

# Work, Love, and the Family Involvement of African American Men<sup>1</sup>

Vania Penha-Lopes

[Since I was eighteen, I've had] about fifty jobs [laughs]. All the job-hopping I did, been fired, coming up as a Black young man, it's so hard to get a real good, you know, a really good job where you can be able to retire, or work on a job for twenty years or more, so at the time you really try to find what's best for you. I was in and out of jobs, construction, messenger, to surveyor. I did a lot of jobs. I did so many odd jobs, I tell you. (Curtis, a thirty-one-year-old married father of a six-year-old girl)

Considerable variation exists among African American men regarding their involvement in family life. Based on in-depth interviews with forty-five African American fathers,<sup>2</sup> I identify three types of involvement: "sharers," "helpers," and "shirkers." Sharers are those who contribute to at least half of family work (i.e., child care and housework); helpers do at least a third, but fewer than half, of the tasks; and shirkers participate in less than a third of the tasks.<sup>3</sup>

Analysis of the data shows that childhood experiences and recollections are significant but do not fully explain men's choices regarding their participation in the division of family work (Penha-Lopes 1999). This article examines the impact of men's prior and current job experiences, as well as their love relationships, on their family involvement.

When most respondents were boys, they expected to grow up and have a steady job. Unfortunately, this was not always the case, as the above quote illustrates. Although Curtis's long list of jobs was not the norm, his difficulty in finding gainful and viable employment was. As a whole, the fathers in this sample had had an average of over nine jobs in their lifetimes. Moreover, 60 percent of the sample (57 percent of sharers, 50 percent of helpers, and 80 percent of shirkers) had been, at some point, out of work or had difficulty in finding jobs. Overall, then, many of these men had unstable employment histories, which reflected the well-known systematic barriers that Black men experience in the job market, such as lack of stability, low earnings and status, and high labor-force dropout rates (Bowman 1991). From an individual standpoint, their histories also reflect their past job satisfaction and perceived inequalities due to their racial status.

At some point in their lives, several respondents were employed in the secondary labor market. Like Curtis, many did non-unionized construction work, only to find themselves out of a job when construction was finished. Others, such as Norman, admittedly "had an attitude" and would give up too easily if they did not get along with their employers. Yet others attributed their labor-force woes to racism; as Melvin put it, "Being Black, independent, and strong posed a threat."

As Wilson (1978) argues, unemployment and underemployment decrease a man's feeling of self-worth, make him less marriageable in the eyes of women (due to the strong societal script for men to be economic providers), and also make him more socially isolated. On the other hand, as Gerson (1993) has shown, the drive to succeed at employment can reduce men's family involvement solely to economic provision.

Even though most respondents were at interview time either gainfully employed or were furthering their education in order to improve their chances at the job market, such a history of unemployment had left a mark on their parenting, both in terms of their actual involvement in their children's lives and in their self-perceptions as fathers. Shirkers differed from both sharers and helpers in that they were the most likely to have experienced unemployment and job turnover; shirkers were also the least likely to be satisfied with their current employment situation. In comparison, men with a history of steady employment were most likely to be moderately involved in family life.

## Results and Discussion

### *On the Extreme: Shirkers and Their Work Experiences*

More than their counterparts, men who shirked involvement with their children had followed two discrete work paths, both of which had pushed them away from family life. One path reflects a downward spiral, characterized by lack of education, a series of dead-end jobs, unemployment, drug abuse, and imprisonment. The other path began with the pursuit of higher education and progressed toward steady career success. Despite their dissimilarities, men who had followed either path shared the most salient aspect of their conception of fatherhood: a strong adherence to the breadwinning ethic.

### *Downward Spiral*

For 60 percent of shirkers (13 percent of the total sample), unemployment had been, until close to interview time, a constant. Mostly high school dropouts, their limited educational achievements left them at the mercy of low-paying or seasonal jobs with few opportunities for advancement. Twenty-eight-year-old Grover, a "jack of all trades" at a pet shop, had had some eight jobs. At twenty, having been fired from a job he enjoyed because his boss was indicted for tax evasion and needing to support his pregnant girlfriend, he went to work for a food service. What he considered the meaninglessness of his duties (stocking the food machines) disheartened him: "It didn't feel like something I wanted to do continuously, plus it seemed like I was going nowhere. I was there for five months; I'm still doing the same thing. I wanted to move on, at least move inside the kitchen, you know? The cook did all of that, but they just kept me on the floor."

As a result of their low tolerance for what they saw as stifling jobs, they would often feel frustrated and leave a job even if they did not have another one lined up. As Norman, a thirty-two-year-old college student, recounted:

I was always out of work. If it wasn't seasonal—and remember, most of the work I did was in construction—so if it wasn't seasonal it was because I didn't like the job, I couldn't get along with the employer, the employer didn't like me, whatever, and I had a very short level of tolerance. I just couldn't tolerate much of anything. So whether I was hungry, starving or the rent was due, I would walk off the job in no time.

These men faced a conundrum: while they would not hesitate to leave jobs, supporting themselves was so fundamental for their self-identity that they would often feel ashamed of collecting unemployment. Again, Grover explained:

Whenever I've been unemployed, I just do what I had to do to make some money.

*Did you go on public assistance?*

No, I mean, I've been down there and I was ready to go through it and everything, but I just never went through it. There's more that I can do besides sit around and collect some money and wait on a check 'cause there's other ways to make some money other than waiting on the government to send me some money. I did electrical work, I did, you know, painting, anything that people needed done, I would do.

“Doing what needed to be done” eventually led most of these men (including Grover) to engage in criminal activities in order to make ends meet. Paradoxically, temporarily rejecting mainstream means—even at the risk of imprisonment—gave these men a modicum of pride that came from taking control over their financial situation in a way that they could not on the job market. In so doing, they assumed the “negative side of being cool” (Majors and Billson 1992).<sup>4</sup>

But if delinquency was a financial form of coping with unemployment, it only aggravated these men's emotional distress over it, for it went against their moral outlooks. Clarence confided, “It was painful because I didn't like what I had to do—necessary to survive, so that was kind of painful. So you'll get a better understanding, [in] 1990 I was incarcerated. That's the part I didn't want to tell you.” While in prison, Clarence started to take college courses; when I interviewed him in 1993, he hoped to open a day-care center after he graduated with a degree in social work. Similarly, Lionel related the shame he felt, and how his mother's support eventually propelled him to resume a legitimate life: “It wasn't good. Emotionally it was something against my upbringing, right? And my mom, she never really, how would you say, looked down on me for it, but she would always give, like, little hints that I could do better, and ‘Why don't you stop doing what you're doing?’ and I put myself out of that rut.”

Often men tried to thwart their loss of self-esteem stemming from their failure on the job market by relying on drugs and alcohol. For Norman, that resulted in years of homelessness, after his “dismayed” relatives and friends would no longer lodge him. For Frank, his drug addiction had led to HIV infection and the impossibility of finding employment. Remarkably, Frank assumed responsibility for his situation; a drug counselor, he believed he had been given a new chance in life. At the same time, he shared with the other shirkers an intense disappointment over unemployment: “To me, I miss working. Yes, I do, 'cause I like to be independent. . . . The best things since I'm not working? I really can't answer that one. I don't like it. I don't.”

Although at interview time all men in this category either had jobs or were furthering their education, their work experiences had taken a toll on their relationships with their children. Years of addiction or incarceration prevented them from living with their children or even being available for continuous child care. Most important for them, because these men defined fatherhood primarily as the ability to provide for their children's future, their lack of financial means had led them to diminished contact. Thus, Grover dreamed of getting “a decent job, like maybe with the city or something that I can at least say that I'm not going to get laid off or

anything like that.” With a better job, he hoped to be able to afford to bring his eight-year-old son, who lived in the South with his mother, for visits, as well as send them money more consistently. Frank, with no hopes of ever having an income again, poignantly asserted:

I was never involved. I wasn't a father to my [twenty-four- and fourteen-year-old] daughters. . . . You put your pants on every day, but that don't make you a father, to be a man. Because I didn't want no kids, and when they came here, I was scared and didn't want no responsibility. . . . Even though the second one came, but I really want to work forever, I figure, my income has stopped. That's what I'm talking about, I'll be honest with you.

### *Focus on Financial Success*

Financially successful shirkers also defined fatherhood primarily as prosperous breadwinning. When asked about the effects on their family life of working part-time or not working at all, they invariably cited the difficulty in paying bills or child support, but not the possibility of spending more time with their children. Davis, who at twenty-four was an ambitious financial salesman, only saw his wife and two-year-old son on weekends because he wanted to build his clientele by working overtime; he believed he could enjoy his son later, once his commitment to his job had taken him “where I want to go, if that makes any sense.” Thus, it should come as no surprise that, like all shirkers, he had to be reminded twice to go beyond the obvious consequence of unemployment (i.e., diminished income):

*Suppose you weren't working at all. Other than money, do you think your home life would change?*

Probably, definitely would.

*How?*

There's no money coming in.

*But other than that.*

Just spend time with the family, but then, you know, what good is that if you can't support 'em?

*Has this ever happened?*

No, I've never been out of work.

Financially successful shirkers differentiated themselves from the less successful shirkers in that they had established careers. All professionals, their jobs required overtime, which further curtailed their daily involvement with their children. But since, unlike the other subgroup, their higher income allowed them to pay for child support, they focused their attention on economic provision rather than on the guilt they sometimes expressed for not always being available. Thus, just as Davis hoped to spend more time with his son once he felt more secure about his career,

Duke, a detective, had at times worked an additional job in order to guarantee his children's education:

I have worked part-time off and on for a long time. There were times like, I'm divorced, so I had to pay  $x$  amount of dollars in child support, and one [son] was going to Catholic school, and other things. Of course you don't just get off by paying child support; you pay extra clothing and different things like that. . . . I'm trying to get myself together to send my older son to college.

Like other less involved fathers, Duke claimed, "I would like to spend more time with [my children]. I feel guilty for not." Yet when probed about what they would most like to do if they had extra time, shirkers cited activities that did not involve their own children. Duke planned to go to law school; Lou, who owned an international investment firm, would like to "study more languages, martial arts, computer training." Ironically, some of them would prefer to be mentors—to other people's children. As we have seen, Clarence, who, as a college student, had a relatively large amount of free time, did not use it to visit his sons often. Instead, he worked as a part-time grade school tutor "not for the pay. I do it because I like it and I feel that I'm helping the children." Similarly, Duke dreamed of dedicating his life to neglected Black children, rather than trying to build a closer relationship with his own:

I would like to work with kids, especially young Black men after seeing what I do, and not having the time there to spend with my kids and knowing that that affected them. I would like to probably dedicate the rest of my life to working with these kids, but there's no money in it. Not that I would be doing it for that, but you have to survive. I think that's one of the courts I would go into once I get my law degree, and also fight discrimination.

### *Involved Breadwinners: Helpers and Their Work Experiences*

Like shirkers, most helpers also gave primacy to the breadwinning ethic. They see work as a defining characteristic of their masculinity and thus necessary for their well-being. Otis, a minister of music at a Baptist church, typified that attitude:

*Suppose you were not working at all. Do you think your home life would change?*

Yes. Personally, I could not not work. I mean, I would have to work. I would have to do something. I mean for me, psychologically, a man, a husband, a father cannot sit around the house. I even teach my sons, when they like to stay in the bed, you know. A man cannot afford to sleep late. You can't cultivate that habit of sleeping late, even though they don't have a job. If it's a school break or whatever and they've been pretty busy, fine, but you cannot develop a consistent habit of getting up at ten, eleven,

twelve, one, two o'clock. You just can't do that. And particularly at the adolescent stage, because whatever they do, it's going to carry over into manhood. Unless they really put forth a concerted effort, that's not going to change.

Like shirkers, helpers firmly believed that a man has to work, preferably at a job with a pension plan, health benefits, and, as Curtis put it, "a little piece of money . . . because the whole thing about New York is the more money you make, the more you're going to spend. . . . On my check stub all I can see is deductions, deductions." Unlike shirkers, however, helpers interpreted working and breadwinning as the ability to "take care of [their] families financially," but hopefully not to the detriment of spending time with their children. In fact, the few who had demanding careers tended to emphasize the autonomy and flexibility that allowed them occasionally to take time off to attend a school function or tend to a sick child. Nat, a bank vice president, explained how and why he treated his career as a job, while he was fully aware that his title conferred him many benefits:

Over the years I would say that a career has become a job, okay, and I mean that by saying that the priority has fallen because there are other things that are more important, but I see the necessity of having a job to get the money to do the things you want to do with your life. So I really don't treat this as a career. I know I've been blessed in terms of getting the title of vice presidency, which really doesn't mean a lot except because of the pay and the benefits, but I don't think it's the same as other firms where you're vice president. But I'll take it. I'm not turning it back in. . . . There are activities that I can't really avail myself of, although I try like with school programs to either take a half a day or take the day off so I can be present because I want to have a presence for my sons. I don't want them ever to feel I was not around when they needed me, so I make a concerted effort to be there when I can.

Perhaps because of their attitude about work, helpers tended to be more satisfied with their jobs and to have had steadier work paths than shirkers. Even when they had experienced unsatisfactory conditions in the workplace—such as racism, low pay, or lack of autonomy—they had been less likely to quit for fear of being unable to provide for their families. Nickolas, a school custodian who disliked most of his previous jobs because "they didn't pay good money," illustrated that point:

I think in a country such as this, any human being should be making more than ten dollars an hour no matter what they're doing, because if it's somebody trying to take care of a family, take care of himself, minimum wage should be ten dollars or more. You can't live off of four-fifty or five-fifty, six dollars an hour, you can't do it. I wouldn't directly quit, but I'd establish a bad relationship with the job, complaining, not being happy because to me a person like me, I want the best for mine, I want the very

best for them. And working, some kinds of jobs wasn't bringing the best, so it just brings a bad attitude.

The pressure to provide for their families was indeed strong for helpers. They were, however, three times less likely than shirkers to have experienced unemployment and less likely to have felt emotionally stressed about it. It could thus be argued that helpers were more resourceful than shirkers. Not only did they not attach a negative meaning to collecting unemployment, but they were also more willing to rely on odd jobs rather than resort to criminal activities. Moreover, the relatively few helpers who had faced unemployment could count on their partners and relatives for financial and emotional support. Curtis, who had been laid off from several jobs until he landed his position as a school security guard, credited his wife (a transit worker) for keeping him afloat:

My sweetheart, she always had a good job. Me, I was bouncing around, and, you know, you want to feel like you're part of helping out too. It makes you feel bad inside, you know. . . . There's nothing to feel great about when you don't have a job helping out, trying to do the best you can. But she was always great, she'd always tell me, "Just keep your head up, something's going to happen." Yes. Always. She was supportive, you know, always on my side, tell me to forget about that and just to move on and things are going to come your way pretty soon. Always said she was there for me.

Nickolas, whose wife was a homemaker when I interviewed him, relied on his extended family so as not to change their home life so drastically when both found themselves out of jobs:

There was one time I was unemployed and my wife was unemployed, we moved with a family. Maybe nine, eight months. It didn't last long; we was back working again and boom, back in our own. Me and my wife always had our own, even when times were hard, we always had our own. She moved in with her mother, I moved in with mine, but our mothers live right next-door to each other, so it was like we never were away from each other. [Our kids] would stay around her mother and father's house or my mother's—we were that close, where you would walk from one house to the other like stepping here, over there.

This emphasis on keeping their families together in the face of adversity further differentiated helpers from shirkers. As an extension, when asked about the effects on family life of working fewer hours or not at all, many helpers tended to focus on the benefits of having extra time. Thomas, a post office supervisor who felt he needed to build a closer relationship with his wife, said:

Other than the money, I would love to be around my family. My wife would probably say I get on her nerves, but there's a lot for her to learn

about me, and working as much as I am, I don't touch bases with those things that are valuable in a relationship, you know. I do regret working the hours that I do, and sometimes I work sixteen hours a day. . . . I think that's why the family breaks down because they be working together, but they don't know each other's values, and it's sad.

In sum, as a group, helpers stood in between shirkers and sharers: like shirkers, they valued breadwinning, but also like sharers, they subordinated it to the primacy of family life.

### *Family Is Everything: Sharers and Their Work Experiences*

The most involved fathers (51 percent of the total sample) were the least likely to have a strong breadwinning ethic. This is not to say they dismissed work. In fact, on average, they worked only one fewer hour a week than shirkers did.<sup>5</sup> Like most American men, sharers recognized the need for a stable income. Hathaway, a forty-two-year-old accountant, was perplexed at the supposition of not working at all: "I've got to think about it. Not working, not having an income. I don't know, that's hard to—I've had to work all my life to actually think about not to." At the same time, even more than helpers, and regardless of the status of their occupations, most sharers would rather spend time with their children if they had the economic resources; in other words, sharers valued parenting over and above working. Abdul, a nineteen-year-old dispatcher, promptly showed his preferences were he able not to work: "Of course, who would wanna work?! Right now I could be chillin' with my daughter. But I have to support my daughter." And Eugene, a thirty-five-year-old director of equal opportunity employment at a prestigious downtown firm, pondered:

If I wasn't working, I think, how's my mood? Stressed because I'm not working or, I mean, if I wasn't working by design then I could spend time, more time with my family, you know. I would be like a domestic mom; I would make sure the house was clean, stuff like that. And I would devote time to community affairs, try to be a help that way.

What is the source of that orientation toward work? First, most sharers had not had long bouts of unemployment; when faced with it, then, they were not as likely to see it as a threat to their self-esteem because they believed they would find another job soon and because they had economic and emotional resources from their partners and extended family. Holman, a twenty-nine-year-old data-entry operator who described himself as "pretty domestic," focused on the positive side of not working when he had been laid off from his long-term job three months before our meeting, by preparing for job interviews and taking care of his home and children:

Being unemployed was great! It allowed me to spend more time with my wife and my sons; it gave me a chance to be just "Dad." The best thing about not working was the time with my family—very special. I don't mind working, but I do value time with my kids. It was also a good time to learn about the job market 'cause when you're working, you can't see. The

worst thing about not working is the reduced income. But my wife was supportive; she saw me keeping busy.

Unlike Holman, Chester, a twenty-two-year-old doorman, remembered being very depressed when he was out of work for a year: “I started to feel useless, and it’s very frustrating. I really don’t wanna do that again. Ever.” Additionally, he found out that his fiancée was pregnant. But, like Holman, Chester could count on help; he lived with his mother, who supported him financially (and continued to contribute two-thirds of the household income) and encouraged them to go ahead with the pregnancy. Since then, Chester and his fiancée have lived with his mother, who also was helping them with the care of their baby son.

Second, sharers had had the most stable work histories of the three groups of fathers, even though they were slightly younger than helpers and shirkers: not only had they had less job turnover, but they had worked at their current jobs somewhat longer than their counterparts. Sharers had had an average of only 5.5 jobs, as compared to 11.2 for helpers and 14 for shirkers. The mean number of years sharers had spent in their current jobs is 6.1; both helpers and shirkers have spent fewer than 5 years.

Third, almost all sharers, as opposed to about a quarter of shirkers and helpers, enjoyed what they did, be it working or, for 17 percent of them, going to school full-time. George, a thirty-three-year-old reclamations technician, was satisfied with his job, even though he wished he had a higher income:

I like it, but I don’t like the pay. I’m supposed to get a raise, but then they laid people off; I can’t ask for no money, they might lay me off. But it’s a good job because, see, when I first started working, they cross-trained everybody so I know how not only to do my job; I know how to do everybody else’s job too. But it’s a nice, it’s one of the largest minority-owned companies in the world, and it’s all right.

For sharers, who were more likely than their counterparts to be employed in middle-class occupations, more important than the pay was the flexibility that a job could afford for men to dedicate more time to their families. That included the lack of overtime requirements. Eugene explained why he “loved” his job:

Oh, I love it. I wouldn’t do it if I didn’t like it. I have to do this. It’s frustrating, you feel like you’re out there by yourself, but I can give something back to the community, I can help people that another person may not take the time to help, so there is some satisfaction there. And I have a very flexible schedule. That’s another thing which I like about it.

The few sharers who were not employed also enjoyed their situation. Almost all lived with primary breadwinners (one was married to a fellow college student) who had agreed with them that their temporarily focusing on their education to improve their job opportunities was to the family’s advantage. Unlike most helpers, who found complete financial dependency on a woman problematic, these men saw that chance as “a blessing.” Kevin, a former housing activist,

was taking two years off work to finish his graduate education and to be the primary parent for his year-old son. He and his live-in partner decided to rely on her income as an administrative assistant at a large university because of its health benefits and free use of a gym that offered parent-baby activities. After that period, they planned to move to the South, where he believed there were better job opportunities in his field of urban planning, and also because they wanted to raise their son near Kevin's extended family. For him, the worst thing about not working was the isolation from "people, discussing issues, day-to-day problems." However, that was not nearly as important as the special relationship he had built with his son:

[My time] is pretty evenly divided between him and school. I have the equivalent of what would be considered a full-time load. And when I'm not going to class and studying, I'm taking care of him. I love it, because I really enjoy academics, I've always had a bent in that direction, I've just resisted it more to be an activist as opposed to an academician because academics doesn't have the greatest reputation in our community. . . . The other thing is that it has just been an incredible year of being with this guy. It's unlike any other time in his life; he's totally dependent, and every day I can see little things where he's becoming increasingly independent, which is great.

Like the other heavily involved fathers, Kevin defined himself as a caretaker, in direct opposition to the stereotypical image of the breadwinning father:

I'm not just the guy who comes home at evening hours from work, you know, throws him in the air a couple of times, and goes to bed, but I'm involved in the whole thing. I feed him, I change him, I bathe him, we have little swimming classes, go to the park with him, we feed the squirrels. Summertime is just, we spend half the day out in the park lying on the blanket, playing, talking, and it's almost been a luxury because most times you can't just stop working. So I'm happy with what I'm doing right now. I know it can't last. The timing has just been, really, I've been very fortunate. I consider myself fortunate.

Kevin's words highlight the final factor in sharers' orientation toward work: the still-rare chance to have meaningful relationships with women who can reverse roles with them (Gerson 1993). Though that was not possible for most sharers, they were often co-breadwinners; a third of them lived with women who earned more than they did. Therefore, as a group they felt the least pressure to provide for their families; their drive to succeed in the workplace was secondary to being as strong an influence on their children as their mothers, to the point where they postponed career improvement until they felt they had sufficiently "cultivated and nurtured" their children.

This "child-centered" attitude (Coltrane 1996, 62) started early. Although sharers were only slightly more likely to have planned their children's births, they were much more likely to have taken time off from work when their children were born and to have attended their births.<sup>6</sup> Typically, they described those experiences as "beautiful," "blessed events," and "suspenseful

like a roller-coaster ride.” Since several had taken birth classes, they claimed not have been at all nervous, even though doctors did not always believe them. As Brook described:

A beautiful experience: holding my wife’s hand, going through it. The doctors thought they’d wait and see if you’re gonna faint or not ’cause she had to have a C-section, and I’m not squeamish that kind of way. I watched the whole procedure. Yes, and it was a blessed event when my son came out. I was good with it.

In sum, heavily involved fathers subordinated work to the process of parenting, a practice that started even before their children were born.

### *A Special Case: Custodial Fathers*

A small group of fathers (22 percent of the total sample) were raising their children as single fathers. Nationwide, the proportion of such fathers is small but continues to grow among Blacks and Whites (Bennett and DeBarros 1996). These men subordinated breadwinning to family life even more than the other heavily involved fathers.

A small minority of them shared custody of their children with their ex-wives and relied on the women’s higher income for child support. Divorced from career women, they believed their relationships were friendlier than during their marriages and that the joint custody was a mutual decision, stemming from their pre-divorce close bonds with their children. Marvin, a thirty-five-year-old part-time tutor at a community center, was unemployed when his three-year-old daughter was born. When his wife (whom he calls “Miss Independent”) went back to work, he felt it was only natural that he would be the primary parent:

I was Mr. Mom all day. Yeah, changing diapers and making the bottle, making the formula, waking up at four in the morning, feeding her; she had like a three-hour cycle. It seemed like I’m the one who got no sleep. Every hour, on the hour, something like that.

*Was she breast-fed?*

No.

*So you really had no excuse.*

I had no excuse. I had to get up regardless. She was cool. She did all right. She’d let me know like, “Hey, Pops, I’m wet. I’m sticky, time to feed me,” and she’d drink her bottle and go back to sleep; I loved that. That’s what I loved, because she didn’t have colic—nothing like that. I’m so thankful she didn’t have that.

Three years later, Marvin’s daughter lived with him during the week. Because he paid for her private school while his ex-wife paid for all other expenses, he considered himself both a

breadwinner and a caretaker. While he liked that arrangement, he noted that it required flexibility in schedule that many fathers cannot afford:

I'm involved a lot, 125 percent. I even braid her hair sometimes. She loves coming to [my job]. . . . We've got it split down the middle. It's joint. So it's not like she's going to be snatched from here. . . . It's rare if you ask me, but it all balances out. It's been working really well. I mean, it doesn't work for everybody because I've got the flexible hours—that's what I like about it. My hours are really flexible.

In contrast, a larger group of custodial fathers tended to have sole custody of their children. Their relationships with their children's mothers were more problematic, with some men citing abandonment by their ex-wives and others claiming that the women were not fit to be parents; only a few remained friendly toward the women. They were also better off economically: mostly in middle-class occupations, few had experienced unemployment.

More than other fathers, these men have chosen to concentrate on parenting, trying as much as possible to organize their work schedule around their children's time. For those who, like Melvin, owned businesses, that was easier to accomplish:

Well, I sacrifice the time to spend with them, period. I'd rather not, how to say it, I don't want to say that I'd rather not work bottom line, to deal with cultivating and nurturing my children than to work. Now I think, you have to stabilize your child from birth until probably fifteen, sixteen, if not eighteen. The demands and the social ills of our society require that there be strong positive parental influence as well as adult influence.

For the ten years prior to our interview, Kendrick had been working as a courier for the same company because he could make his own schedule:

It's like I'm my own boss: I come and go when I want. When I know my rent is due, I'm gonna work; I'm gonna work nine to five like that! You know? But sometimes I make sixty-seven dollars in one day, and I'm not going to work two, three hours, see. That's how the job is. I'm working on commission. And that's the only reason I've been there ten years, because I come and go when I please. Say if I take a vacation for a year, I can go back; I don't have to punch no clocks or nothing.

While Kendrick's work schedule provided him with less income, he felt that was less important than the time he allotted to his children:

I want to give my children so much because sometimes I can't afford to give them the things I want to give them, you know; but that don't leave me nothing, because as long as I'm giving them my time and my love, I

think that's what they need, because they so happy to see me when I come in.

But most fathers were not in a position to enjoy such flexible schedules. Thus, Levert, Sam, and Leon had relied on extended-family help, after-school programs, and, to a lesser extent, paid day-care centers. Sam, an engineer with a prosperous employment history, separated from his second wife when their son (now a college-bound seventeen-year-old) was a year old. About five months later, she filed for alimony and child support (even though he was the one with the child), which prompted him to countersue for full custody. When he won, he asked his first ex-wife, with whom he had three children and a friendly relationship, to take care of his baby son on weekdays for about a year:

For that period of time, *she* took care of him. She was working, and she had a babysitter during the day. But she was the main person during the week; on the weekend, he stayed with me.

*And when he was with you, did you have babysitters?*

No, I didn't. I did *everything*.

We can see that, were it not for his supportive ex-wife, being a full-time single father might have been much more difficult for him. In addition, Sam's steady income allowed him to pay a babysitter on weekends and even maintain a talking home computer, which he programmed to wake his son and remind him to brush his teeth. Today he admits that "[the computer] sort of made things easier for me."

Being a heavily involved single father thus requires not only a child-centered attitude, but also social support and the right working conditions. Opting for involved fatherhood is an increasing trend among American men. As the several examples show, however, it also demands a workplace that recognizes the changing needs and preferences of working parents. At the end of the century, that was far from a reality for most men, regardless of race or socioeconomic class. Analyzing the employment choices of involved fathers, Gerson (1994, 245) notes:

Contrary to the stereotype of the work-obsessed man, most involved fathers preferred to work less and parent more. . . . Given the right conditions, many men would forgo traditional jobs in favor of more control over the conditions of work and the ability to spend less time at it. For involved fathers, more flexibility and control meant more time for family life, not just more time for leisure. The right conditions rarely obtain for those who would choose to spend less time at work and more with their families, however. The obstacles that constrain men's domestic participation not only make parental equality an elusive option; they also perpetuate the belief that all men prefer it that way.

## *Women and the Social Construction of Fatherhood*

How do women affect men's involvement in family life? The men's accounts of their participation in family work as well as their attachment to work repeatedly referred to the women in their lives. Men's love relationships with women thus provide the last piece in the puzzle explaining their involvement in child care and housework.

Men see women as agents in their social construction of fatherhood.<sup>7</sup> Men who were happy to find out they were going to be fathers even if they had not planned the pregnancy and also felt they had a solid relationship with their lovers tended to have at least a moderate level of involvement with their children. In other words, they saw fatherhood as an extension of their positive relationship with their partners. For instance, Steve, a helper with two young children, had been living with his girlfriend when she announced that she was pregnant. Even though he told me "it was not a decision, just something that happened," he claimed not to have any regrets because he "really cared for her." Abortion was not an option:

That's something you regret. Not myself, because she's the one who had to go through it, but I think you regret it a lot. You start asking yourself questions, and what if we would have had it, so . . . I think about this here: If you don't want to have any kids, don't, but don't sit there. Take the precautions so that you don't. But once you have it, and you become pregnant, you go through with it, know what I'm saying? Don't start that whole process of having abortions and all that.

Seven years later, when he became a father again, the circumstances were different because, by that time, he and his girlfriend had gotten married and planned the pregnancy. As he put it, "Well, that one was planned. That one was planned because I figured, another child by this time, and she also said she wouldn't have any more unless we got married. And we did get married, and this was the best time now; we'd have one more and that would be it."

Lamont, who referred to his live-in girlfriend as his "common-law wife," also focused on the happiness underlying their lack of pregnancy planning:

*What made you and your wife decide to have the baby then?*

I guess—I don't want to say this—maybe it was love, I don't know.

*So, was it planned?*

I didn't plan it. I didn't plan it. . . . I don't know if she planned it. It's a great thing that happened. I'm happy it happened. . . . We was happy when we found out she was, I was happy; we'll keep it and be good parents to it. We'll love it if we can't give it anything.

The fact that men with the highest child-care involvement were also most likely to live with their children's mothers further strengthens the argument that women mediate fatherhood. Otis, a helper who married his wife because she was "very caring, ambitious, fun to be with" and who enjoyed being a husband and a father, illustrated those feelings when he talked about the time his wife was expecting their first child (at interview time, they had two teenage sons):

I think we were just ready for children. We had been married almost three years. . . . I felt excited, oh Lord, yes. Yes indeed. . . . When I found out that we were going to have a child, I just assumed it would be a boy. I went out and bought clothes for a boy, and toys. I had a shrine I had set up with all of his stuff waiting for him to arrive. I was real excited.

In contrast, men with a history of conflict with their children's mothers, who felt trapped by them once they learned of impending fatherhood, and who thought that the pregnancies were a mistake, were more likely to leave the women and to avoid involvement with their children; in other words, they saw fatherhood as an extension of their negative relationship with their partners. Norman, a shirker who only started having a relationship with his fourteen-year-old daughter during the year before our interview, illustrated this point:

*What made you and the mother of your child decide on having the child then?*

We didn't, . . . this was I can say an accident, but purely being irresponsible. At the time I blamed her for being older. Now there's no excuse for me saying well, I was seventeen, I was a minor, that had little to do with my level of knowledge back then. As you can tell, a seventeen-year-old dating a twenty-three-year-old, you have to have some type of knowledge about life to conduct yourself in a relationship like that. . . . I was angry the minute she told me she was pregnant. I felt she was trying to trap me. I said once again she was the older one, I assumed, I never asked her that she was using birth control. And we didn't talk for three months, so when I saw her again, she was pretty much like four or five months pregnant. We had a rather distant relationship then.

As research has shown (Arendell 1986; Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991), a bitter divorce or separation may also lead men to become "non-fathers." Often men claim that their ex-mates do not allow them to be part of their children's lives because they have a problem separating out the role of lover from the role of parent. This shows that fatherhood is intimately tied to power relations between men and women. As Duke, a shirker, maintained:

"The [mothers of my kids] carry the attitude [that] how I feel about them [is the same way I feel] about my kids. And it's totally different, and I have a big problem with that, and it is kinda hard for me to explain it to them. I'm not sure that they're capable, either one of them, capable of understanding. And a lot of things are based on that.

Thomas, a helper who was remarried, also blamed his ex-wife for his lack of involvement with their daughter. Although he says he had been "very pleased" with the birth, and that he spent so much time with the newborn that his wife was jealous of them, his hesitations about the

marriage and interference from his mother-in-law led him to seek separation when his daughter was two years old. While he obtained joint custody of the child, he ceased to spend time with her because he felt his ex-wife was thwarting their time together, and, feeling guilty over the divorce, he opted for not fighting for it:

I don't know what it was. We went to court together; I thought she would let me see the kid. She kept the kid away from me, and I used to go pick my daughter up and she would call the cops, saying I didn't bring the kid back on time, this and this, and so I just refrained from going to visit. And I promised this lady I would take her to court, but I didn't want to fight her in court. I don't think that should be the place. I don't like that, so I didn't, so she grew up. . . .

The longer men harbor negative feelings toward their ex-wives, the longer it may take them to have satisfying relationships with their children. Men may overcome those feelings if they succeed in forging satisfying new love relationships. In a minority of cases, men remarked that their new wives had encouraged them to attempt to reconcile with their former partners as a way of developing a bond with their children (Penha-Lopes 1995).

Arendell (1986) notes that it is common for men to ignore their children from former marriages once they remarry and have more children.<sup>8</sup> But I have found that, in some cases, men do not count children from previous relationships as their own when their ex-partners form new bonds with other men. In their minds, if a man ends a relationship with a woman, he may relinquish his paternity and expect her new partner to become her children's *pater* or "daddy," defined as a man who raises a child (Stack 1974, 157). In my interviews, men did not mention the existence of such children until I asked them whether they had any natural children who did not live with them, thus excluding them from the number of children they had, why they had decided to have them, and how they felt about become fathers at the time. That is clearly exemplified by Curtis, who had mentioned only a five-year-old daughter he doted on—the child he had with his wife—up until that point. As I probe him about this older child, notice how he keeps reminding me of his ex-girlfriend's marriage as the reason for his lack of involvement:

*Do you have any natural children who don't live with you?*

Yeah, I got one. A boy. He's about nine now.

*Who does he live with?*

He's in the South. He lives in the South.

*With his mother?*

Yeah.

*You hadn't told me about this son before. What made you and his mother decide on having the boy?*

Well, at the time, I was moving, I was going north anyway at the time, so, I really, I heard about it later. . . .

*So you're not close to your son?*

No, I'm not that close to him. I went down there, you know, to say hello to everybody. . . . She's married and what-not. . . . She's very happy and her family is very nice and happy, so I just go and say, "How are you doing?" to everybody. . . .

*Has your son come to New York to visit you?*

Naw, nooo.

*Why not?*

[Doesn't answer.]

*Does your daughter know him?*

Uh-uh.

*Why not?*

She don't know him. I'm gonna take her over there. We're supposed to go back in April, like March right before Easter, go over there. . . .

*Your wife, how does she feel about this?*

She don't know about it. I don't tell her.

*This is definitely anonymous; I don't even know your wife's name. You didn't consider the relationship you had with your son's mother—it wasn't a serious relationship?*

No, no, it was you know, one of those things, you know. It happens.

*So how often do you see him?*

I don't see him that often, 'cause I don't go down South that often. I think I went down South, since the ten years I've been up in New York, about twice, and most of those times are short visits.

*But did you see him those two times?*

Naw, I just went by there, but I didn't see him. I told you she's married.

*So are you satisfied with not seeing him, or not, how do you feel about that?*

Well, it's all right with me. When I go down there, if I really wanted to see him, I'd actually bring him by. . . .

*So you went back twice, and you saw him those two times—*

Naw, I haven't seen him.

*You never see him.*

No.

Further proof that this man did not see himself as the father of his natural son was his answer to the question "What do you think of yourself as a father?" He said, "I tell you, I love that guy. I

really do. I think I'm doing a pretty good job." In other words, the fact that he had not even ever met his son did not interfere with his conception of himself as a father. And the root of that idea is his lack of relationship with the mother of his son.

Conversely, women can also affect men's conception of fatherhood through the children they bring into the relationships. Specifically, if a man embarks on a serious relationship with a single mother, he may opt to raise her children as his own. Holman, a sharer who at interview time was in the process of formally adopting his older son, explained:

I wanted to be with [his mother] and I was in love with her, and I said, "This kid is going to like me" [laughs]. And I'm not going to buy him off, either. Because that doesn't work. My mother being a single parent, I met guys who were interested in her trying to buy us off, and that turned me off. I said no, this is not going to happen.

*How did you feel about becoming a father at that time?*

It was scary because . . . he's not yours, you know, in reality. I love children, but I had to deal with the fact that this is someone else's child first, and they would spend *some* time together, so I didn't want to be in the way where it would confuse him, and that was just a rough time. I didn't want to hurt him in any way, and I had to be careful of how I attacked that, also knowing that [his mother] and I had just started dating. . . . We hadn't made a decision yet where we were going to be husband and wife, so I may not be this child's father . . . and then it happened, we got really attached and then she and I broke up for a period and that was really rough. . . . So there were times when I didn't see her, but I would just see him. Or I would call and I would go up there to see him when she was at work, whatever. And I'm glad I stayed in contact.

Even though only 7 percent of the men had faced this situation at interview time, 24 percent had been partly raised by stepfathers, 73 percent of whom felt those men had treated them as well as they would a biological child.

Custodial fathers (22 percent of the total sample) also traced their status to their relationships with women. In comparison with those who were moderately involved in their children's lives, highly involved single fathers (70 percent of custodial fathers; 16 percent of the total sample) were more likely to live with their children full-time, to have a higher income than their ex-wives, and to believe their ex-wives had chosen to terminate their relationship. They thus justified their living arrangements as an attempt to minimize disruption of their children's lives.

### *Women and Men's Involvement in Housework*

Like in the majority of African American families, less than a third of the men who had live-in partners (18 percent of the total sample) were sole breadwinners, but 10 percent (7 percent of the total sample) were economically supported by their partners.

Sole and primary breadwinners were less likely to divide housework equally, focusing instead on activities that they enjoy. Lionel, for example, admitted that his girlfriend did practically all of the housework, but still insisted that their division was “cool,” since she was a full-time homemaker and part-time student: “[She had] too much idle time and, you know, that’s not good. She’s not in school now and she’s currently not working, so it gives her a sense of responsibility.” Nickolas, who was proud of “not having to do nothing,” conceded that he was much more active when his wife, now on disability, worked full-time—a charge that his wife (who was present when I interviewed Nickolas at home) did not deny.

The reality of shared breadwinning (i.e., women’s employment status and relative income contribution) makes men feel the need or the pressure at least to help out with domestic work, which lends support both to social structural theory and to cultural norms of gender behavior. For instance, Norman, who was married to a primary breadwinner, did most of the housework and felt their division of labor was fair. Although he noted that “there are a lot of things that she’ll hem and haw about it to death,” mostly their division “doesn’t bother me. It’s just she and I here, and who else is going to do these things? And besides, we’re here for each other, but like I stated before, it doesn’t bother me. I feel good about them.” Jerry, who was married to a fellow college student and part-time worker, said they strived to keep housework evenly divided and avoided conflict by telling each other when they felt the division was becoming unequal.

### *Conclusion*

The work trajectories of these fathers support the argument that difficulties on the job market push men away from family involvement (Wilson 1978). But they also confirm the thesis that men’s outlook on work influence their choices regarding their parenting (Gerson 1993). In synthesis, paternal involvement is both a function of structural constraints and of men’s interpretations and actions about them. After all, not all men with a history of unemployment and high job turnover were uninvolved, and not all men who had been successful in their careers were heavily involved fathers. Of paramount importance, then, are how men construe their experiences on the job market and how they relate to the breadwinning ethic, which, until very recently, was the only acceptable definition of masculinity. As Chester put it, “I think fathers’ role in raising children seems almost downplayed, like, you know, the opinion is that the father is supposed to be the breadwinner, and I don’t agree with that.” Indeed, 91 percent of sharers, three-quarters of helpers, but only 44 percent of shirkers agreed that a married man’s first responsibility is his family. Marvin’s attitude is typical of more involved fathers: “No, a married man’s chief responsibility shouldn’t be his job. A married man’s chief responsibility should be himself and his family—himself as a man. And himself for the family, because without the family, you’re not a man.”

Attitudes are not born in a vacuum. The emotional and financial support a jobless father receives from his social network differentiates between men who take an active role in their children’s lives and those who do not, so that unemployment, compounded by a lack of support, turns men away from family life. In comparison, shirkers were the most socially isolated of the three types: they were not only the most likely to have had longer bouts of unemployment and dead-end jobs, but the least likely to have received help from family and friends. On the other hand, most sharers and helpers had had help with their parenting—especially in financially problematic times—from their partners, mothers, relatives, and fictive kin. This shows that the

workplace and the family must be better integrated, because less involved fathers are partly so because they lack a supportive network of friends and relatives.

In addition to men's interpretations of their work experiences, the ways in which they view the women in their lives also affect their family involvement. According to the fathers' interpretations, women affect men's behavior by mediating their connections with their children, either as former lovers or as current partners. For the respondents who lived with women, their participation in housework was also related to their partners' employment status. Thus, whether or not they live together, men and women continue to influence each other's lives by helping define parenthood.

## References

- Arendell, T. (1986). *Mothers and Divorce: Legal, Economic, and Social Dilemmas*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bennett, C. E., and K. A. DeBarros. (1996). "The Black Population." <http://blue.census.gov/population/www.pop-profile/blackpop.html>. Retrieved October 28, 1996.
- Bowman, P. J. (1988). "Post-Industrial Displacement and Family Role Strains: Challenges to the Black Family." In *Families and Economic Distress*, ed. P. Voydanof & L. C. Majka. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Coltrane, S. (1996). *Family Man: Fatherhood, Housework, and Gender Equity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Furstenberg, F. F., Jr., and A. J. Cherlin. (1991). *Divided Families: What Happens to Children When Parents Part*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gerson, K. (1993). *No Man's Land: Men's Changing Commitment to Family and Work*. New York: Basic Books.
- Majors, R. G., and J. M. Billson. (1992). *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*. New York: Lexington Books.
- Penha-Lopes, V. (1995). 'Make Room for Daddy': Patterns of Family Involvement among Contemporary African American Men." In *American Families: Issues in Race and Ethnicity*, ed. C. K. Jacobson, 179–99. New York: Garland.
- Penha-Lopes, V. (1999). *It's a Family Affair: Parenting, Domestic Participation, and Gender among Black Men*. Unpublished dissertation., New York University.
- Penha-Lopes, V. (2006). "'To Cook, Sew, to Be a Man': The Socialization for Competence and Black Men's Involvement in Housework." *Sex Roles* 54, nos. 3/4:261–73.
- Stack, C. B. (1974). *All Our Kin*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Wilson, W. J. (1978). *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

---

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the III Biannual Conference of the Association for the Study of World African Diaspora in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on October 6, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> This study is based on in-depth interviews I conducted with a non-random sample of forty-five Black fathers of minor children between 1993 and 1996 in order to explore the questions as to how and why Black men participate in family life. All respondents lived in the New York metropolitan area at interview time. Referral and snowball sampling were the major sampling techniques used. Two-thirds were either

---

married or cohabiting with women, and most lived with children. About two-fifths were employed in white-collar occupations, 20 percent were not employed, and the remainder were blue-collar workers. Respondents ranged in age from 19 to 49; close to half were in their thirties to early forties.

<sup>3</sup> See Penha-Lopes (2006) for a detailed description of the methodology.

<sup>4</sup> Majors and Billson (1992, 4) define the “cool pose” as “the presentation of self many black males use to establish their male identity. Cool pose is a 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.” This form of masculinity, the authors argue, results from the frustration Black men experience out of their historically low social and economic status. On its positive side, the cool pose produces creativity, dignity, and social competence. On its negative side, which includes delinquency, it “can . . . inject strain into his most intimate relationships, get him in trouble with authorities, and reinforce an aloofness that stems from living too far from his deeper emotions” (37).

<sup>5</sup> The mean number of hours per week that sharers spent at work was thirty-seven; helpers had the longest time at work, at forty-two hours per week.

<sup>6</sup> In contrast, most shirkers said they only learned of their children’s births later because they no longer had a relationship with their mothers. Helpers were more likely to attribute their absence to having arrived late to the hospital or to having been barred from the labor room by doctors. In general, fathers of teenagers said it was uncommon for men to be allowed in the delivery room in the late 1970s, when their children were born.

<sup>7</sup> I am indebted to Steven L. Nock (1996, personal communication) for this insight.

<sup>8</sup> A respondent in Arendell’s study of divorced mothers thus described her ex-husband’s attitude and behavior regarding their children: “He used to have them come visit him, but he just has no room for them anymore now that he’s remarried. It’s like the kids don’t belong in his life anymore” (1996, 116–17).