina closer to her, and now she wants her back because she wants to move in with her mother.

Me: Okay. I'm guess I'm just wondering why the mom didn't go to the grandmother and say help me out with Siena.

Ralph: She did, but at the time the mother was, I guess, having issues where people were staying with the grandmother -- like other -- her other brother, Siena's uncle or relatives. So she was angry at them and that's what spawned me winding up getting them. And I'm like okay; this is weird because my timing was off. I just started back working for this company. It was not a lot of work, but I had really needed that time period to go ahead and do that. She kind of like rushed me to get her -- rushed me to get her before Fourth of July so I was just like, all right, whatever. I had plans, you know -- I didn't have no kids basically at the moment, because none of the kids were staying with me, so I'm like okay, I'm about to go over here. I'm going to do this every day -- like I had a schedule before this time of year, you know, December, but now it's just like everything -- just kind of remix -- throwing my daughter in there. I'm like, oh -- okay.

When mothers abandon their role, fathers are still often given an opportunity to take control of a domain to which they had once been granted access. Once given room, some fathers

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grow strong in their caretaking identity. Their ability to do so is determined to a great extent by the gatekeepers in their lives, who include not only the mothers of their children, but the grandmothers and other mothers within their kin and fictive kin networks.

### Summary

For the purposes of their empirical study, Allen and Hawkins posited that maternal gatekeeping occurs within three domains: in the setting of standards for household responsibilities; in the external validation of the mothering identity, and in the clear distinction between parental roles. Mothers are categorized as either “gatekeepers” or “collaborators.” Mothers who gatekeep are women who set standards for family work, who strongly identify doing family work with being a good wife and mother, and who expect family work to be the sole domain of mothers. Conversely, collaborators are mothers who share the establishment of standards with fathers, who use more than family work to affirm their maternal identity, and who expect their partners to be involved in household responsibilities.

Allen and Hawkins’ groundbreaking study successfully enabled them to operationalize and test the maternal gatekeeping concept with empirical means. In their analysis of the socio-historical origin of maternal gatekeeping, Allen and Hawkins state, “The ideas of women as nurturers of home and children and men as breadwinners came to represent an ideal in which women, by being central to home and family, were given the opportunity to wield some domestic power and privilege over men. Thus, a wall was built around a maternal garden of home and family, complete with a latched gate to ensure the specialization of gender in “proper spheres of influence.” (p. 201)



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The metaphor of a gated wall built around a maternal garden illustrates the role of a gatekeeper. Studies on gatekeeping typically focus on the beliefs and behaviors of women who discourage or inhibit the behavior of men in the household, which includes the caretaking of children (Sano et al 2008, Roy and Dyson 2005). However, while the concept of a gatekeeper is fixed, the behavior or actions of the gatekeeper are variable and fluid. How a mother gatekeeps (the extent to which the gate is kept open or closed) does not negate the fact that she holds the position. Despite considerable debate on the extent to which mothers influence the household and caretaking behaviors of fathers, they have historically been central to the institution of the family and exert control over the domain of family work. Even with ideological shifts in the paradigms of mothering and fathering brought about by the feminist movement, there has been no conclusive evidence that mothers have relinquished their role as keepers of the gate around the “maternal garden of home and family” (Allen & Hawkins 1999).

If mothers are intrinsically gatekeepers, then it is critical that there be studies focusing on what factors maintain the function of the gatekeeping role as opposed to whether or not mothers gatekeep. Roy and Dyson (2005) suggest that while mothers can exercise great control over child caretaking, they can also open gates and encourage parental involvement. However, regardless of the actions which are influenced by beliefs of a mother's significance, the role remains. The fundamental basis of the role of maternal gatekeeper places the mother - as opposed to the father - at the head of the negotiating table. It can be argued that whether or not a woman sits at the head of the negotiating table of the maternal garden is not always a matter of choice or an authentic choice. For some women, their place at the head of the maternal garden exists only because the man of the household or the ideology of the dominant culture allows it. Additionally,

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a father's reluctance or resistance to take on activities considered part of the maternal sphere, such as nurturing, may preclude a woman's ability to exercise authority as a gatekeeper.

A generation ago, mothers and grandmothers had to correct the inability of fathers to fulfill their parental duties. Due to their inability to fulfill the socially prescribed role of breadwinner, many fathers were unable to meet past demands of fatherhood. Although the economic circumstances of low-income fathers have not changed, the criteria of "decent" fathering are expanding to include noneconomic roles. Thus fathers today are reclaiming a place within their families, a place that for many may lie not in the labor force, but within the maternal walls of the black family. Yet most people still believe a man's role as nurturer should supplement his role as provider not replace it, while mothers and grandmothers of this generation are struggling with making space in their long-dominated sphere of influence.

Men's inability to assume the breadwinning role in the black family has amplified the maternal gatekeeping position of black women. Many women soon learned to view themselves as permanent fixtures in their families while their men struggled with the realization that the breadwinning role they were supposed to have was improbable. The single black mothers first brought to public attention by the Moynihan Report (1965) are now grown up and have become grandmothers. Their hold on their families may have loosened but not by much. Many still head their households and are driving the caretaking of the grandchildren directly and indirectly. While some grandmothers' influence may be curtailed by the mothers of this generation, fathers often do not easily wield the same power.

## Chapter 6- A Woman's World

### **A Woman's World: Finding one's place in the urban matriarchal village**

As mothers and grandmothers exert their influence on father involvement on an individual level, mothers and grandmothers within their community exert a collective influence on it. Such influence manifests itself in the advice they offer, the stances they take, the reactions they have, and the opinions they share, all of which can take place in the public domain.

Parenting Journey is a program offered by the Head Start. The curriculum takes a psychoanalytic approach and requires parents to reflect on their childhood and recognize its influence on them as adults and as parents. Participants often discover the connections between how they were parented and how they parent. These workshops take place at the various centers. During a session, 4-10 parents may be in attendance. For a long time, Parenting Journeys were only attended by mothers. However, in the last few years that has changed at some sites.<sup>21</sup> At this particular site, however, all six participants were women, three of whom were also grandmothers.

I attended two Parenting Journey sessions after getting permission from the facilitator and participants. My participation was limited. I seldom spoke except when someone directly asked me a question about my personal life or my research. Because they were all aware of my research on father involvement in Bed Stuy, for both sessions, the women primarily discussed their opinions about men, relationships and the ways in which they saw fatherhood changing. In one of the sessions, the grandmothers dominated the conversation. They all agreed that they saw

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<sup>21</sup> In 2011-2012, one site's Parenting Journey consisted of 8 fathers. This site was the only site with a male family worker.

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more fathers around the neighborhood, but disagreed on whether or not seeing more of them was meaningful.

“They be there alright. Just standing around not doing shit.” The women laughed. One grandmother, a younger one at the age of 46, shared her story. She used to argue with her husband all the time about how he did not help around the house or help her with the kids. Then she became sick, was hospitalized and bedridden. Her husband was forced to take on more responsibility and she was forced to let him. She had not realized until that experience how much she was contributing to the very behavior that had always angered her. One grandmother responded to her story, “You know you have a good one,” insinuating that her husband was an exception.

Grandmother: Look, I’m not saying that all men would step up like that, but I never would have known if I didn’t get sick. And there’s no turning back, I know what he can do, maybe not like me but that don’t matter. I can try to tell you young girls this, but this is a lesson that many women have to learn on their own. You have to train your man and sometimes you have to be a little easy. But that’s just my experience. Everybody is different. But I tell my daughter that all the time. Let that man, be a man. Don’t be telling him what to do all the time. Let him do it his way some of the time.

As she spoke, one younger mother clearly disagreed. She was currently in a custody battle with her child’s father.

Me: You seem upset.

Young Mom1: Looking at the grandmother. “I hear what you saying, but I’m sick of these men not doing much and getting all the credit. I be here every day, bustin my ass. And

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then you wanna show up like you a good father. And I gotta 'be easy.' Nah. I'm not gonna be easy.

Young Mom2: I hear what she's saying. Maybe some men try, but it's still us mothers out here. It's always going to be us mothers.

Later, after the session, I asked the mother why she had become so upset. She spoke of her father and how still to this day she sees him on the street but it is as though they are not even related. Her mother had gotten by without him, and she was going to get by without her daughter's father. With tears in her eyes, she exclaimed, "I was better off without him and my daughter will be better off without hers."

Young Mom1: When I see him, I wish my father was dead.

Young Mom2: Don't say that.

Young Mom1: Why. Why I can't say that? That's how I feel.

Mothers carry the negative experiences they had with their fathers and past lovers, retelling and sharing them among themselves. However, such conversations do not take place solely in the company of women. Often, men hear about these experiences and attitudes as well. One day as I stood surveying the escorts who were entering, I stopped a grandmother.

Me: Do you have a second to share your thoughts on fatherhood in Bed Stuy?

Grandmother: What's this now?

Me: I am trying to get a community understanding of fatherhood.

Grandmother: Fatherhood- she repeats. Sucks her teeth. No.

Me: That's okay. Thank you anyway.

Grandmother: She turns to walk away but then turns around again. She mumbles. They don't do nothing.

*I'm silent but looking at her.*

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Grandmother: You heard me. They don't do nothing. So I don't got nothing to say about these fathers here.

Me: Well, that's why I want to get everyone's opinion. People have different experiences.

Grandmother: Not on fathers. Why them?

Me: So, you don't want to talk about it?

Grandmother: No.

*But she does not walk away.*

Me: Okay. That's alright. Thank you anyway.

The grandmother stands looking at me. I am racking my brain to figure out what to say next because she seems upset. A father to whom I have spoken a few times walks by after picking up his son from the classroom and I say hello to him. As he approaches me, the woman mutters, "Fathers-mffph. They do nothing. Mmmph." She walks down the hall, visibly upset. I am not sure if the father heard what she said, but I ask, "How's everything going?" He looks back at the old woman walking down the hall, then at me, and lifts his eyebrows and head up. "What's up with that?" he asks. I shake my head and give him an apologetic smile. "You heard that?" He shrugs his shoulder and responds, "I've heard worse. It is what it is. Have a Happy Mother's Day." It's Friday and that Sunday is Mother's Day. "Thank you," I tell him. "Enjoy your weekend." Loosely stroking his son's head, he walks out the door. After several minutes, I see the grandmother again, now, with her granddaughter. She tells me, "You should find something else to do."

Many women feel a great deal of anger and this anger gets projected in little ways. When approached about a survey on fatherhood, some mothers verbalize discontent with fathers as a

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worthwhile topic of study. One mother told me, “What about me? I am the father, I’ve been the father and you know what, my mother was the father. So are you gonna study me?” I have met with this sentiment a considerable number of times in my conversations with mothers. Nowadays fathers in low-income urban communities must deal with the legacy that their fathers have left behind. Regardless of how much the legacy of father absenteeism is real or misunderstood, it is part of the narrative of black communities. The damage of this legacy is most apparent when fathers are seeking support. When a mother attempts to limit a father’s custody or visitation rights, then this legacy can make a father feel as though the world will not respect his efforts or rights because he is simply another deadbeat dad. Childcare organizations can foster a space in which fathers can feel supported without bias. But, this often depends on the mothers, who typically make up the majority of the employees of these organizations.

When I sat down with Ms. M she was reeling from an altercation that had ended seconds before our first formal interview. A mother of a Head Start child had gotten frustrated after Ms. M had, in the mother’s opinion, violated a court order prohibiting her child’s father from seeing the child. Ms. M explained to the mom that the order she had in her possession stated that the father currently had no visitation rights. So, although he could not interact with the child, the father could still come to the center, attend parent meetings, and ask staff about the well-being of his child. “Unless you have an order of protection, the father is welcome here.” Ms. M’s explanation did not satisfy the mother.irate, she began cursing and threatening to hurt Ms. M. She was yelling so loudly she could be heard by the children and teachers in the classrooms. Teachers stuck their heads out to see what was going on. Each time the mother insisted that Ms. M was violating the court order, Ms. M repeated, “You have no paperwork that says that the

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father cannot be here. He has rights.” These words seemed to infuriate the mother. She threatened to call the cops, to take her child out of the Head Start, and to bring “someone down.” Ms. M. calmly stood her ground. The mother eventually left the building, still angry and cursing.

Ms. M looked at me and asked, quite coolly, if I was ready to begin our interview. As we sat down, three teachers came in to check on Ms. M and to see if she was okay. By this time I had already witnessed several interactions of mother and fathers arguing over escort privileges. What surprised me about this incident was how Ms. M had handled it. She was the first family worker whom I had ever heard use the phrase, “the father has rights,” when speaking to a mother.

The family worker position at Head Start is an intensive one. While teachers are responsible for the development of the child in the classroom, family workers are largely responsible for the well-being of the child and the development of the family outside the classroom. When a family applies to Head Start, family workers are the first employees with whom it interacts. A family worker is required to do a needs assessment on every entering family and to refer it to appropriate services according to its current circumstances. Family workers are also required to assist and support families in the setting of goals, such as the attainment of a GED or the learning of English. Relationships between parents and family workers can become quite personal; family workers often have to exercise much discretion in the ways in which they handle situations to meet the needs of families. At the start of the year in which I conducted my study, all fourteen family worker positions were filled by women.

Although most incidents never reach an extreme display of discord within Head Start walls, according to a few staff members tensions between mothers and fathers have been



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increasing over the last few years. Between September 2012 and June 2013, I personally witnessed several disagreements between mothers and fathers about some aspect of their child's custody or visitation. Employees also volunteered stories of incidents in which they felt that they had been caught in the middle of a dispute between a mother and father. When parents are at odds about custody privileges many of the family workers informally contact Mr. S., the father initiative coordinator, to "handle the father." Yet, in confrontational situations that demand urgent resolution, either the teacher or the family worker must attempt to resolve the issue.

In the case of most parental disagreements, the family worker or teacher (most of whom are older women) tries to mediate the situation by appealing to the mother. Often, they attempt to persuade the mother to "allow" the father to see the child. They use language such as "it is in the best interest of the child" or "a child needs to see their father." In each situation, the employees often speak directly to the mother while the father stands to the side. In two instances that I observed, the father was asked to sit in another room as the employee and the mother spoke in her office. Eventually everyone calms down, and the father is given Mr. S's contact information and told to seek him for support.

The incident with Ms. M was different. She did not use any pleading language to the mother on behalf of the father. She was very clear. The father had rights and until the mother had the proper paperwork requiring Ms. M to do so, she would not deny his parental rights. Nothing Ms. M said confirmed that the mother had any authority over the father's ability to be at the center. Even as the mother pointed to legal documentation prohibiting the father from visitation until further notice, Ms. M remained resolute. Her resolve was uncommon. I have observed mothers with no documentation demand that family workers not allow the father to pick up the

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child. In a few situations, the father was turned away simply because the mother had written the father's name on the line of the escort sheet that was labeled: "People not allowed to pick up the child."

I decided to spend the next two weeks at Ms. M's site to explore the significance of this observation. As I personally got to know Ms. M better, I began to understand what made her take such a strong stance on the rights of fathers. I was also able to see how her stance affected her site. In our first sit-down formal interview, Ms. M showed me a booklet entitled "Daddy's Gift," dated to 2003. In it she had compiled pictures, poems and journal entries from and about the fathers across all the organizational sites. Copies of the twenty-page handmade booklet had been shared with children and their families. Shortly after she showed it to me, she spoke about the importance of organizations that supported fathers, then shared a story about her daughter.

Ms. M: Way early in the pregnancy, I didn't even know if my daughter was going to have him. That was her first boyfriend from the time she was like 12, she was like 18 going on 19 then. And so we had to like really talk to her because of what she wanted to do, that she wished to try to have a baby to keep him alive in some form, you know, just trying to find out those questions. But I'm like you don't want to wake up 3 years from now and say why did I do this? I ain't really want to have this baby because there was no stress or whatever. And so she decided to go ahead with it. In a way I'm glad, because she never told me [until after] she wasn't pregnant, she probably would have killed herself. So I'm glad she kept the baby.

The father is not involved. He's involved when he wants to be because my grandson does modeling and different things like that. So when he sees somebody, he tells people you know that's my son or whatever. Well I kind of know why, you know. Because when my daughter got pregnant, my daughter took me through a whole lot of scheme. First she told me she was raped so I took

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her to the precinct and did all those things and whatever. When we seen the baby's sonogram picture, we was like that ain't no rape, that look like such and such. Now such and such was there all the time because he was coming over my house a lot, he lived on the block where we all had each other keys, there was only seven houses. And so our kids were always in each other's house, spend the night, all through that block. That's how we lived, our own little community. And she didn't say public that it was him. She kept the lie going. I don't know, I don't know.

Yeah but he didn't say nothing either because he say, he ain't saying nothing because she didn't say nothing. He was saying she should have said something. And so even when we—when she was having him, his best friend was there as his godfather and he was calling him. I didn't know at that time that he was calling trying to communicate because he wanted to be there but he couldn't be there because then it's like how would I know? And so then after when my grandson was probably about a year and a half, she finally said who it was. But then in that year and a half she never made it possible for him to be a father. And so—because she had the lock on him. And so once the lie was out they weren't connected.

[Now] Because he has another son that he's really bonded with and she gets mad and I have to remember to tell her, “Well, you lied.” You have to realize you can't blame him all the time. Yeah he knew and all that but you caught him in the disconnect and you made him a part of the lie. And so that means you separated him when it was time for him to be bonding and doing these things, you made it not possible for him to be there. And so yeah, everybody knows he's the father. He says he's the father but doing father things, he don't do it with him like he do it with the other one and she can't understand that. I said because they have a bond. And then I say I don't [know] if I could be a good father with you either because you don't talk to him right. I think you're jealous of the relationship with the other son. But the mother allowed the relationship. You didn't allow the

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relationship so when you see him, you always—don't always be nice. You know what I'm saying?

So I think she makes him feel some kind of way and so like—And then he did tell us one time—he told me that for my grandson he don't have to worry about he said because I know he has family and everybody that will do everything. The other boy the mother's sketchy, stuff is iffy and if I don't take care of him, I don't even know if he'll eat. I don't know if he'll have a place to stay. I believe it's true. She'll just bring him and drop him in and don't come back for weeks or take him somewhere and he won't know where he is so he always tries to get him so at least he'll know. Um-hum, they be together, apart, together, whatever.

Looking back I understand that so I tell her you have to allow him whatever little he does, you have to make it be grateful. And she's like I ain't got to suck up. I ain't playing. I'm the mother and the father. But you know that's you, that's not wisdom. But even though I try to tell her whatever he does, how little it is, praise him. Make him want to be able to be in your son's life without it being a judgment. Because he says you know your mouth is reckless, I mean I do but I don't know what you're going to say. So if you want him to have a relationship then you've got to sometimes have to shut up and stand back and let it happen.

Me: So you think it makes a difference?

Ms. M : Of course it makes a difference.

Ms. M has personally experienced how her daughter had a negative influence on the long-term relationship between her grandson and his father. She also counsels parents and recognizes the general influence a mother has on a father's involvement. I asked her to provide the history of the morning's altercation. She compared the mother to her daughter and said that the mother's use of a child to hurt its father often occurs in relationships.

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Ms. M: Mother and father got custody issues. She done call me a bitch, a stupid ass, she threatened me. Now the father is the one we know. He goes to school. He attends the meeting and all that. She got, not an order of protection, custody. And, so I told him I have to recognize her custody agreement. I cannot let you in the classroom. I cannot let you know where the child is. She has sole custody and visitation. She decided that she doesn't want him to be a part of her life in school. Since February she has been back and forth. [Before] He was okay. He picked up, brought to school, came to meetings.

So they had a blowup. She attacked him in the hallway, it's on camera and everything. So then we have this thing- She don't want him to come and be a part of her life and I told her that you just have sole custody and visitation. Now you don't have an order of protection. So as long as he's not in the classroom with her, if he wants to come downstairs to a parent meeting, he's allowed to come to a parent meeting. Because the child is not upstairs, he's not interacting with her. He's interacting with the peers. And the Head Start says we don't support one parent, we support the family unit. So, he's a part of the family too. So yeah I may tell you as the mother something but I'm going to also tell a father what he's supposed to do too. So, I was like you don't want him here, you need to get an order of protection. You need to go somewhere and get your rights established. See so I'm telling them both different things but I'm still here for the family. Even if you're apart and you're going through, I can't take a side. I have to be neutral. I tell you what I think is best if you're asking my advice in my situation. And I'm telling you I sent him to Mr. Smith. I said well I'm going to send you to him, so you work with him so the mother don't think I'm telling him her business or whatever else. But we still as a program help both sides of that family.

Ms. M recognizes the influence she wields in the lives of parents. She considers herself a surrogate mother and in her position as family worker she is able to exert more influence than do other community mothers, especially when it comes to supporting both mothers and fathers.

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Ms. M: But we do step in and become a surrogate. They come to us for advice. They come to us and—I've talked people out of abortions. I've talked people out of, one parent just going to get her tubes tied because she is so and I'm like, how do you feel about that? Yes. Surrogate mothers, yes. You know, I don't tell what to do but if you come in and you supposed to talk, I'm a Christian so I'm going to take them biblically and they know that we're going to pray on it. You know, at the end it's your decision. I have fathers that I do the same thing with. I have some fathers that come to me just like sons. Because you listen, you listen.

Ms. M. is very adamant about the rights of fathers. She is very firm with both mothers and teachers regarding their behaviors toward fathers, especially when she believes these are prohibitive. She uses certain key legal words and phrases such as “a father has rights,” “we are mandated,” or “we need legal documentation.” Her language pervaded her site. As I interviewed the teachers there, I noted that these key phrases came up again and again. Ms. M, a veteran employee, had inflected the language of the center with fatherhood. Although such phrases were reiterated at other centers, they were certainly not used as pervasively or uniformly.

Ms. M is an older women and wields significant influence on the other staff members at the site and generally within the organization. Her influence is apparent in the following conversation. During an interview, a teacher dropped by Ms. M's office to see if she was okay after the incident with the angry mother.

Teacher: Are you okay?

Ms. M: Yeah. I didn't beat nobody up today. Mom and dad conflict, he want to see the child. Like I said, I have a sole custody and visitation paper. There is no order of protection so I will not—the father does not go in the classroom, whatever. If he

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come downstairs to a parent meeting, that's within his right. I have no paper that says he can't be in the building. That's not what your paper says. So she's telling me, "I have told you what I wanted." And I said yeah, but you ain't give me the paperwork for that. Go get an order of protection if you got to.

Teacher: All right.

Ms. M: I don't have no paper that says he can't be here. So now you want me to do what you want me to do but I'm not! Because as a family person, I'm working with both of you all. She's telling me you have to do what I say to do. That's the mother, that's what she told me. I wasn't going to hit her. I wasn't even interacting with her. She busted my door with this. They started arguing down the block and then she came back. You all was gone, why you even brought that back here? And so when the cops came I said no, nobody hit nobody. I just seen them arguing and I'm leaving because I'm off duty. I told him that. That's what I said. She called the police. Yeah, she called the cops. The next thing I know I saw a police officer talking to him between the two doors.

Teacher: I thought she left because she came late, after 4 o'clock. All my three year olds was gone She was the only one. Yeah, and she was late a lot of times. But see when the father used to pick her up—he was always on time. That is true because I used to see him. Every day he brought her himself. And I'd say how you doing? Have a nice afternoon and evening. And he'd say you too Miss and I'll see you later meaning tomorrow. That's the last time I see him. There was no problem. Mommy on the other hand, I'm not talking bad about her. Whenever I see the little girl now, she is one of the last three, maybe the last four. See—my—I tell the mother, look. 4 o'clock, after 4 o'clock they are not insured. You need to get them here—get here before 4 o'clock. After 4 o'clock and God forbid if anything happened to them, we will get in trouble and I can get fired and me and my co-workers, you need to get here before 4 o'clock or 4 o'clock on the dot. They are not insured after 4 o'clock. The ones that's going from 4 to 5 they are insured until 5:30. As for the ones here, no they not.

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- Ms. M: Actually, they are but that's just what we tell them.
- Teacher: Well I didn't know no different.
- Ms. M: Yeah.
- Teacher: As far as I was told—
- Ms. M: As long as they on the premises—as long as they on the premises they are insured. As long—as long as an activity is going on. And an activity is still school so they are insured but we always tell them that.

Ms. M encourages teachers to understand and be able to explain the legal ramifications of why they do what they do. For instance, she corrected the teacher's assertion that families cannot be in the building because they are not insured after 4 pm. In conversations with staff, Ms. M was constantly referenced as a source of information on what was and was not legal in their interactions with families. Ms. M's determination to ensure the rights of fathers was reflected in the site's determination that they always be upheld. One teacher at a different site who used to work with Ms. M spoke about her influence on the engagement of fathers.

- Teacher: Well, when I started fathers actually thought it was only for mom – mothers. So then I was surprised when I see -- I was there for about a year. And then [Ms. M.] came over used to tell us she used to catch the father in the hallway, you know, they'll be coming with the mothers but they would always sit be kind of laid back and not saying nothing. So Ms. M would say, "Come on in, daddy, you're part of this family, come on in here." And she used to tell 'em you're part of this family, too. She used to tell 'em your opinion matters, too. You have to, you have an opinion you're gonna say what you want for your kids, too. And then after that, after she started doing that I started seeing the men coming in, they bringing in the kids. We used to have them to come in and read stories. It really shocked me 'cause it was like a whole big thing.



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Later this teacher told me about an incident that she had witnessed while using language very similar to that of Ms. M. Although she was at a different site, she later confirmed my suspicion that she had worked directly with Ms. M. They had once worked at the same site for five years.

He wanted to know how the child came to school. Cause first she put him on the thing-- they were together. I don't know what happened after the first week of school. He wasn't in the child's life. He said she wouldn't allow him to – but then he would come – he would come to school cuz I told her you cannot not telling me he can't see this child and he was the biological father and his name is down on his paper. So she told me, she said, oh well he can go in and see her, but that's it. I said, if he come in here and he wants to take her he has the right we cannot unless you get a court order. We can't stop that. They have the right to come in as long as he—there's not court order stating he cannot pick up that child he is allowed to get that child. The big thing with her she didn't want him to see so she – he came and picked up the child, took the child home. I don't know what happened. The next thing I know they was in court.

He ended up with custody because when they came to the school she wasn't coming to school like she was supposed to. She wasn't – she wasn't taking care like she was supposed to. She wasn't doing the right thing. Then she went to the shelter, she left her mother's house and went to the shelter. Got put out of the shelter, don't ask me how. Right now she's living in the street with this baby So she came in Ms. M was trying to work with him but then she stopped coming here, too. So the next thing I know the father had custody. Which I think was a good thing because then the child start coming to school. She was clean, her hair was clean, everything, she looked good. Okay, so the girlfriend helped. The girlfriend would bring her every now and then and then there was a big thing, she said she didn't want the girlfriend to bring her, oh, Lord. I told -- I said – I told the father, please bring this child cuz I don't have time for this craziness. Most of the time, you know, like sometimes you get 'em to come in say

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oh don't let him pick up the kid. I don't hear that 'cause you know why, next week y'all gonna be right back together. Get away from me with that nonsense. That's just what I tell 'em you know you be back.

Not all employees are this vocal in their advocacy of a father's legal rights. One day I was fielding calls during a site visit. A father came in with another male friend and hurriedly asked the custodian, "Where's the meeting about my daughter at?" The custodian tried to help him, but the father was spastic and abrupt in his language. The custodian gave up and directed the father to me. The father was looking for his daughter but did not know where she was. Although his child actually attended another center, he came to the site where I was located because he remembered coming to a workshop in the past at that location. He kept repeating that he did not know where his daughter was and that he wanted to make sure she was okay. As I tried to locate his daughter, I heard him explain to the custodian that he had tried to call the mother, but she kept hanging up on him and would not tell him where the daughter was.

After calling around to the various sites, I located the daughter and mother. I told the child's teacher that I would let the father know that the meeting was over there and that he should go there. Visibly upset, he asked me, if his daughter was okay. He had heard that the mother was going to a meeting about her, but he didn't know what the meeting was about and was worried. "Why am I not at the meeting? Why are things going on with my daughter that I don't know about? I came here because she won't tell me nothing." He paused. "Fuck, so she's all the way on the other side?" He turned to the other man of around his age who had accompanied him and said that they had to go to another center. They both began walking

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towards the door, but he quickly turned round and came back. He banged on the window at the reception desk and said, “Thanks for helping out.” He and his friend then left.

A couple of days later, I checked in with the family worker about what had happened. She immediately knew what I was talking about and shared with me more details about the incident. The father came over to the site and the family worker was there to meet him. She told him that the mother was in the Parenting Journey meeting but that he could not participate because it was a closed meeting. Although the Parenting Journey program is open to all parents, after a few sessions they close it to maintain the intimacy and safe space of the participants. I asked how the situation had been resolved and the family worker said, “We let him see his daughter and then he left.”

Me: “Did the mom not want him to see the daughter?”

F Worker: “No, she said it was okay. I tell her all the time that a child needs their father.”

Me: “Why did he think that something was wrong with his daughter? He kept asking me, if she was okay.”

F Worker: “I don’t know. I don’t know why he would say that.” Muffled giggle. “He’s a little (wiggles her fingers as if to suggest he’s wired, crazy, or over-the-top)”

Me: “But I don’t understand. Why didn’t the mom just tell him where she was and what the meeting was about. He said that she hung up on him.”

F Worker: She shakes her head and then lowers the tone of her voice and walks closer to me. “That father. He’s involved when he wants to be. She probably didn’t want to be bothered with his nonsense. I know the mom well. She’s comes to Parenting Journey all the time. “

Me: “Well, did he get to see his daughter? “

F Worker: “Oh yeah. Yeah I talked to her and she was okay with it. He didn’t do anything. He didn’t even stay for the meeting. He just saw his daughter and left.”

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At a later date, I obtained more background about this couple. They have four children and the mother and father are not always together. The mother attends Parenting Journey and has developed a strong relationship with the family worker as well as with the other mothers who attend the sessions. This year there are no fathers in Parenting Journey at her site although the family worker said there have been some in years past. Through these sessions the family worker had learned detailed information about the dad from the mom and it had influenced her approach, perception, and attitude towards him. Her own personal experiences and attitudes have also influenced how she deals with him and other fathers in general. In several chats she expressed her belief in the importance of fathers' participation in the lives of their children, but she also believed that most men were "full of it." "They talk and complain a lot but when it comes to really doing something they don't step up." This standing reference point creates a situation in which men have to prove themselves to be good fathers before employees give them the same sort of parental regard that they automatically bestow on mothers.

Fathers are very much aware of being in the position of having to prove themselves as good fathers. One father I interviewed was all smiles as we started our conversation. After asking him to describe how he thinks his son sees him, I asked, "Do you feel people and society generally respect you as a father?" He stared at his four-year-old son who was standing against a wall right next to his seat and slowly his smile faded. "It's like you always got something to prove," he started in a low distracted tone. "Even to the ones who are here to supposedly support you." He stuck his chin out, up, and to the right. "You see that woman right there." "Yeah?" I said. He then related this story:

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“One day, I came in here and I didn’t have on a uniform<sup>22</sup> or nothing. My wife was pregnant with our fourth child and that lady knew that. I guess when she saw me I just look like one of the guys on the block. She came up to me with an attitude and said, ‘I hope you gonna support all these kids you’re making.’ Even though she sees my wife all the time, she never said nothing to my wife. It was like us having kids was all my fault. I didn’t say anything. I was mad, but I didn’t say anything. I just kept it moving. The next time she saw me and I had my uniform on. It was like I was a different man or something.” He’s quiet for a few seconds. “I guess it’s okay once people know you...know that you are trying to be a standup guy.”

Most of the fathers I have spoken with have expressed this feeling of needing to prove to those around them that they are not typical absentee black fathers. Often, the person who the father felt sat in judgment of him was a woman, but sometimes it was an employee at a Head Start. Mr. S also recognizes this as a significant obstacle to father engagement. Mr. S is a tall slender man in his late fifties. He is quite charming and friendly. He says what is on his mind, seldom holding his tongue. His daughter, now in middle school, attended the Head Start when she was young. His wife, works as a cook at the Head Start. Mr. S. and his family represent the typical intimate relationship many of the staff at the Head Start have with the agency. Most older staff members have had children attend the Head Start and now have grandchildren enrolled. Like Mr. S, many of the staff members live walking distance away from the site and have kin and fictive-kin relationships with the population outside the walls of the Head Start.

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<sup>22</sup> He is referring to the uniform he wears for his job as a UPS employee.

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Mr. S tackles his position at the Head Start like a lieutenant of a never-ending war. His enemies are all those who fail to recognize and encourage the efforts of fathers. For him, these include most of the women at the Head Start, colleagues with whom he has worked over the years. They also include the mothers of the children at the Head Start. At one point, as he was quick to reveal, it also included his wife.

“You know,” he says in a hushed tone holding my shoulder as if he were going to tell me a secret, “many of these women, they don’t want to help me. They don’t support fathers. They think my job is a waste of time.” I have heard him express this sentiment many times in meetings with staff as well as directly to fathers. Sometimes, he qualifies it with “Not all women,” or “You know I’m not talking about you. I can tell you support fathers.” His newly hired supervisor told me that he routinely asks her outright, “Do you support fathers?” whenever they have disagreements about organizational priorities.

Mr. S’s approach is a response to his own past battles trying to stay involved in his daughter's life while going through relationship issues with his wife. It is also affected by the fact that the Head Start is a female-dominated organization. Over 95% of the management and staff dealing directly with children and families are women. Many of these women are mothers and grandmothers of children who once attended the Head Start. Ms. M. is one of these employees and she talks about her influence and that of other grandmothers in the organization. She also mentions the many potential confidants to whom one may go for advice.

“So Head Start provides opportunities again for more grandmothers because like Miss B---- is a grandmother. Because people come and speak to her about all kinds of issues and she's not the Family Worker. And we just—it's not territorial...talk to who you feel comfortable talking to. Sometimes it might be

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the teacher that take on the same role. It might be the janitor. Some people talk to the coach.”

Ms. M is correct as I have seen many parents confiding in various staff members. However, the lack of men at the Head Start makes it more challenging for fathers to find someone with whom they can connect. Some men end up going to the Father Initiative to search for support while others find advocates in employees such as Ms. M, but seeking support usually occurs under extreme circumstances, when a father’s custody or visitation are being threatened. In day-to-day situations, fathers generally do not connect with employees who are taking care of their children. This has an impact on father engagement in the school. The only male teacher at the organization speaks about this problem.

I mean, they might not tell me, but they, you know, but us -- because we're, you know, everything with the machismo thing and, you know, all of that, but if I was to walk in and see a male teacher, you know, African American, you know, of color just working with kids and just seeing how they interact. So it would -- I think it does kind of like, you know, encourages them or motivates them. You know, it's just -- because it's all -- it's all about, you know, I wouldn't say perception, but I don't go around saying hey everyone be like me. I show them proof, so it's like they see me and then they, you know, they'll- I know we have parents who, as far as males, that actually came in and got on the carpet and sat down. I'm saying they probably haven't learned it from me, but they might see me, because I'm doing it, they're more comfortable and they're like wants to -- more inclined to be themselves, you know? So, I tend to think so. But even when I was in school, I'm talking about from early elementary maybe onto maybe like sixth grade, I didn't really start encountering male teachers until maybe like the

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fourth, fifth grade. And then when I got to middle school, most of my teachers were males.

He goes on to tell me how he has encouraged one of his fathers to consider becoming an early childhood teacher like himself. While women are surrounded by other women who understand their circumstances, fathers are not. Given that black fathers have just recently become more involved at the Head Start, the support and the encouragement of the organization staff are critical. Yet, the fact that the organization is female-dominated limits opportunities for men to find someone with whom they can relate, especially if they are having trouble with the mother of their child regarding custody and visitation.

Some female employees are uncomfortable with taking what sometimes might be perceived by other mothers as “the father’s side” and will qualify their statements to justify the mother’s oppositions. One teacher explained how she managed a custody dispute by using similar language to Ms. M’s, but also by assuring the mothers that she was not taking the father’s side. “Look, he may or may not be at fault, but because I don’t know the details and there is no legal order, I can’t deny his rights as a father to pick up.” Another teacher used the significance of neutrality to pacify the mother, “I’m not taking his side, Mama. I gotta stay neutral. I hear what you saying. Sounds like he’s in the wrong, but I can’t just take your word for it. How would you like it if I took his word over yours?”

A female employee's hesitation at "taking the father's side" may lie in her empathy with a mother's feelings. Many of these women have had experiences that seep into their overall perception and behaviors toward fathers at the Head Start. They are also influenced by the conventional assumption that most fathers are uninterested in being involved. A glaring



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illustration of this is the inability of some employees to notice the recent uptick in father presence at the Head Start or generally around the neighborhood.

Ms. P, a family worker, told me that there were not many fathers at the beginning of the year when I came to her site to recruit fathers for my study. Halfway through the year, I again asked her and her teachers about the number of fathers escorting children to and from Head Start and was told that “there are not too many fathers here.” Towards the end of the year when I came to the site to interview teachers, there were far more fathers than they had led me to believe. Employees were surprised when I pointed to the discrepancy between what they believed, what they had communicated in our interviews, and what I had actually observed during my time there. When their inaccuracy about the number of fathers who routinely escorted their children to and from school was pointed out, most accepted the news with pleasure.

However, a few employees refused to believe my inferences, arguing that perhaps this specific school year was an exception or that their class was unique but as a whole, there were not many father escorts. This inability to recognize the growing presence of fathers stuck with some women even in the face of counter-evidence. One teacher vehemently disagreed with my analysis. Her deeply ingrained belief about fathers’ absence in the black community affected her capacity to accept that any change, however slight, was occurring. Her belief that paternal presence was not only not growing but was actually diminishing was shared by only a few teachers at the organization.

Although most teachers have noticed far more fathers escorting children, some think that that is as far as their involvement goes. Yet in the same way that some employees have been unable to spot the increase in father escorts, so it seems that some employees have been unable to

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notice fathers' attempts to get more involved, especially in cases where attempts are subtle and not persistent. This blindness prevents some employees from encouraging father involvement.

During a morning meeting with twelve parents in attendance, nine of them were mothers or grandmothers and three were fathers. All were deciding on a field-trip destination and photo backgrounds for school pictures. The loosely run meeting lasted fewer than fifteen minutes. It took longer to gather the parents than to discuss the issues. At the end of the meeting, parents slowly trickled out. Two fathers and three mothers left immediately. The rest of the parents lingered in the hall, some still sitting in the folding chairs that had been put out for the meeting. One father, who had taken my survey earlier that morning, remained seated. His daughter had long been in the class. The family worker said, "Dad, you can go, we don't need you no more." She laughed while the father rose and asked, "Oh, the meeting's over?" He looked slightly confused because there were still five women in the hall sitting down. But he left.

The meeting was not actually over. Shortly after the father left the mothers discussed where they wanted to go for the parent trip. The family worker was not being rude or crude in her comment to the father. She had said it in a rather jovial tone. When I asked her about it later she quickly dismissed her behavior and said, "Oh, he didn't want to be there. I didn't want to take up any of his time. It's just us women here." Although her exclusionary behavior was not intended to be negative, it does reflect the exclusive maternal community that she has built at her site. As I hung out at the site I recognized a core group of mothers who hung out at the office. They volunteered to put up display bulletin boards in the lobby. There were at least five of them, all young and unemployed. They used to come use the computer, often checking out Facebook or Youtube clips. They also came to seek support regarding paperwork. The family worker helped

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two of them with resumes and job applications in the several days I was there. Like Ms. M, she was a surrogate mom, in a sense. They all discussed life, love, and relationships and chattered about the craziness of Facebook. She and the chair of a parent committee, also a grandmother in her fifties, spoke to these young women nearly every day.

In a private interview, the family worker shared her belief that men and women have particular roles when it comes to family life. She is a single mother and though she publicly supports the Father Initiative, she also feels that fathers are not as involved as everyone thinks. The fathers at her site are not as involved as the mothers. However, in a certain sense, her attitude and actions contribute to this discrepancy since they do not encourage the fathers' involvement. In a superficial sense, she is right. Not as many fathers as mothers seek ways to become involved, but fathers are also unlikely to be asked by female employees to become more involved.

Some of the employees recognize the need for teachers to make a point of reaching out to fathers. Active encouragement is necessary because it is a challenge to connect with many of the fathers. This is especially true for the younger teachers. Older teachers who evoke the older, authoritative persona of Big Momma, are much more adept at getting fathers to oblige, to engage them in conversation and to persuade them into doing things that they hesitate to do. In my interviews, I noticed that younger teachers definitely complained more about fathers not being engaged than did older teachers.

Teacher 1: The fathers that we've had so far, they don't really speak to us. They don't speak to us. And some of them won't even answer you when you say hello.

Me: What is that about?

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- Teacher 2: -- we have twins in here. And their dad is just like-He's just -- I want to say strict, but he seems like he's always in a rush. He's always like come on. He's very serious.
- Teacher1: He's very serious.
- Me: Even with the twins?
- Teacher2: Yeah.
- Teacher1: Yes with them too.
- Teacher2: But they kind of like play him a little bit. Because they'll be doing stuff and he's - - he's all about getting -- getting their stuff for them, let's go, let's go, let's go, let's go. He's just always in a hurry, always in a rush. Mom will come in, she'll sit down, she'll look at their work, she'll help them with their work in the morning. During dismissal time it's okay, go put your stuff on while I'll talk with teachers, how's \_\_\_\_\_ doing? I notice that. But dad's just like, he's always in a rush, let me go, let me go.
- Teacher1: Get's his stuff done and even when they're writing their names, if he sticks around in the classroom, he wants them to get it right the first time. He stands over them and he's like it's this, this is way it's supposed to be. He doesn't give them a chance to make mistakes.
- Teacher2: I think sometimes I relate to them differently because I find, not to be bias or prejudice, but the dads are always easier for me to deal with than the moms. Moms sometime they notice everything. Dad -- dads will probably trust us more. And then, like later on in the year they'll probably ask or inquire about certain things.
- Teacher1: I have a similar experience also. The moms, it's like they -- they put a lot of pressure on us and the dads, they're easier to talk to. When we speak to a dad it's like okay, yes. But the mothers, they have questions.

They go on to discuss another father.

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- Teacher 1: One father - everything is the mom. We have to, usually we ask him if we can see the mother because it doesn't look like he deals with anything concerning her. When he comes in the morning or if he does bring her in, we will, if -- if we have something to share we'd ask him to see the mother, because it's like he just dropped them off and running. So that's what it seems like with her father.
- Teacher 2: During parent teacher conference, he was just like, kind of like he didn't know what to do or really want us to sit down and talk to him. He didn't have --
- Teacher1: He didn't have anything to say.
- Teacher2: Yeah.
- Teacher1: He didn't respond to anything when was sharing parent teacher conference with him. He said okay, I'll tell the mom.
- Teacher2: Yeah.
- Teacher1: That's what he said to me, I'll tell the mom.
- Teacher2: But when he comes to pick her up, he's very affectionate with her.
- Teacher1: Yeah.
- Teacher2: He's just like hugging her and walking around the classroom and she's showing him things. Mom is just about business. You know, she handle the business and leave. But he's very affectionate with her.
- Me: So the mom talks to you guys.
- Both: Yeah.

Older teachers likewise face resistance from and hesitation in men, but from their words it is clear that they challenge fathers to do more.

OldTeacher1: But you know a lot of times guys, you know, they got this macho thing, there's a wall up. I don't need no help from nobody, you now, and that's a lot -- and that hurts them a lot, too.

OldTeacher2: Yeah, because they have that -- they don't want it --

OldTeacher1: Their ego is very --

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OldTeacher2: They don't want let that wall down.

In another classroom at a different site:

OlderTeacher: It's a change and a challenge, because we're so used to just dealing with the moms. But when we get a dad in here it's like, oh, it's like oh a—you don't know what to do now, you know? It's that kind of reaction, it's like "oh the dad is here, okay." And then it's like yeah, and then you-you kind of get used—you know, get the feel of it, it's like okay. So now, we look for it, towards the dad coming in. We look for the dad. And when you give them that push, you know, when you pour a little into them it makes them more willing to do and stick around for a minute, you know, in the morning to see what the children are doing. And, you know, they have to leave, but they wouldn't be so much in a rush to leave.

Because they see—we-we invite them, we make it inviting for them to-to be more active, to be involved, even in the classroom. It still took some time, because we were saying okay well the children—when we send the children home with stuff to do and they come back and it don't look like they did it compared to what we know they're doing in the classroom, like, you know, we're like okay dad, you know junior didn't do this. You know, and they smile and everything and, you know. So you know, we want you to let them do .

It depends on how they are approached, you know. If you don't, if you don't have that—call it magnetic spirit, you know, then it's like, they shy away. Because it's like okay, let me just drop the kid off and go. But you got to show them that you want them involved. Show them that you want them involved, then they become even more involved. But at the same time, a lot of them are reluctant because, you know, we service children and families in need. It's quite a few who maybe you know embarrassed so they won't stick around.

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This is an older teacher speaking. The "magnetic spirit" to which she refers is the authority that grandmothers of the community have over most people, including fathers. Younger teachers have a much harder time figuring out ways to engage fathers. In my experience this was most obvious in classes where both teachers were younger. Such teachers reported difficulty in getting fathers to talk to them. Younger teachers are thus more likely to accept the father's hesitation as a rule and work around it instead of encouraging him to get more involved.

Another pair of young teachers shared not only their experiences engaging fathers but also their personal experiences with men. Both were mothers of younger children. One of them had a son in the Head Start, the other had a child who had attended the Head Start in the past. Both felt that fathers generally did not want to be engaged and pushed everything on the mothers.

Teacher 1: Because the mothers are the ones who are basically with the children more.

Teacher 2: Right, they take care of those type of things.

Teacher 1: Yeah.

Teacher 2: Anything, doctors, school --

Teacher 1: Doctors, school, trips, the mothers --

Teacher 2: From my experience it's mostly the mother's handle.

Teacher 1: Even in my own personal business -- life, my -- they father's around, we're together, but he gives it to me. And the kids know they come to me for trips and for anything, they come to me. Like mom what are we going to do? They don't really go to him like daddy where are we going today, you know. So it's probably the same.

Me; Why is that?

Teacher 1: I have no idea, really. I have no idea. Even at -- even my own life, with my friends, it's just the mother whose at the forefront. And you ask daddy -- what's daddy -- ask my kids what's daddy's doing, oh he's laying on the couch.

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Teacher 2      They step over daddy to come to mommy.

Teacher 1:      The mothers just take the role of being everything in the household and the kids know that, so. And I guess because the fathers also push everything on the mother. Go ask your mom.

Teacher 2:      They be like go ask your mother, yeah.

Teacher 1:      Even here, when the fathers come in- "Oh we'll let the mother do it. The mother's going to handle it." Except for at my old site, we had one father you really didn't see the mother, you just saw him, so you know, everything would just get relayed to him.

A few days later, I was watching Teacher 1 interact with parents as they came in. It was trip day and teachers were getting parents to sign permission slips the morning of the trip because so many of them had forgotten to bring back the ones they had been given in advance. A young man came in with a little boy. "Sign this. We're going on a trip," the teacher told him rather curtly without even looking at him. She continued speaking to another parent, a mother. The man looked at the paper. "Where you going?" he asked, interested. To this she briskly replied, "His mom knows, I told her about it yesterday." The man signed the paper, said "see you later" to his son, and left.

This particular teacher has voiced her frustration about general parental participation. She was also one of the teachers who expressed to me in an interview that she did not believe fathers were getting more involved. She also greatly underestimated the number of current students who were being escorted by fathers that year.

I frequently observed teachers and family workers giving paperwork to fathers and telling them specifically to give it to the mother to fill out or to "get it filled out." These sorts of



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comments differed from their directions to mothers to whom they said, “fill this out and give it back.” Only in cases in which the father was known to be the primary guardian did their language differ. Men, however, reinforce this sphere of control. When asked to fill out paperwork, they often say, “His mother will be here tomorrow. She’ll fill it out.” Or when asked to complete the survey, they will say, “the mom will do it.” Some employees have admitted to challenging such responses. “Why can’t you fill it out; aren’t you a parent?” Others never ask the father, claiming that they do not know anything, anyway. Sometimes this is true. I once asked a father whom I always see escorting his daughter what school she was entering the next year. “Uh... that uh charter school close by.” I was not familiar with the school to which he was referring so I pressed him for more specific information. He replied, “She’s (the mother) coming now. She’ll know. She handles that stuff.”

The family workers and teachers of Head Start hold positions from which they can influence the actions and behaviors of parents, especially fathers. The employees' actions are influenced by their attitudes toward fathers and a father's role in a child's life. So, they are in a position to act according to their beliefs with the power of the organization behind them. People in an organization can wield its authority to align with their beliefs in case-by-case and personal situations. Over time, the organization itself may begin to epitomize and manifest these attitudes in its bureaucratic processes through protocol and paperwork that become part of its system of service delivery.

### The Legacy of Hiding

As I looked through old documents of family applications, I noticed that the field requiring the father’s name, address, and phone number was often left blank. In a few instances I

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saw the father's information written in and then crossed out, most likely by the family worker. Although things had changed by 2013, community members still hold on to the experiences and the life lessons of the previous generation. For instance, in a staff meeting employees argued about whether or not a father's information was necessary if the mother's information was already on file. One staff member offered the rationale that "fathers don't want their information taken." When she stated this, heads nodded in agreement.

There is a memorable scene in the 1970s TV show, *Claudine*. Claudine learns that the social worker from the welfare office is coming to visit her home. She comes in, tells the man she is with that he must leave, and begins to throw all his clothes out of the closet. She goes around the house looking for signs of his presence to remove them. Although I was not yet alive when the show was first aired in 1974, I do remember watching it in syndication. This show was mentioned in five separate interviews I had with older community members who were talking about their or their friends' personal experiences of hiding men from welfare officials.

Teacher: Well they stopped the social workers now going to the homes, because what happened, a lot of social workers got assaulted. Okay, for instance, some of my business, I have one that came to my house, my kids usually like take a toothbrush to clean their sneakers. On this day I -- unfortunately they left the toothbrush out on the sink. The lady, of course, said she had to go to the bathroom. So when she came out she says oh, you got six toothbrushes.

Me: Are you serious?

Teacher: I swear to God I'm not lying. And I said to the lady what do you mean six? It's only five people in here. She says oh I counted six toothbrushes, so you got a man. I said miss, I don't have a man in here, it's just me and my kids. And it's not until the lady left that I realized my daughters had took that extra toothbrush,

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because they had learned how to take the little toothbrush, you know, to help me save the sneaker.

Me: So did you have to go through with the whole -- the investigation because of that?

Teacher: Yes I did, because the lady looked down there and said that I had a extra toothbrush in my house, and that's when they used to come out and investigate your cases.

Me: When was this?

Teacher: This was -- okay, my daughter was born 93, 90 -- 90. In the nineties. I had just opened the case.

A family worker recalled a similar situation involving a close friend.

FWorker: I had a friend, a very good friend and she was married and every time they come to her house, she used to take all her husband's clothes and take it to the neighbors house 'til they leave. Because they went in your closet. You ever seen the movie *Claudine*?

Me: I have. That was such a long time ago, okay.

FWorker: But it did happen. They would come, go in our whole closet and all kinds of stuff and when, you know, she would bring his clothes back and she was married, but she never let them know she was married. You tell them you had no husband.

Although hiding from welfare officials is less of a valid worry now, there are new reasons to hide, such as child support enforcement and warrants (Goffman, 2009). The suspicions and fears held by men about sharing their identification with the Head Start are not completely unjustified. Courts often subpoena sign-in records, and governmental offices often call the Head Start for information. Sometimes this actually benefits the fathers when they need evidence of their involvement in custody and visitation cases. Still, the benefit of documentation is a new

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phenomenon for black men. Documentation has historically led to consequences. The perception of documentation doing more harm than good for black men is what keeps many of them invisible, even the ones who are not involved in illegal activity. The attitude of “you never know” keeps some men from sharing their information. “You never know” acknowledges that a man cannot be sure of the actions he will have to take in case a situation becomes dire. Any formal and bureaucratic means of collecting information can theoretically be used to capture someone in a situation. “You never know” also reflects a general mistrust of all government institutions due to the discrimination inherent in them, as can be demonstrated by racial profiling programs such as ‘Clean Halls’ in New York City. It also echoes the general community sentiment that the often antagonistic and hostile behaviors of police officers in urban neighborhoods frequently have unpredictable and violent results.

Though I did once see a teacher remind a father to sign his child in and the father purposely walked out without signing, my experience with soliciting fathers to participate in my study was that they seldom refused to share information. And, while fears of giving government institutions information may be legitimate in those involved in actual illegal infractions, hesitation to do so reflects more of an instilled cultural habit of concealment than an actual desire to avoid a particular circumstance. Yet because staff members at the Head Start too share this legacy of hiding, they assume that fathers do not want to share information. This belief causes many employees not to ask for information, which limits the center’s ability to support a large population of fathers. For this reason they are also unable to counsel fathers and families—too influenced by the community’s legacy of hiding black men—on legitimate and non-legitimate reasons for keeping information confidential.

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Two teachers discussed with me their view that even today men need to hide.

Teacher 1: Yeah, it's the same thing as far as the women. If you have a father in the house. You won't qualify.

Teacher 2: You can't qualify.

Teacher 1: For any assistance, because they figure oh you have a man in the house, he's bringing in some kind of money. But that might not be the case.

Teacher 2: Right.

Teacher 1: He might not have a job.

Teacher 2: Right.

Teacher 1: You know, so I know a lot of situations where, you know, people have had maybe they child is disabled and get social security or whatever, they're going to close that case once they find out there's a man in the house. And the man could be getting little to nothing, but it's a man in the house.

Teacher 2: He could've been just released from prison. It's a man in the house.

Me: But even if they, even if the man is not working, it's still -- you can't --

Teacher 2: It's a man in the house

Teacher 1: It's a man in the house

Teacher 2: Before, after they thoroughly investigate him and find out he don't have no job nowhere else

Teacher 1: Right.

Teacher 2: Then you might qualify.

Teacher 2: Yeah, they put you through the whole ringer. So a lot of the times, women, there are fathers in the home, but you won't know.

Teacher 1: You won't know. Because it hurts their case, it hurts their livelihood. But it's not a new thing, that's always been the case?

Teacher 2: It's always been that.

Teacher 1: It's always been like that. Girl you don't remember -- what is it Queen High [ph. sp.], it wasn't Queen High, was some -- some movie they have the woman had to hide all the toasters and stuff from the welfare people.

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Teacher 2: Oh you mean --

Teacher 1: I can't think of the movie.

Me: *Claudine?*

Both: Yeah.

Teacher 1 It's the same thing. She wasn't even married to the man, and she said oh you got a man in here, you don't need our services.

The historical practice of social services scrutinizing whether a male is involved and cutting off families dependent on welfare has become so ingrained in people's beliefs about government benefits that community members still believe it is a valid concern. Ms. M, a family worker, told me that it is a constant battle for her to convince parents that fathers need to be documented.

Ms. M: Oh, the dad that I seen, he wasn't even on the birth certificate. So I asked the momma why? Well she said—what she told me was oh, well he was in jail so he would never sign a thing. So I said well now he home, why you don't get him put on? She's like, oh, you know he the father, it's not, you know, why go through all that? And I'm not putting him on child support or nothing so I don't really need to prove that to anyone or whatever. But I told one of them, you know what when kids get older and they look down and see it he's going to ask you why his dad's name is not there. So you could do that now and change it. I'm like if he was incarcerated, it [the government] probably may not charge you now because he wasn't able to sign the papers.

In an era of increased public-service accountability, governmental requirements of valid documentation are tightening. Staff members are forced to confront their own assumptions and over-willingness to hide black men. In a staff meeting at which employees were being trained in new processes for collecting information, a debate ensued over families' rights to privacy and

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with information entered in the new internal database. Some employees deeply believed that “getting in the business” of families, especially fathers, hindered their ability to gain trust and build rapport. Yet, it is not finding information on families that is the true concern of employees but documenting it. Many of the employees at the Head Start create deep and meaningful relationships with families and come to know the intimate details of their lives and to ask highly sensitive questions. Family workers are challenged with striking a balance between upholding the government and the organizational requirements of documentation and empathizing with the families they serve. Their shared experience, however, leads employees to the flawed assumption that fathers want to be hidden.

Some men are indeed in precarious positions and are hiding, but these are in the minority. When trying to connect with fathers, it is often unclear whether men are hesitating to give identifying information because they are purposely hiding or because they do not have reliable information to give. I asked one father for his number while he had his telephone out. He told me that he would give me a number the next time he saw me. I assumed that he just did not want me to call him, so I let it go. The next week he came by to talk and before he left he gave me his number. I noticed he was holding a different phone. For many of the fathers participating in my study, contact information changed frequently because their cell phones were regularly out of service. Sometimes, a father’s reticence was due simply to the fact that he did not have a phone number or was not sure how long he would have it.

Gradually, both employees and families have become accustomed to documenting fathers. Social media has had some influence on their slow acceptance. The free sharing of personal information to make and sustain contacts places documentation in a more positive light,

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especially for young black men who may be isolated in their communities. As many black men are involved in starting their own businesses or promoting their artistry, they are beginning to recognize the benefits of coming out of the private margin and documenting their presence in order to obtain support and benefits. Yet, there are still many young men who remain disconnected and invisible. Some will stay in the margins until they no longer have reasons to hide. But it will take community members and organizations to help most of these invisible men see the benefits of coming out of the margins.

Whether through conscious or subconscious actions, the employees of Head Start use the organization in ways that align with their beliefs and attitudes about fathers. However, sometimes individual gatekeeping behaviors become a part of the organization's processes. This can occur in any organization that deals with children and families. In this way maternal gatekeeping can be extended beyond women to include community and societal institutions as well.

An example of this can be seen with parents who become employees at the Head Start. More than half of the current staff members are parents of former students. Many parents have come to work at the Head Start through training programs and by volunteering when their child was enrolled. Typically, women went through a program to become teachers or family workers. Most of the male employees went through the custodial training program.

When asked why more fathers do not sign up for the programs for teachers and family workers, one teacher said, "They just aren't interested in taking care of children." Patrick, a custodian who overheard this response immediately challenged her observation. "Maybe. But it's not even promoted to men. Even when they talk about volunteering here, men have always been



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told to help move things or clean with the custodians. It's only recently that they started focusing on having fathers come and read in the classrooms." The teacher replied, "Yeah—you may be right. But come on. You know. These men don't want to be messing around with children."

A couple of months later I was able to catch up with the one male teacher who worked at Head Start. He said he had decided to get into it mainly because his mother and many of his aunts were in childcare and had encouraged him to consider it as a profession. Even then, it had taken him a while to consider working with young children. He feels that most fathers simply do not realize that becoming an early childhood teacher is even an option. He noted that he had actually just had a father in his class who had decided to try it. "We got to know each other and he saw me with the kids, his kids, and it started to seem like something he could do." I asked him if he thought the father would have considered it had he not met him. "No. I doubt it. I mean unless you can get over that mental block you're not going to consider it."

Although the goal of the Head Start has been to focus on the early development of children living in poverty, it has also opened job opportunities for low-income, uneducated parents dwelling in the community. There were no formal mandates that parents be tracked for particular job positions, but men and women have been informally directed to formal and volunteer positions. Fathers have seldom been encouraged to become teachers. In fact, one custodian recalled that once when a father had mentioned the possibility, he had been explicitly discouraged by a family worker who had posed the question, "What is he going to do when a little girl needs to go use the bathroom?"

Fathers may not be encouraged to become teachers but most of the custodians are fathers of current or former Head Start children. Each of the ten Head Starts centers has at least one

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custodian on site. The custodians are very much a visible part of the daily hustle and bustle of the facility. They are often the first ones in the buildings, cleaning and preparing for the children. They are also often the last to leave, as they need to throw out the trash and lock up. During morning drop off and afternoon pick up, the custodians greet the families, often roughhousing children on the way in or out. Once children are settled into class and the halls are fairly clear, custodians routinely hang out in the classrooms with the teachers and often participate in classroom activities with the children. I noticed the strong relationships that many custodians built with families and children.

A mother who has just picked up her triplets from one site is speaking to a family worker. Avonte, a custodian, is hanging out in the front entryway holding the doors as families leave. One of the triplets walks over to Avonte and punches him in the neck and starts laughing. Avonte, grabs the boy and twists him upside down holding him by the heels. The little boy's sister comes and begins punching Avonte in the stomach as she tries to free her brother. Avonte grabs them both saying, "You don't know who you are messing with." They continue to roughhouse until the mom comes by and tells them it is time to go. Avonte hugs them both and releases them as they run out after their mother. Roughhousing between custodians and children is a common occurrence, sometimes to the chagrin of other employees.

Mr. Patrick, another custodian, is roughhousing with a little boy who is screaming with delight. School is over and the little boy is waiting to be picked up along with five other children whose parents are late. An administrative employee, an older woman who is a grandmother of a child at the site, says to Mr. Patrick sternly, "Don't play with him like that." Patrick does not look at her but keeps playing with the boy. She repeats, "You shouldn't play with him like that.

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You are getting him too riled up.” Mr. Patrick mumbles, “School is over.” But he does stop, reluctantly. She walks past me saying loudly, “I hate when he does that. He has work to do. Why he gotta go messing with the kids getting them all riled up and such.” She says this loud enough for Patrick to hear. He ignores her but I can tell that he has heard her words because I can see the expression on his face as he subtly shakes his head. The little boy tries to follow Patrick to continue playing, but Patrick will not play with him anymore. He mutters, “Go back and wait for your mother.”

Teachers and family workers often dictate to custodians when and how they can play with the children both outside and inside the classroom. The woman who reprimanded Mr. Patrick, however, was neither a teacher nor a family worker. She was an administrative assistant who has no function related to interaction with children. Her position is on the same level as the custodian’s in terms of salary and status. Therefore both she and Patrick have, in theory, equivalent authority in the organizational domain of the children at the Head Start. Nonetheless she felt comfortable dictating to Patrick when and how to play with the little boy after school hours. Patrick did not have to stop playing with the boy, but he did so with little resistance. Twenty minutes later as he came by to dump the garbage in the office I was in, I asked him to elaborate on the role of custodians with children at Head Start. He told me that most of the custodians know the children and families well. “I can’t speak for everyone, but I do play with the kids a lot. I think we all, you know, try to be father figures.” I asked him specifically about what had occurred twenty minutes earlier.

Patrick: “Everybody’s always got something to say, I don’t care. I don’t listen.”

Me: “But you did stop,” I pointed out.

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- Patrick: "I had work to do." Pause. "What you gonna do? I'm not going to fight you. Anyway, she always has something to say."
- Me: "You mean about playing with the kids.?"
- Patrick: "Yeah. About everything. I mean she's always saying stuff about being in the classrooms."
- Me: "Why?"
- Patrick: "She doesn't think I should be there."
- Me: "What do you think?"
- Patrick: "I'm not there all the time. It's not like I am keeping them from learning. I am like a dad here for all the kids here who don't have a father. Sometimes, when they are having a hard time with a little boy they will call me in to help."
- Me: "Only for the little boys?"
- Patrick: "Well, yeah. You know. Little boys need their father."

A few days later, I checked in with the teachers about their use of the custodians in the classroom. They said that in the past they have sent boys who were acting up to Patrick. Such an informal arrangement also occurred at other sites and at the two other locations that were specifically mentioned, it had also concerned boys. "What about the girls?" I asked one of the teachers at Avonte's site. "Well, the girls don't need it as much. The boys, they need to hear that rough voice. You know, from a man." When I heard this, I almost laughed. Among the many boisterous personalities at the Head Start, Avonte, a custodian at the site, is a jovial man whom I have only heard speak in quiet tones, even when expressing frustration.

Teachers, partly because of their roles as teachers but also as women, dictate who, how, and when custodians interact with children. In some ways this may be due to the lower job status of custodians even though the organizational chart level and pay scale do not support this.

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I argue that this power dynamic is intensified because of the job's domain field. With what involves children, women have more organizational authority than men. Patrick and the administrative assistant are around the same age, he has worked there longer and he knows the children and families better. Yet, she asserted and he accepted her dominance in the interaction with the child.

Custodians pride themselves on their role as a father figure. Many of them feel privileged to be in a "community-dad" type role. The dynamic of the community dad, where a father tries to support other children whose father may not be around, is very strong in black communities (Hamer, 1997). Yet within the walls of the Head Start this role is subject to the daily demands of female employees that occur before the eyes not only of the staff, but also of parents and children. The men often accept and follow these orders, thereby reinforcing the gatekeeping position of women in the organization. And everyone, including children, witness this reinforcement.

At a very young age, little children are taught male and female roles. The children at the Head Start are well aware of the interactions between custodians and teachers or family workers. To these they may add the preconceived notions they have of family roles from home. One day, I was hanging out in a classroom. It was pick up time. Children often have free time while their parents trickle in. Two girls and one boy were playing. One of the girls said, "I'm going to be the teacher. You be Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. The other girl replied, "I'm going to be a teacher too." When the little boy said, "I want to be a teacher too," one of the girls replied. "No. You a boy. You be a janitor." The boy shrugged his shoulders. The little girls told him to go clean the spill. Then they told him to go kill a roach. The boy did all the little tasks while the little girls taught, and read to

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empty chairs. The little boy found his way over to the table and looked at the little girls teaching. One of the girls' mom came in and called her away. The little boy saw his chance. He picked up a book and started reading to the chairs. The girl who had told him that he must be the janitor said to him, "No. Not Yet. Wait for storytime." The Head Start has a program called "Men who Read." Fathers are specifically encouraged to come in and read a book to the classroom of their children, usually during morning story-time. I believe this is why the little girl made this command.

Depending on the game they are playing, the boys and girls assume different roles. When playing classroom games like school or house, the girls are very vocal. Outside in the yard everyone tends to play more equitably, but even then, the young girls tend to take on a dominant demeanor with the boys. When boys and girls play together, girls tend to lead the action. One little boy told me that he preferred playing with boys because "girls are bossy."

Maternal domains rooted in gender ideology are reinforced - sometimes unconsciously - by the behaviors of adults,. I watched as a little girl grabbed a doll out of a little boy's hand. The little boy started to yell, "Henna took my toy. Henna took my toy." Henna said, "Uh-Uhn, that's my baby doll." The teacher came up and without saying a word grabbed a wooden truck lying nearby, handed it to the boy, and walked away to help another child. It all happened so quickly that I do not think the teacher even realized what she was doing. The boy looked at the truck and at Henna, who made a face at him and then turned around to play. The little boy just stood there with the truck in his hand. He then went to the play rug and sat down with the truck, slowly stroking its wheels. At first I thought maybe the doll belonged to the little girl, but later when

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playtime was over, all the toys went back into the bin. Both the truck and doll were the property of the class.

While boys are pushed away from caretaking roles, girls are pushed into caretaking roles. At a Father Initiative basketball program, two preteen girls walk in. Mr. S. says, “What you girls doing?” “Nothing,” murmurs one of the girls as the other girl shakes her head. “Okay, go over there with Jessica and watch the little kids.” Jessica, also a preteen, sits against the wall watching some of the preschool children while the older ones play basketball with the fathers. Jessica's father had told her to watch the kids earlier in the day. During the six-week program, I only saw one girl play basketball. Never did I see anyone tell a boy to watch the little kids. In fact, I saw a boy be specifically told not to stay with the little kids and to go play basketball. The nine-year old was sitting with the younger children as they played with little cars. One of the mothers told him, “Leave dem babies alone. Go play with the boys”. The boy did not want to go, but before he could make a move to obey or disobey, the woman came over, pulled him up by the arm and walked him over to the basketball court. “Put him in,” she told one of the referees. Boys were constantly being pulled away from things involving younger children, consciously or subconsciously, by men and women. As they get older and mature into adults, discouragement from activities related to child care does not stop, as in the case of Mr. Patrick and the administrative assistant.

Another poignant illustration of institutionalized maternal gatekeeping at the Head Start are the fields on the forms printed up by the organization. In the past, paperwork at the Head Start highlighted the mother. A few employees pointed this out to me and said there was an impetus to change documents to reflect the reality of family households around the time that the

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Father Initiative was established. A review of old documents reveals this change. Older documents including trip forms, health information forms and escort forms specifically listed as “mother” without a “father” field. More recent forms use generic terms such as “Escort 1” and “Escort 2”, or “head of Household”, as listed on the intake form. One teacher spoke specifically about this change in the forms.

Teacher: Because if you want the fathers to get involved, you know, then you have to—we have to initiate that, you know, put something in writing that they have to sign or for where they have to put their name. Because it’s always the mother putting in the information and then a lot of times there’s no space—at the time there wasn’t no space for—

Me: When was that?

Teacher: This was ten years ago. This was like maybe, it’s 2013—this was like maybe two thousand two, three. Yeah. At the time even I had like a difficult time getting my husband at the time involved with going to school for the kids, you know, because I was usually the one working. And if something came up in the middle of the day or happened, like if the school called or what have you and you weren’t home I felt like you go, I’m at work, why-why should I leave my job? And so that, alone, you know just drew my attention to, you know a lot of the paperwork that I would have to fill out for my kids. And you know and I used to kind of get pissed off like, why they don’t have stuff about fathers, they need to do something. You know, so that’s how it kind of got started with me.

So when I was here and I noticed you know, we had to get the parents to fill out certain forms and stuff, there’s nothing for the father. So after a while you know, I kind of brought it up when we would have our staff meetings. And I said well you know—because that was a-a topic, like how can we get the fathers more involved. And I said, I think that was when father initiative program was just



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getting off the ground. And I said well one of the ways we could do it is kind of have a space for them to, you know, fill in, because right now everything says mother, mother, mother, you know, mother's address, you know, mother's occupation, mother this, mother that. Only in the initial, what do you call that, enrollment form would ask okay, the mother's name and the father's name. But then after that it was like, you know, basically just, you know, blank when it came to the assessments and stuff like that. And then what brought my attention to it even more was a lot of times we had men that did come in and register the child and then they would look at the stuff and say well I got to bring this back I got to give it to my wife so she can fill it out. Because there was nothing there for him to fill out. So that's what kind of, you know, brought up like okay get the mother to do it. But it wasn't for them to do it.

The teacher was referring to information collected about the mother, not information about the child. Fathers were unable to provide information about the mother's work history, and because their own information was seldom requested they had to take the form home for the mother to fill out.

Because the Head Start operates at multiple sites, different locations often use different forms. Some employees, like the teacher of the last anecdote, corrected the institutionalized bias of her location's forms by creating ones that reflected the household formations of its population. For example, at Ms. M's site, documents had father fields or neutral field titles as far back as 2000. At another site, I found a form that was never updated to reflect the organization's commitment to include fathers. In fact, at one site, there was a trip form from 2009 that had a name field for "mother/grandmother/guardian". There was no field for the father. Regardless of the language of the forms, whether the mother or father are encouraged to complete the

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paperwork depends on the teacher. This shows how both individual actions and organizational processes can work together or in contention. At Head Start, much change has been made in organizational structure, but individual embrace of this structure is still a work in progress. Due to the discretion that their job demands in assisting families, employees often take actions influenced by their personal beliefs.

An example of this is one that many of the fathers specifically complain about -- the scant attention paid to Father's as opposed to Mother's Day. Even staff admitted this discrepancy. Some employees go out of their way to ensure that children celebrate fathers as much as mothers. Ms. O. is one of these.

Me: So, one thing I always hear is about the way organizations and schools, child care organizations and schools treat Mother's Day versus Father's Day.

Ms. O: Well, we all guilty of that. So, I changed it. I think like two years ago. Instead of having them, because it's so happened that mothers always have some, when it comes to the father, the father will tell me, what happened to my stuff? I'm a father and -- I feel so bad because when it's mothers or fathers day, I cook for them. You know what I'm saying? So, I said listen, from now on you're not going to have Mother's Day, we're going to have parent day. This way mothers part of your parent, it's included. And that's what I did. Last year we did parent day. In between so nobody, I said listen, we're going to have it -- you going to say it's Mother's Day, you can't say it's Father's Day, it's in between. We had that and I cooked, you know, and whoever came we had a good time. But I think society makes you focus more on the mom than the dad. But we, gradually we weaning our way out of that.

Other employees rationalize that Father's Day does not need to be celebrated as much because there are not many fathers or because the Father Initiative will do something on its own. One teacher told me she did not want to hurt the feelings of children who did not have fathers in

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their lives because there were so many of them. When looking at the escort survey of her class, only 30% of her fathers were reported as "never seen." As organizational commitments grow more welcoming towards fathers and with Mr. S.'s efforts with the Father Initiative, the Head Start is fostering systems that combat the institutionalization of maternal gatekeeping. Nevertheless this remains a challenge due to individual actions by employees who wield the authority of the organization behind him. While an annoyance or frustration may indirectly discourage father involvement in certain aspects, such as forms, or inadequate Father's Day celebrations, institutionalized actions become more dangerous when such actions attempt to prevent the father from being involved with his child.

Oftentimes the father's engagement with his child seemed to be not only at the mercy of its mother and other mothers around the community, but also at that of social institutions such as public schools and family court. Despite an ideological shift in the definition of a fathering role that includes child care, society and its institutions may still adhere to a mother-knows-best schema. This institutionalized maternal gatekeeping inhibits paternal involvement and makes it challenging for fathers to embrace practices that are unconnected to the traditional role of breadwinner. Conversely, perhaps mothers are aware of their privileged positions in society when it comes to child care and subsequently feel less compelled to work things out with their children's father if conflicts arise and formal custody or child-support battles ensue.

For non-resident fathers the state's intense focus on child-support without an equivalent deep interest in paternal visitation supports the notion of fathering as being a fundamentally economic activity. Officials use many effective methods to collect owed support payments such as withholding pay, garnering tax returns, even incarceration. Yet when the custodial parent

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repeatedly and unlawfully denies access to a child, support payments are still heavily enforced even though no similarly effective methods ensure that visitation rights are not violated. When relationships between a man and woman become too strained to negotiate childrearing, men who turn to institutions to provide equitable support may discover that such support is not available.

Another example offered by many men to demonstrate the lack of institutional and organizational recognition of their role is that in case of illness or emergency schools and medical offices will often call the mother first, even when the father has been the primary point of contact. Often this is simply because the mother's information is the first contact requested on documents such as the blue card (a card kept for every child in a New York City public school that lists emergency contact information) and employees are not necessarily aware of individual circumstances. However, sometimes this gatekeeping reflects extreme cases of structural inertia, an organization's inflexibility, or its inability to adapt to individual nuances.

When one study participant obtained a court order from a judge stating that he was no longer banned from being on school property and was allowed to have his name placed on the blue card, the school rejected the letter, stating that the language was ambiguous and that the father needed to get a revised order. The language stated that the mother "may" put the father's name on the blue card. For the school, this did not mean that she had been court-ordered to do so. Proof that he was the child's biological father and a letter from family court documenting that there were no outstanding concerns regarding the child's safety were not adequate for the school to grant him access to his child's teachers or records. The school required more clarity to overrule the mother's decision not to include the father on the blue card. Until this occurred, the father had no parental right to his child's educational records or to speak to his son's teachers

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about his progress. The school official's interpretation of the word "may" enabled the mother to limit the father's parental rights. This example differs from the one at the Head Start where Ms. M ensured that a custody and visitation order did not prevent a father from coming to her center. Other staff members may have been unclear about the difference between a custody order and an order of protection. Employees exert some discretion on how they apply ambiguous or confusing legal documents, and it is up to the parent to know or assert his or her rights.

Institutionalized maternal gatekeeping may not only be used in a mother's favor; it may also reflect the inability of institutional systems to respond to individual nuances. One of my study participants, after looking at his and his friends' experiences with gaining custody, concluded that when the man is the first to place a court order to gain custody, the woman ends up in the defensive position of trying to regain custody of her children. Despite this, he believes that the woman is still not as disadvantaged as a man in this initial defensive stance. In my study, all those single fathers who had custody had either placed the court order first or had been granted parental rights by the mother.

Winston and Corey, two fathers in long-term custody battles, both reported that during proceedings court judges had asked them about the whereabouts of their mothers (the children's paternal grandmothers) and whether these played a significant role in the child's caretaking. Their lawyers advised them that the support of their mothers would be helpful in gaining custody of their children. This propensity to ask about the paternal mother may not be without reason since the grandmother plays an intense role in the black community. However, the fact that a grandmother's involvement helps the father secure a better outcome in a custody battle indicates institutionalized gatekeeping.

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Even single caretakers like Corey, are not immune to maternal gatekeeping especially as an institution's weaknesses are easily exploited by mothers. Father rights groups have long asserted that women make false allegations of child abuse in order to gain advantage in custody disputes. Empirical evidence for this argument is mixed and faulty as investigated allegations are rarely found to be false. Most are left "unsubstantiated," meaning that no evidence has been found to support or refute the accusation. However, the number of unsubstantiated claims does offer some support of the perceptions held by some father rights groups and individual men (Brown, 2003). One call to ACS was enough to have Corey's children removed and placed with their mother. Men, however, cannot use the system as easily.

On the first day of one of his visitation weekends, Winston noticed his son's right eye was bruised. He took pictures of it and then took the child to the hospital "to get it documented." The hospital reported the bruise to the police, who reported it to ACS, which then followed up with the mother. The mother claimed that Winston's new girlfriend must have hit the little boy. ACS then alleged that Winston was the suspect for the bruise. It took four months for him to clear his name. According to Winston, the child's mother was never officially investigated. Winston took his son to the hospital to "get the bruise documented" primarily to protect himself. He and his son's mother had been in a lengthy, highly contested custody battle and she had made allegations of child abuse in the past. Both Corey and Winston's suspected abuse cases were found to be "unsubstantiated."

A single father and a former marine, Robert expresses a desire to believe in systems of order in his neighborhood. Although we have had conversations about the number of police officers in Bed Stuy and the fact that he was constantly being stopped while driving, he believes

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that being stopped is just a nuisance that will quickly be over if he cooperates. “The problem with these guys is that they try to do a lot of talking and don’t do the right thing. Just say, ‘Yes sir, No sir.’ If you didn’t do anything wrong, then there is nothing to worry about.”

When Robert asked me about the other fathers I was following, I mentioned the problems two men were having with custody. I asked him if he had ever had to worry about custody with DJ. He responded that he had not because DJ’s mother had never been that maternal and knew it. She had been happy to leave and have her freedom. He proceeded to tell me that DJ and his mother have also never really gotten along. “He doesn’t want to be with her.” Several months ago, at the request of DJ’s mother, Robert planned to send his son to her for a visit, but he did not want to go. Robert had to buy another airline ticket to send his mother (DJ’s grandmother) along with him before DJ agreed to go. He did not mind the extra cost because he felt better knowing that his mother was there to look out for DJ as his son’s mother was not particularly attentive.

Me: Why did you make him go if he felt so bad about it and you don’t trust her?

Robert: I send him to his mother because if I don’t then... She just doesn’t give me any trouble around custody. I don’t want to start something.”

Me: I don’t understand, I thought you don’t really worry about custody.

Robert: I don’t really, but she’s his mother.

Despite raising his child alone for several years and believing in systems of order, Robert still felt he would be at a relative disadvantage if DJ’s mother ever fought for custody rights. Not wanting to rock the boat, he obliged DJ’s mother’s desire to see her son despite his doubts about her ability to be “maternal.” His willingness to ensure a relationship between DJ and his mother stands in stark difference to the stand taken by other men who feel that their ex-partners keep

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their children from them for any reason whatsoever even when visitation is court-ordered.

Winston keeps receipts from a nearby McDonalds to record the number of times he has gone to pick up his son for visitation and the mother simply did not show up. In the past six months he has collected eight of these. Mark makes his girl's mother Western Union him the money she gives, so he can document the frequency and amount she contributes.

Mothers, feeling empowered by institutional maternal gatekeeping, may not feel the same need to respect the rights of their children's fathers and may at times infringe them. When this occurs, many men will try to turn to organizations that support fathers. However, many small local fathering initiatives, such as the one at the Head Start, focus primarily on how to become a better father and are unable to provide legal assistance or resources for dealing with custody and visitation issues. Many of the fathers I have met came to the Head Start's Fathering Initiative because they felt their rights were being violated. Most of them expressed disappointment when they quickly realize that the Head Start could not assist them. Corey and Winston, after being involved for over a year, stopped attending. Both expressed deep frustrations that the Father Initiative group could not offer tangible support in family court. Larger father rights groups that are capable of offering more resources are composed primarily of white, middle- or working-class, men (Gavanas, 2004) and may not best represent the interests of men who are fighting not only against gender discrimination, but discrimination based on class and race in the same institutions.

In the case of men who do not have primary custody and do not have good relationships with their children's mothers, maternal gatekeeping appears to be that much more intrusive. Malik struggles with his thoughts about maternal gatekeeping as acted out by mothers and



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society at large. In one instant message he wrote, “Sometimes you (as a dad) feel like a second class parent....like you aren't privy to certain liberties that mom is given automatically.” Some fathers spoke specifically about women at other community institutions such as public benefits offices or even the family court system. According to Winston, the discrimination he has experienced with the family court system comes from its being dominated by women. According to data from the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission of 2012, women made up 76% of the employees of social assistance agencies in New York. Social assistance includes agencies providing child youth services and individual family services such as public assistance and foster care placement. Black women outnumber black men in these agencies by 3 to 1.

“Everyone is a woman. My lawyer, who’s terrible. My wife’s lawyer. The judge. The social worker. The kid’s court appointed lawyer. It’s all biased and everyone just thinks I’m trying to get out of child support. My child is about to repeat 1<sup>st</sup> grade for the second time and his mother is crazy, has a temper and hits him. I have the photos to prove it and I’m the bad guy getting drug tested and banned from my child’s school.”

Even when fathers are concerned with the well-being of their children, they do not as easily resort to restricting the mother’s involvement in the child’s life. In the three cases I followed of fathers who had primary custody and serious concerns about the mother’s negative impact on their child, not one of them had taken any steps to prevent the mother from seeing the child. When I asked one father about his unwillingness to go that extra step despite concerns for his daughter’s welfare, he replied. “I can’t do that. Nah, it’s just not right. She’s her mother. I just can’t.” Although he may simply respect the mother-child bond, it also appears that he does not feel he has the right or the power to restrict her involvement. “What I look like tryna take a

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child from her mother? She's her mother no matter what. Yeah, she got some issues and I worry about my daughter being some foul-mouth little kid ten years from now, but no one's going to respect a man who keeps a child from her mother." As a workaround, he tries to find ways to structure his daughter's visitation with the mother so less "damage" will be done. He offers to bring the children to her instead of her picking them up, or volunteers to take them all out together. Sometimes she even spends the night at his place, when she is agreeable to it.

One teacher commented on a father's reluctance to restrict the mother's involvement. "I remember this father, he was a real good father. He loved his little girl. But the mother, hmmph, the mother, she was [sucks her teeth] just selfish. We all knew his situation. His daughter would come to school after staying with her mother and she would be cursing just like her mother. We knew when she stayed with her mother and when she stayed with her father. She would be late and tired. He had her. He could have tried to keep her all the time, but he never would." Shaking her head, "I remember him. He was a real nice guy. Real nice."

### Summary

Applying the concept of maternal gatekeeping to black low-income communities emphasizes the importance of viewing maternal gatekeeping not only at the individual level but at the level of community and society. Maternal gatekeeping is not about the individual negotiations of roles within a household because this negotiation begins with pre-set roles. The caretaking of a child is not a task a father can easily assume because the role of gatekeeper has been conferred to mothers by society or culture. Fathers, are thus negotiating not only with mothers, but also with the institutions that sanction the maternal gatekeeping role.

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Viewing maternal gatekeeping from a lens broader than that of the individual family unit enables us to understand how maternal gatekeeping can become institutionalized to the detriment of fathers seeking a parenting role that extends beyond that of breadwinner. In the black community, this is particularly important when the ideology of motherhood and the control of the maternal garden is magnified due to the legacy of absentee fathers.

A father's willingness and ability to carve out a place within the maternal walls is not only influenced by the mother of the child, but also by other mothers -- his own and his partner's -- as well as kin and non-kin, including mothers from the community in which he resides. Some mothers can only express their ideas and feelings, but other mothers are in positions to act on their beliefs as in the case of employees at Head Start and other community institutions. Ironically, fathers who are left with the gatekeeping role abandoned by the mothers of their children quickly realize that their sphere of control is still at the mercy of proxy gatekeepers both human and institutional.

What at first turned out to be a dissertation about fatherhood in black communities from a father-centric perspective revealed to me that one cannot truly understand the experience of fathers without understanding their relationships to the various women who occupy the role of maternal gatekeepers in their lives. Their fathering identity and long-term relationships with their children are shaped by it. Mothers, and all who sanction their institutionalized role as maternal gatekeepers, can significantly impact low-income black men's adoption of the American shift to more nurturing fathering roles.

### Conclusion

On any given day in Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, an observant walker will pass by men with their children, pushing strollers, holding little hands, or buying chips and a quarter-water<sup>23</sup> from the corner store. At first, the observer is likely to be slightly surprised as she tries to reconcile this observation with what she has come to believe about fathers in urban neighborhoods, namely, that not many of them are involved. Upon asking old men sitting on crates in front of the park, the staff at neighborhood childcare centers as well as the fathers themselves, she hears....*"Now that you mention it, I have noticed more fathers with their children."*

While African American fathers have long served as the prototypical image of the deadbeat father, they are at the forefront when it comes to maintaining involvement in non-intact families. This interesting dynamic points to the need for deeper insight into unique fatherhood experiences in urban black communities. A community study focusing specifically on black men in their efforts to be fathers is missing from the scholarly literature. By embedding the actions of fathers within the context of their families and community, my project contributes a focused investigation of the mechanisms through which race shapes such a distinct experience for African American low-income fathers. I find that longstanding negative perceptions of black inner city fathers, performances of masculinity, matriarchal and extended familial kin, family forms, and the female-dominated sector of family and child service provision uniquely shape the behaviors of black fathers.

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<sup>23</sup> A pint size imitation-fruit drink costing \$0.25.

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This work highlights the ways in which diverse, and at times conflicting ideas and values are enacted and exchanged between family and community members. I focus on how people and organizations in one urban community shape the behaviors of fathers and families through informal and formal practices. The overarching goal of this project is to recast black urban fatherhood as a dynamic process that is deeply influenced by societal and cultural norms as well as structural circumstances. The methodological decision to focus specifically on black fathers in a historically impoverished African American community enabled me to zoom my lens in on the interface of societal and cultural norms within structural circumstances.

Twenty years after the interviews that informed Waller's (2002) study, new norms of fatherhood, family forms, and gender are expanding the cultural repertoires of all families. My study provides timely ethnographic detail on how fatherhood in one low-income community is responding to such broad changes. The quantitative analysis I use to explain changing escorting patterns over the last decade in Bed Stuy complements my largely ethnographic account by situating present day behaviors within the context of time. My study offers detailed examples of how the changing public face of fatherhood within a community is influencing community perceptions of fathering behaviors. While Waller's study provides a useful account of the wide scope of fathering beliefs that exist in the cultural repertoires of low-income parents, my study extends that research by showing how and why particular beliefs get selected for enactment. By supplementing the experiences of fathers with the voices of extended family and community members, I provide detailed examples of the factors that facilitate and inhibit father involvement.

In chapter 2, I use data about the family escorts of children attending a local Head Start to offer a measure of public displays of fathering in Bed Stuy, Brooklyn. I find that there has been

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an increase in the number of fathers regularly escorting their children to and from the Head Start over the last ten years. Daily escorting of children to school is a major contributor to the population of adults with children out and about the streets of the local community. If we consider people as part of the community landscape, then there has been a dramatic shift in the community's backdrop. Once rarely seen with children in public, men are frequently being seen with children in present day Bed Stuy.

In the past, the absence of men and children together in the community landscape may have signaled to denizens that men and children were unconnected. Men without children reflected the perceived absence of fatherhood in a historically African-American, low-income urban neighborhood. In a sense, we can apply the theory of broken windows to the altered urban landscape (Wilson & Kelling, 1982). If the community environment can “communicate” social disorder, in this case fatherless children, then the opposite might also be true: a landscape that now frequently places black men and children together signals a new social order.

Public displays of men with children create a social mechanism for community members that allows them to observe who is “being” a father and who is not. Such scrutiny by neighbors was less likely in the past because of the general tendency of men to be without children in public. Now, men with their children in tow have shifted from a seldom seen public aberration to a regular occurrence. If someone is known to be a father yet is seldom seen with his child, his non-existent public connection to the child is evaluated against a new frame of reference that includes men, like him, who are seen with their children.

Shifts to fatherhood norms that emphasize nurturing aspects re-center fatherhood in the relationship a man has with his child. Although fulfilling traditional roles is still important, a

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man can find more honor in a position that may not include the roles of breadwinner or husband – roles once firmly affixed to the "decent daddy" moniker. Unemployed and single men can solicit positive recognition for being good fathers without the immediate negative implications of being unable to provide adequate financial support. As society begins to revere aspects of fathering focused on affection and nurturing, children, as markers for black men in the public domain, move from being a scarlet letter to a badge of honor.

Fathers are also observers of the changing community landscape. Witnessing other men with their children in public serves them as a constant reminder of a father's own relationship to his child. At minimum, seeing more fathers compels more fathers to want to be seen with their children, especially if other fathers are reaping social benefits from this display such as regular accolades for their greater involvement.

Although findings suggest that more men with children can be found on the streets of Bed Stuy, community members vary in their ability to perceive this change. Child-care workers are more likely to notice fathers with children than the average community member thanks to their consistent interactions with children and family members. A lack of acknowledgement of the trend may be due to the lack of significance placed on escorting as a meaningful measure of father involvement. A father can simply escort his child to and from school and not participate in any caretaking of the child at home. Yet, even if we assume this minimal relationship of father and child, theories of social control would dictate that escorting as public display is still fundamental to the development of new fatherhood norms, especially in a local urban community in which the narrative of father absenteeism may be more prevalent.

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It is not just the suspicion that fathers may not be taking on responsibilities beyond escorting that reinforces the belief that it is a negligible measure of responsible fatherhood. Chapter 3 finds that performances of masculinity in the presence of children contradict, and at times negate, nurturing and affectionate behaviors that are requisite for being seen as a responsible caretaker. Some men learn code-switch behaviors based on their environment. In public with a child, however, they will experience the conflict between the performances needed for two distinct groups of perceived observers. One set of observers are searching for signs of responsible fathering while the other group of observers are looking for signs of weakness. Poses suitable for new fathering are at odds with those necessary to exhibit the traits vital to a man's survival on the "do or die" streets of Bed Stuy.<sup>24</sup>

A father must learn to reconcile the two stances for different sets of eyes. The manner in which he does so is critical to the perceptions of those watching him. Local eyes see the juxtaposition of the cool pose to the fathering stance and pass judgments about the meaningfulness of his fathering. Unfortunately, local eyes also carry with them biases influenced by stereotypes of the absentee black father and the dearth of public displays of men with children in the past.

There are mixed findings on whether or not increased paternal involvement of low-income men has positive implications on child outcomes (Nelson, 2004). Yet before policy makers can try to improve the "quality" of father and child relationships, the fathers themselves must view new roles as workable and worthwhile. Public images of men who appear to have

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<sup>24</sup> "Bed Stuy, Do or Die" is a longstanding notorious slogan of the neighborhood.



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successfully reconciled affectionate fatherhood without losing their *street cred*<sup>25</sup> are convincing some men loyal to street life that it is possible to do both. Respect now given for being a loving dad may keep more fathers connected to their children and family long enough for natural bonds to strengthen and adult maturation to take place. Time and the experience and wisdom that comes along with it, often pull many away from their allegiance to street values. This may be one factor in the considerable number of fathers who were not involved in their older children's lives but are now deeply involved with their younger children, twenty-odd years later.

The new package deal (Edin, Tach & Mincy, 2010) also increases the attractiveness of fatherhood and its feasibility after a relationship ends. Yet, within cultural repertoires strong norms of having an intact family still exists. Chapter 4 shows the strategies that men employ to feel successful as fathers and as integral members of their families even in instances when financial contributions are inadequate. Finding small ways to feel like a provider, smooth-talking, not saying no to children, and relying on a narrative of being an entrepreneur assist in the psyche of men dealing with their irrelevance as significant contributors to their children. Alternative roles in the household that include the fulfillment of non-economic duties, such as child and household caretaking, are challenging for both men and women if they continue to ascribe to traditional family roles. Even if they do not, allegiances to traditional roles may be used by men to make excuses when they do not want to take on domestic roles. Or, used by women when they wish to ridicule men or garner sympathy from others when conflict arises.

Women, as gatekeepers of the maternal domain, are in the position to discourage and encourage their male counterpart's efforts. Some women, inspired by shifting norms and perhaps

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<sup>25</sup> Street credibility

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facing the reality that their men simply cannot provide financially, are switching from encouraging to demanding that men take on a greater role in child and household caretaking. The economic liberation of women takes on different implications in the black community. What may also be needed is domestic liberation. Black women, long internalizing the script of the independent black mother who is both provider and nurturer, have not only to open up space for men, but demand that they occupy it. Nonetheless, such demands can easily fall on deaf ears as some men may not be ready to step up. This is as much a learning curve for women as for men.

Black families have historically been led by unmarried women. Thus, the script of the independent, strong black mother has in time become solidified in the minds of many in black communities. The unfortunate corresponding image of the black father, invisible on paper and in the landscape of the street, has reinforced the idea that women are the sole guardians of families. Consequently, a much higher fence thus exists around the black maternal garden, one made of stronger wrought iron and secured by a tighter latch. Its gate is guarded not only by the individual mother, but collectively by her mother and any other mothers whom she happens to rely on for support.

Chapter 5 shows the influence that grandmothers and other women in the community exert on maintaining their esteemed position over the maternal domain, which, at times, may result in keeping men out. Grandmothers, in their revered role, provide counsel on whether men should be allowed to enter the maternal garden based on their beliefs and past experiences. While some men recoil from additional demands, some in fact embrace them and find that being connected to their children comes with benefits. This is not a quick and easy process, as evidenced by the fathers in this study who had fatherhood thrust on them when their children's

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mothers abandoned their gatekeeping position. Over time, many of these fathers “stepped up,” though acknowledging the unlikelihood that they would have stepped up had their children's mothers not stepped down. This points to the significance of women’s actions on a man’s efforts as a father.

Chapter 6 demonstrates how local social service organizations, made up largely of women, may be prone to reinforcing the gate at the individual discretion of employees. It highlights the importance of formal mechanisms and local organizations - especially those that deal with families and children – in encouraging male entry in the maternal domain. While many men must deal with having limited power in the maternal domain, black men may be more vulnerable to formal institutions that enforce a woman's power. For example, in cases that involve the police or allegations of abuse, institutionalized discrimination may make it easier for black men to be presumed guilty. A belief in this bias and respect for the maternal connection may also make it unlikely that men will use such sources of formal support when conflict arises.

While there are many new reasons for low-income black men to embrace fatherhood (i.e. its greater visibility, the possibility of reconciling poses, connection to children without the need for monogamy) many obstacles remain. Encouraged by new social norms and public displays by peers, more low-income black men are dipping their feet into the fatherhood well. Community institutions are in the position to take advantage of men's willingness to include fatherhood as part of their public persona and to develop the new appeal of fatherhood into a lasting bond. However, an organization's success lies in its ability to provide meaningful support for fathers. Men who find that their local father initiative pays lip-service to the importance of fathers but cannot offer tangible support during attempts to secure visitation or custody may eventually give

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up their fight. Childcare organizations must also reconsider their staffing structure because, like the old community landscape, the absence of men in caretaking positions may implicitly discourage men from the maternal domain.

In 2014, the opportunities for low-income men to embrace fatherhood are greater than ever. Organizations and institutions are gradually establishing formal means to ensure the rights of fathers. Society is becoming more accepting of roles of fatherhood that do not prioritize breadwinning, and non-intact family forms are increasing among the mainstream population. At this point it may be too early to say what these changes may mean for the future of black children and families. Yet, the greater presence of men with children in a community landscape that once lacked such public displays may be a signal of promising future trends. Perhaps positive escorting trends are part of a virtuous circle, a complex chain of events that will gradually reinforce itself through a feedback loop. My study suggests that men with children as part of the daily community landscape contributes, in fact, to such a reinforcing feedback loop.

While black fathers and their children may benefit from new acceptable means of achieving the goals of decent fatherhood, the benefit for all of society may be even greater. A recognized connection between low-income children and their fathers forces us all to look beyond the stereotypes of the deviance of black men and see them in a light to which we are simply not accustomed. The strategies men employ in reconciling their social worlds in order to become decent fathers are no longer relegated to the privacy of their homes. The nurturing stances they assume may offer some respite from the cool, dominant poses they have learned to project to the outside world. Individuals and organizations must look beyond the cool posturing of low-income black men to see the little hands they are now increasingly likely to be holding.

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Responses can either trigger the release of such vulnerable clasps or nurture the tenderness with which the little hands are held.

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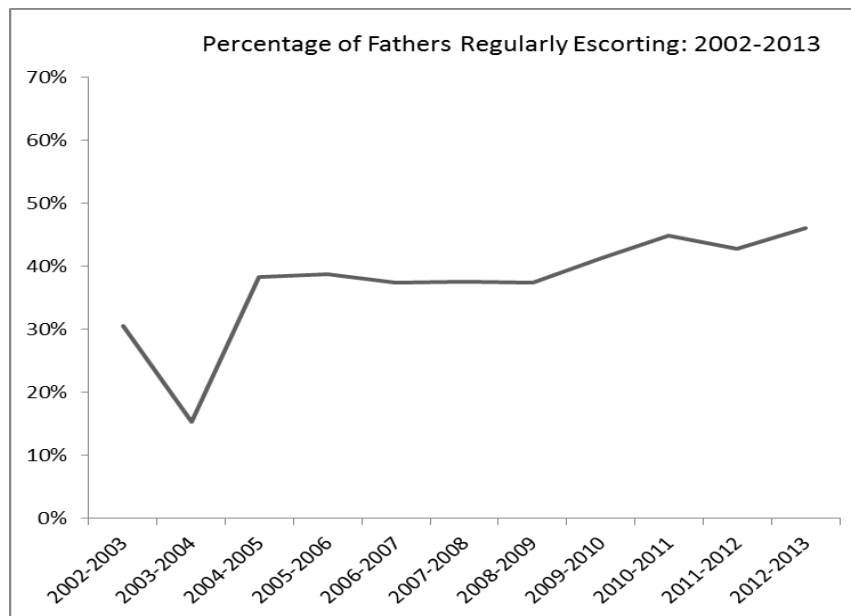
**Table 1: Teacher Recollection of Escorts from 2002-2012**

| Academic Year | Children Recalled | Children on Rosters | Children Enrolled | Teacher Recall Rate | % of Sample Population |
|---------------|-------------------|---------------------|-------------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| 2002-2003     | 275               | 363                 | 577               | 76%                 | 63%                    |
| 2003-2004     | 52                | 78                  | 577               | 67%                 | 14%                    |
| 2004-2005     | 238               | 299                 | 564               | 80%                 | 53%                    |
| 2005-2006     | 266               | 307                 | 564               | 87%                 | 54%                    |
| 2006-2007     | 262               | 314                 | 550               | 83%                 | 57%                    |
| 2007-2008     | 370               | 390                 | 554               | 95%                 | 70%                    |
| 2008-2009     | 386               | 425                 | 491               | 91%                 | 87%                    |
| 2009-2010     | 387               | 410                 | 551               | 94%                 | 74%                    |
| 2010-2011     | 412               | 436                 | 559               | 94%                 | 78%                    |
| 2011-2012     | 425               | 451                 | 559               | 94%                 | 81%                    |
| 2012-2013     | 445               | 463                 | 577               | 96%                 | 80%                    |

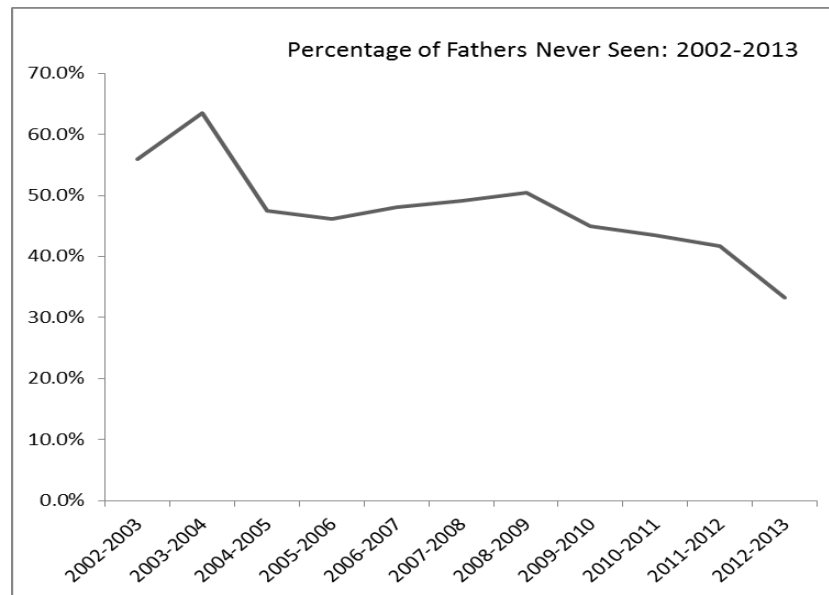
Note: *Teacher Recall Rate* is the percentage of children that teachers could remember from the total number of children on the rosters they reviewed. *Percentage of Sample Population* is the percentage of children recalled out of the total number of children enrolled in the organization.

**Table 2: Fathers regularly escorting to and from the Head Start from 2002-2013**

| Year      | Father written in (#) | Children Recalled (N) | Fathers Written In (%) |
|-----------|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| 2002-2003 | 84                    | 275                   | 30.5%                  |
| 2003-2004 | 8                     | 52                    | 15.4%                  |
| 2004-2005 | 91                    | 238                   | 38.2%                  |
| 2005-2006 | 103                   | 266                   | 38.7%                  |
| 2006-2007 | 98                    | 262                   | 37.4%                  |
| 2007-2008 | 139                   | 370                   | 37.6%                  |
| 2008-2009 | 145                   | 388                   | 37.4%                  |
| 2009-2010 | 160                   | 387                   | 41.3%                  |
| 2010-2011 | 185                   | 412                   | 44.9%                  |
| 2011-2012 | 182                   | 426                   | 42.7%                  |
| 2012-2013 | 205                   | 445                   | 46.1%                  |

**Figure 1: Percentage of fathers regularly escorting from 2002-2013****Table 3: Fathers never seen from 2002-2013**

| Year      | Father Never Seen (#) | Children Recalled (#) | Fathers Never Seen (%) |
|-----------|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| 2002-2003 | 154                   | 275                   | 56.0%                  |
| 2003-2004 | 33                    | 52                    | 63.5%                  |
| 2004-2005 | 113                   | 238                   | 47.5%                  |
| 2005-2006 | 123                   | 266                   | 46.2%                  |
| 2006-2007 | 126                   | 262                   | 48.1%                  |
| 2007-2008 | 182                   | 370                   | 49.2%                  |
| 2008-2009 | 196                   | 388                   | 50.5%                  |
| 2009-2010 | 174                   | 387                   | 45.0%                  |
| 2010-2011 | 179                   | 412                   | 43.4%                  |
| 2011-2012 | 178                   | 426                   | 41.8%                  |
| 2012-2013 | 148                   | 445                   | 33.3%                  |

**Figure 2: Percentage of fathers never seen from 2002-2013****Table 4: Annual percentage change of fathers regularly escorting and never seen from 2002-2013**

| From        | To                  | Regular Escort | Never Seen    |
|-------------|---------------------|----------------|---------------|
| 2002-2003   | 2003-2004           | ---            | ---           |
| 2002-2003   | 2004-2005 (2yrs)    | 25.2%          | -15.2%        |
| 2004-2005   | 2005-2006 (1yr)     | 1.3%           | -2.6%         |
| 2005-2006   | 2006-2007 (1yr)     | -3.4%          | 4.0%          |
| 2006-2007   | 2007-2008 (1yr)     | 0.4%           | 2.3%          |
| 2007-2008   | 2008-2009 (1yr)     | 0.0%           | 2.7%          |
| 2008-2009   | 2009-2010 (1yr)     | 10.1%          | -11.0%        |
| 2009-2010   | 2010-2011 (1yr)     | 8.6%           | -3.4%         |
| 2010-2011   | 2011-2012 (1yr)     | -5.2%          | -3.8%         |
| 2011-2012   | 2012-2013 (1yr)     | 8.2%           | -20.4%        |
| <b>2002</b> | <b>2012 (11yrs)</b> | <b>50.8%</b>   | <b>-40.6%</b> |

**Figure 3: Annual percentage change of fathers regularly escorting and never seen from 2002-2013**

