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## **Black Single Fathers: Choosing to Parent Full-Time**

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# Black Single Fathers: Choosing to Parent Full-Time

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**Abstract:** *This ethnographic study uses the narratives of African American, single, full-time fathers to explore the motivations precipitating their choice to parent. While the fathers had in common a number of demographic characteristics, such as full employment, residence, and support systems, which factored into their timing of and ability to take full custody, none of these are salient in their own narratives expressing why they wanted to be full-time fathers. Instead, their main motives centered on fulfilling a sense of duty and responsibility, reworking the effects of having had weak or absent fathers themselves, wanting to provide a role model for their children, and fulfilling an already established parent-child bond.*

For decades, in the popular media as well as in academic literature, African American men have seldom been viewed in the context of a family. At best they are treated as a neutral sociological construct—the black male—or worse, as an unattached danger to society (Cochran 1997; Gadsden and Smith 1995; Madhubuti 1990; Mirande 1991; Rutherford 1988; Staples 1986). While an increasing number of studies have looked at married or cohabiting black men in two-parent families (Ahmeduzzaman and Roopnarine 1992; Allen 1981; Bowman 1993; Bright and Williams 1996; Fagan 1998; McAdoo 1981, 1988a, 1988b, 1993; McAdoo and McAdoo 1994; Mirande 1991; Taylor, Leashore, and Toliver 1988; Wade 1994; for instance) with respect to their child-rearing values, provider role, or gender relations, most recent studies (e.g., Barnes 1987; Christmon 1990; Furstenberg, Morgan, and Allison 1987; Furstenberg and Harris 1993; Hawkins and Eggebeen 1991; Lerman 1993; Lerman and Ooms 1993; Marsiglio 1987, 1991a; Miller 1994; Mott 1990; Rivara, Sweeney, and Henderson 1986; Robinson 1988), and the burgeoning number of government programs on “responsible fatherhood” as well (Johnson and Sum 1987; Pirog-Good 1993; Savage 1987), have concentrated on single black men who are nonresident fathers. This focus, along with the high rates of divorce, cohabitation, and teen and nonmarital births among African Americans as a group, has led to a close association between the terms “black father” and “absent father” (Dowd 1997).<sup>1</sup>

Fortunately, a number of these studies (Danziger and Radin 1990; Seltzer 1991; Taylor et al. 1990; Wattenberg 1993) have indicated that the lack of marriage or coresidence with the mother does not necessarily indicate parental noninvolvement, as might be inferred from the term “absent.” Indeed, while recent research on fathers in general indicates that fatherhood is turning out to be a

much more varied and complex arrangement that defies simplistic categories, no study has looked at single African American men who parent full-time. One would think they are nonexistent, but most data indicate that they exist at a higher rate than white single dads.

Eggebeen, Snyder, and Manning's (1996) study of National Survey of Families and Households data indicates that single-father families represented 15.5 percent of all single-parent families with children and that single-father families are increasingly formed by fathers who are young, have never been married, and have low incomes and fewer children. In each decade from 1960 to 1990, they found nonwhite children more likely than white children to reside in father-only families. Eggebeen, Snyder, and Manning's reading of census data indicated that by 1990, 3.3 percent of white children would be in father-only families, while 5.6 percent of black children would be. However, 1992 census data showed that 3.4 percent of black children seventeen years old or younger lived in father-only households, compared to 3.3 percent of their white counterparts (Diverse living arrangements of children 1993).

The confusion of these numbers is frequently exacerbated by the use of a myriad of terms—*single father*, *unwed father*, *father only*, *lone fathers*, *father custody*, and *male-headed families*—without distinguishing among them. For instance, father-custody families can include fathers who have remarried,<sup>2</sup> and since white men have higher rates of remarriage than black men, the percentage of white single-father custody may be overstated (Zill 1988).

In any case, the proportion of African American single-father families seems to be at least as high as, or higher than, that of white single-father families. Nevertheless, the glut of studies focusing on single-father families, whether qualitative or quantitative, has focused on white fathers (see Barker 1994; Bartz and Witcher 1978; Chang and Deinard 1982; DeFrain and Eirick 1981; Gasser and Taylor 1976; George and Wilding 1972; Gersick 1979; Greif 1982, 1985, 1990; Greif and DeMaris 1989; Hanson 1981, 1986; Hipgrave 1982; Katz 1979; Keshet and Rosenthal 1976; Mendex 1976; Orthner, Brown, and Ferguson 1976; Robinson and Barrett 1986; Risman 1986; Rosenthal and Keshet 1981; Santrock and Warshak 1979; Smith and Smith 1981; and Tedder, Libbee, and Scherman 1981). Not one has focused on African American single fathers with custody of children.

Despite the fact that African American men tend to be disadvantaged in terms of education, employment, income, and health in comparison to white men (Davis 1999), it appears that they are as likely or more likely to take on the task of single parenting. Hence, with the cultural turn in societal expectations for men to increase their domestic duties, it is important to begin to determine (1) what factors enable and motivate such men to choose to be single custodial fathers, (2) how

they parent and the effects on their children, and (3) what benefits and disadvantages attend to the fathers themselves. This article addresses the first of these questions. How did these fathers decipher their ability to choose, weighing their own free will against perceived or real constraints? To what extent do past experience and present circumstances mesh together or constrain one another in the individual's decision-making process?

## **Method and Sample Profile**

Combining the qualitative research principles of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) with limited quantitative data, this research focused on identifying key elements in the process buttressing the choice to become full-time fathers. In addition to tracking some quantitative factors (education, income, age, etc.), I analyzed the qualitative data for emergent themes regarding the motivations and reasoning behind the decision.

Given the relatively small percentage of black men in the U.S. population and the even smaller percentage of single custodial fathers, recruitment for this research has been a challenge. A sample of ten fathers was obtained through so-called convenience methods, primarily word of mouth. This sample was recruited mostly in Milwaukee and Madison, Wisconsin, through various local organizations, such as schools, neighborhood centers, adoption agencies, parenting resource centers, churches, and Islamic centers; single-father Web sites (one of the fathers has a personal Web site, in which he details his parenting experience); the fathers themselves (snowball sampling); and advertising in local alternative newspapers and radio stations. The participants are the first ten respondents in an ongoing ethnographic study of African American, single, full-time fathers. While future respondents are still being located and contacted, interviewing has been suspended while further funding is secured.

Fathers are admitted to the study based on their racial identity and custodial status. "Racial identity" is self-identified. Fathers may be biracial (as was one in this sample), but if they identify more with their African American heritage (as is often the case with biracial individuals), they are considered African American for purposes of the study. "Custodial" is defined as the child's residing with the father at least five days per week. Custody may be formal, that is, legalized through the court, or informal, arranged by the parents or family without the courts' intervention. Custody may also follow a nonmarital birth, divorce, adoption, or widowhood. In this case, of the ten fathers, three were divorced from the mother of the custodial child. Six had never married the mother, though most of the nonmarital group had cohabited with her for some period of time.<sup>3</sup> One had custody through adoption. None was a widower. About five of the fathers had legal custody—that is, custody

adjudicated by the courts. The other five had made informal arrangements with the mother through mutual agreement that father custody would be best in their individual situations.

Fathers first filled out a quantitative questionnaire that elicited demographic information about themselves and their children and addressed their family background, parenting style and philosophy, existence and proximity of support system, distribution of household labor and child care, and a limited number of measurable outcomes for child and father. On completion of the questionnaire, fathers participated in a two- to three-hour in-depth interview with the primary researcher or an assistant. Two of the interviews were conducted via e-mail, but all of the other interviews were conducted at a mutually agreed on location, most often the home of the father. The interview included questions designed to explore the motivation and factors considered in choosing to parent full-time, definitions of and priority given to various parenting roles, and satisfaction with choices made and outcomes. For example, fathers were asked, “Why did you become a full-time father?” “How did your own childhood family affect your choice to parent?” and “What role did your employment (residence, family support, etc.) play in your decision?” Interviews of these ten men occurred from the end of 1999 through 2000.

In this sample of ten fathers, several themes emerged as more important considerations than others. A sense of duty and a desire to fulfill parental responsibility underlie the decision for a number of men. The father’s family of orientation, particularly his father, was a major motivational factor. A preexisting bond with the child and the desire to be a role model for the child was noteworthy for a number of the men. In addition, while employment, family support, the number and gender of children, and competency of the mother were factors weighed in consideration of father custody, the fathers’ narrative accounts indicate that these held little meaning for them in terms of their motivation to take custody.

### **The Choice or Duty to Parent**

Defining choice and weighing the individual pushes and pulls of the decision to parent is a murky area. All individuals have a “choice” to parent—that is, they have the choice to conceive or not (excluding cases of rape and infertility), to abort or not, to adopt or not, to rear a child or give it up for adoption. However, because of the biological differences between men and women and the way our society has structured gender roles, men have more of a choice than do women as to whether to take on a full-time parenting role once a child is born. Excluding the adoptive father in this sample, five of the remaining nine fathers had continuously coresided with their children since birth; that is, upon divorce or separation from the mother, they immediately took custody. However,

four of the fathers experienced a period of time when they did not have custody of their child, and three of those four fathers were able to use that time to complete a college education and find stable employment, whereupon they requested custody. That time off for personal development is an option less frequently available to mothers.

Maternal incompetence is another factor further muddying the concept of choice. While the definition of incompetence could be debated (though not here), three of the mothers would be considered incompetent by most legal standards; two were drug addicted and one had had several nervous breakdowns. A fourth mother had been living in an overcrowded residence, which led to the baby's injury, so the court placed the infant in foster care. A fifth mother was defined by the father as incompetent because she was unemployed and living with friends. Nevertheless, all the mothers except the first three mentioned above saw their children regularly, often spending one or two nights a week together or helping with weekly child care.

Maternal incompetence is often cited as a factor limiting the father's choice, but options other than father custody, such as foster care or informal adoption by other family members, do exist. Considering the numbers of African American children who are either under state custody or have been informally adopted by extended family members, non-father custody is a well-known option that these fathers could have taken. Hence, even the fathers in this sample who took custody because their ex-partners were, to one degree or another, incompetent still view themselves as having freely chosen to parent. They view any limitations on their choice as self-imposed.

Studies also indicate that women are more likely than men to perceive parenting as a duty, while men view it more as an option (Dowd 1997). However, at least four of the fathers here used language that indicated that they also saw parenting as a duty and that self-imposed standards, rather than circumstances, were more likely to have constrained their choice, impelling them to take on the responsibility. Only two of the fathers indicated that they would have preferred not to have sole custody. For most, however, the existence and awareness of other noncustodial options constituted the freedom that created the possibility for choice, but it was their own inner sense of duty that rendered those options virtually nonexistent.

Moreover, for these men the choice to conceive and give birth to a child is not a decision separate from the one to raise a child; rather, the former implies the latter. For instance, Alex,<sup>4</sup> a thirty-three-year-old father who went to court to get his infant son out of foster care, indicates that the moral duty to care is embedded in the role of parent, apparently regardless of gender. He says,

I feel I'm doing it because that's what I'm supposed to do. Parents [not mothers or fathers] are supposed to take care of their children....It was my

duty to take my son. I feel I'm doing the right thing.

Similarly, Tracy, father of nine-year-old Train (a nickname), finished college while the mother had custody for several years. He says,

If something had happened to his mother, I would have had to take him, no matter what my situation. You know what I mean? I would not give that responsibility to nobody. And I wouldn't want nobody else raising my child... because I don't want to blame nobody else for how my child turns out. I just want to do the best job I can as a parent, and if my child turns out good, then that's going to make me that much more proud of myself and my child.

While his statement at first indicates that incompetence or death on the part of the mother would have constrained his choice (i.e., he would have *had* to do it), clearly his follow-up statement indicates that the constraint would have emerged from his own desire that he, not anyone else, have the responsibility and accountability for raising his child.

Likewise, Ray, divorced father of ten-year-old Kyle, realizes that his choice to parent as a single father could garner him more kudos than is usual for single mothers. Nevertheless, he says, "People compliment me for having custody, but I don't really warm to the compliments too much, because they are complimenting me on something that I felt was my responsibility to do." In fact, most of the men indicated that their choice to parent elicited favorable reaction from friends, family, and acquaintances, often making them attractive to women.

On the other hand, several of the fathers suggested there was a fine line between a compliment and an insult. For instance, Ray said that while people look favorably on his taking the responsibility, there is the suggestion that it is only because the mother didn't want to.

People used to tell me, "How could she just leave her son?" I'd say, "Well, she didn't *leave* her son. I mean, she can see him any time she wants." He goes over there. And it's not like she just abandoned him on some wayside station. He is with his *dad*. But that's just the society that we live in. I mean people are used to the man taking off.

The compliments reflect a perception that these fathers are the exceptions, that most men, particularly black men, usually don't choose responsibility in parenting and that they are somehow second best.

## **Breaking a Cycle of Bad Dads**

Striking among the findings here is the role played by the fathers' experiences in their



families of orientation in their motivation to father full-time. Only three of the fathers came from intact two-parent families. The majority had spent at least a portion, most at least eleven years, of their childhood in a single-parent family. While this is consistent with the trend of single-parent households being the predominant family structure among black families since the late 1980s and seems to support earlier research that finds a pattern of intergenerational single parenting, it doesn't tell the whole story.

Eight of the men reported being closer to their mothers than to their fathers, even though all of the mothers had been employed. Most of the fathers described their mothers as loving, strong, hard-working women who serve as their role models now. At worst, mothers were described as women who had done the best they could given a stressful situation. Two fathers said they felt close to both parents, and three said both parents served as role models, although it should be noted that sometimes it was as a role model for what *not* to do as a parent.

The view they held of their fathers differed significantly from that which they held of their mothers. Only one of the sample fathers found his own father to be *nurturing*, and that was qualified by "somewhat." Even the four who had grown up in two-parent families or who described their fathers as "providers" or "there for me" did not report their fathers to be nurturing. Social learning or modeling theory would suggest that boys who grow up without fathers would fail to learn how to parent. If that is correct, they would be less likely to take on a parenting role and more likely to reproduce the scenario in which they grew up, hence remaining uninvolved and distant should they have children (Gersick 1979; Hanson 1985).

However, rather than re-creating that paternal motif in their generation, many of these men found their lack of a nurturing father to be a consciously motivating factor in their own parenting experience. The pain of abandonment gave birth to a narrative of negation; that is, the men expressed strong desires to be unlike their negative role model, to not reproduce the abandonment experience, and to avoid having their children feel toward them the way they felt toward their own fathers. The narrative of Larry, a second-grade teacher in Milwaukee's public school system and father of a daughter and son, illustrates this drive.

I saw my dad very irregularly. It wasn't even once a year. We might go two years without even hearing from him, and then one day we would hear from him. I remember one time he came and picked up me and my brother and took us to Oscar's [a restaurant], which had a fish tank. It was my first time seeing it. But he didn't even come to my high school graduation, but his brother did. His brother would try to see us once in a while.



The day my baby was born, I said, "I gotta find a better life." I had always said that I was not going to be like my daddy. I mean, I had the idea, the dream, as a kid because of some of the things my mother went through. I said I don't want my kids to go through any of this shit. I'm going to get married the right way. But, of course, that didn't happen as far as the marriage. But I just said I was not going to abandon my kids. We both [he and his girlfriend] could have separate lives, but I was not going to abandon my child, no matter what. I think that gave me the drive....I just wanted to raise my kids. You know what I mean? I just wanted—because I never had the opportunity to be with my dad. I just did not want to be like my father.

Concurring, Tracy, a thirty-one-year-old social worker and father of two boys (though he has sole custody of only the oldest), described his experience with his dad.

I didn't see my dad much....I seen him once when I was four or five. I remember it exactly. I was in kindergarten. Then I didn't see him again until I was in the sixth grade, so I had to be about twelve or eleven. And then I didn't see him again until I was nineteen. So I saw him three times. Then he just passed away this February. And he called once in a while and I'd talk to him. My sisters seen him more than I did, though. Because I didn't really care for him too much, my mother said. Also because I had gotten in some trouble when I was a kid. I was in Ethan Allen [a reform school] and I was sent to Wales. And when I got sent to Wales, he sent for my sisters and took them to California, where he lived. He wasn't in the state, you know. That's probably the major reason why I didn't see him. But even when he was here, you know, I don't know...why he didn't come see us kids or nothing like that, I can't really say.

Tracy's interactions with his father are so few that he can remember his exact grade or age at each meeting. Also, he appears at a loss to be able to explain (or fearful of the explanation as to) why his father was so unavailable, particularly to him and particularly at a time when he was in trouble. Hence, as social learning theory would suggest, Tracy acknowledges that the lack of a father left him without a model to imitate, left him without the knowledge of how to be a good father. But it didn't leave him without the motivation. "Being there" for the child becomes the minimum expectation, the least that a father can do. He continues:

So [when my girlfriend became pregnant] I was excited about the baby and her being pregnant. But I wasn't prepared. I mean I didn't know how to be a father. I didn't know anything about that. I mean, my father wasn't around. All I knew is that I was going to be there for him [the baby]. I knew I was going to be there. It was like, you know, I'm not going to do what my father did to me.

Similarly, Ray, forty-three-year-old father of ten-year-old Kyle, had seen his father face-to-face only two times in his life. His father, a man with artistic talents, had lived what Ray called “the street life” and died early at about forty years of age.

I saw him twice in life. Once he was doing a mural...on the wall of my cousin's basement. And I came over and my cousin said, “there's somebody downstairs that you might want to meet.” That's how my family always is, just so deadpan about something like this. So I go down and it was him. And there really wasn't much I said to him. Wasn't much he said to me. The second time I saw him was in the summer of '74, right after my mom passed. He wasn't at the funeral, or nothing like that, you know. It didn't really surprise me because he was never around.... Then the next time I saw him was at *his* funeral.... There was only myself, my [two uncles], and the guy waiting to cover up the grave. My sisters didn't go. It was a very sad funeral....Even at that age I started realizing that we are all going to make our own decisions and we live with them.

Ray took custody of his son immediately after his divorce. He says of that decision, “I was looking forward to the arrangement because I saw it as a challenge. And I saw it as an opportunity to do what my father hadn't done.”

John, a twenty-four-year-old father who has custody of his three-year-old daughter, suggests that the effect of his father's absence was positive for his own parenting, as it enabled him to know what *not* to do as a parent.

My mother took care of me most of the time. My father was not there much, though I guess he was there as much as he could. But when someone isn't there, you know, you can't bond with them. A lot of people take their father not being there when they were young as a bad thing. But I just took the good out of it and took what he did do and took what I'm not going to do like him. It definitely made me a better father. It made me say, “I'm not going to do this to my child.”

While avoiding the reproduction of a negative experience was utmost in their minds, most of the fathers expressed the desire to create something positive both for themselves and their children from this negative experience. For instance, Steve, another young father, who has custody of his two-year-old daughter, stated,

My real father wasn't there and I always swore to myself that I'm going to have kids that I take care of, which I'm doing. Just trying to offer her more than what I had coming up and being a supportive parent, being there, talking to her. So I'd say the negatives that happened to me growing up ended up turning my life to having me make positive choices about raising my daughter.

While this drive to be the kind of father they hadn't had was more prevalent among the men from single-parent families, even some from two-parent families had similar refrains. Richard, a gay thirty-two-year-old man who adopted six-year-old Tommy nearly three years earlier, came from a two-parent family. His father was a church minister.

When I was growing up I played Little League baseball for three years. My father never attended one game. I'm sorry, in three years you can get away for one game, at least. You know? And he never did. I asked him to go out and practice with me so I could hit the ball. He bought me a Johnny Batter-Upper so that I could practice by myself. And, you know, it was like that if he was going to the store—hardware store, or anything like that and I might have wanted to go with him, he said, "No, you stay here." It was always like that....So I had been wanting to be a good father for years.

One should not conclude from this that the majority of black men have fathers who are unavailable. Even if this were a random sample, single custodial fathers represent a minority of men and are not typical of the general population of fathers. In addition, several studies of fatherhood among two-parent black families indicate relatively high levels of proactive fathering. For instance, Allen's (1981) study of a group of black two-parent families found the fathers to be very involved, and McAdoo's (1981) study of forty black middle-class families found two-thirds of the dads to be nurturing.

More likely what this indicates is that for the men who do have weak or absent fathers, the experience acts not as a model to imitate but rather as a force motivating them to take on more parental responsibilities than is typical of most men. This is not to say that having such experiences will have that effect on the majority of men, but perhaps more than we might expect.

Several recent studies (Baruch and Barnett 1986; Kotre 1984; Snarey 1993) of single fathers, mostly white single fathers, found similar results. Snarey's (1993) study of single fathers found that fathers whose own fathers had been negative role models were more likely than fathers who had had positive role models to desire to exhibit more involved fathering. Men who had positive role models could as likely go either way in their own parenting. As Snarey explained, rather than modeling what they had experienced and observed growing up, fathers with weak fathers were strongly motivated to "rework their heritage." Kotre (1984) explained his similar finding by utilizing psychologist Eric Erickson's theory of generativity. In a number of his writings, Erickson (1963, 1964, 1974) argued that humans had an instinct or urge to care for others, which would be manifested at a particular stage of life through reproduction, parenting, teaching others, and/or cultural creativity.

While this article focuses on the father's manifestation of generativity in his reproductive and parenting roles, it is worth noting here that several of these fathers were caring for other children in some capacity as well. For instance, two of the fathers had younger brothers also residing with them. Three of the fathers had another biological child whom they saw regularly. One father was helping to care for the daughter of a former girlfriend (the child was not his biological child). Another father had his son's friend living with them as well, and two fathers spent a significant part of their time mentoring other young children through community or school programs.

### **Providing Role Models for Children**

As mentioned earlier, one of the fathers had had some conflicts with law enforcement as a juvenile; two others had siblings who were "living the street life" or in jail. These fathers and a couple others who had had early nonmarital births<sup>5</sup> tended to explain these experiences as the result of not having had a father who modeled good behavior, who disciplined them, or in whom they could confide. Consequently, several of the fathers indicated that they took custody because they desired to be a role model for their children; they hoped to head off the kind of problems they had attributed to the lack of fathering.

Tracy, a social worker who spent several of his teen years in a reform school, said one reason for taking custody of his nine-year-old son was to socialize him into manhood.

I always wanted him, but I also knew he needed his mother. So I told her, "You did a good job; we both did." I think we did an outstanding job with him, you know. I think he is going to be ten times better of a human being than I am. But I told her now I think it's time for me to take over and just be the primary parent and you be the secondary. Because he is about to become a man now, you know. I wanted to make sure [he doesn't go through what I went through]....I wanted to be there for puberty and all, because we both know—she hates to admit it, but I tell him to do something, he does it.

Ray, who works in the public school system, similarly suggested that boys are more likely to respond to the male in the family than to the mother. He states that one of the practical reasons he took custody of Kyle after the divorce is that

there is, I guess, that challenge that a manchild always tries on his mom what he wouldn't do on his dad. Even at his young age, you know, it was always,...they [his son and ex-wife] would go at it over something.

Ronald, a private elementary schoolteacher who grew up in a two-parent family, has custody

of a teenage daughter and son due to their mother's drug addiction. He took custody of his son first, while he was living with some friends. A few months later, after moving into a house, he took custody of his daughter. His daughter has had some behavioral problems in the past year, and he feels he was not as understanding and responsive to her needs as he was to his son's, perhaps because he assumed his son would have been more likely to experience problems than his daughter. Ronald indicates that due to lingering racism in the United States, young black men, in particular, may need extra modeling. He says,

I have my kids because I just thought about what my kids needed....I know what the streets are like. I know what society does to black people as far as discrimination and racism. I've lived the black experience. So I know what my son and daughter are up against. I guess if I had really focused on her, it [the behavioral problems she has had recently] wouldn't have happened to her, or I could have done more to prevent it. But with my son, I knew that a lot of things are going to bring him down, as far as being a black male. And, you know, the streets definitely is one of the things to bring him down. So I've always tried to prepare him and kept him with me, where he would learn from me. Maybe not all what I do, but more what I say and what I do. And I think that I've done good with him, as far as him understanding and being ready for the world once he leaves here.

While this desire to be a role model for their children was more often expressed by fathers of boys, girls represented a slight majority of custodial children (seven of a total of thirteen custodial children). Only a couple of the fathers of girls mentioned similar desires for their daughters. For instance, Larry thinks he might have made better choices about sexual activity if his father had been more involved. He states, "A boy needs a man." Nevertheless, Larry has custody of his daughter Emily, not his younger son. Larry points out that one of the reasons he took his daughter was that "I just wanted to help teach her how to be respectful, not be like a lot of the girls who become women who have a lot of babies. I want her to go to college, finish school."

### **Just Fulfilling an Established Dream or Bond**

For some of the fathers, taking custody just seemed the natural thing to do, given a long-held desire to be a father, to enact an image they had held of the perfect family, and/or to fulfill the close relationship they had with their children. Most of those who indicated the existence of a bond between father and child (in all cases these were fathers who had custody of only one child) also indicated a higher level of prior involvement with the child, either when they had coresided with mom and child and the father had performed primary care responsibilities or during a period of

noncustody during which the father had visited the child frequently. Nevertheless, taking on a majority of child care responsibilities prior to custody remained the experience of only a few men; most indicated that the mothers had handled the majority of the responsibilities previously.

Tracy, father of two sons, explains that although the pregnancy of his first son was unplanned, it seemed to be his chance to fulfill his long-held desire to once again be part of a large extended family.

I remember when I was young, very young, all I can remember is my family. Not just my immediate family, but, you know, family around. So that's what I liked, when I see all the family members together. That's what made me want to establish a family.... Although the pregnancy wasn't planned, when I found out my girlfriend was pregnant, I was happy. I was happy. It was a joy to me. It never once crossed my mind that it was a mistake. I didn't try to talk her into getting an abortion or anything like that. It never once crossed my mind.

That desire may have made him more likely to proactively connect with his son, which he attempted to do even as the child was in the womb. However, Tracy's former girlfriend and mother of Train is diabetic. Therefore, in addition to his own desire, her ill health during and after the pregnancy required that someone take on more child care responsibilities. Tracy decided that someone would be him.

I was in Texas in college when I found out she was pregnant. So I dropped out of school. She was very ill through the whole pregnancy, and she had a hard time in labor. She was in labor maybe thirty hours, and she had to have a C-section to get him out. I stayed up the whole time, 'til the last hour. I fell asleep in the chair. She was ill after the birth too. I did most of the bathing, diapers, feeding. That was rough, but then I had a new respect for women. Boy I'll tell you that! But before he was born I used to talk to her stomach all the time. I used to sing to her stomach all the time, you know. When he came out I sang that same song, and he knew exactly who it was.

Tracy and Larry are friends and neighbors, and both of them graduated from the same university during a period of noncustody. Tracy's son and Larry's daughter are close in age, and each of them refers to the other's father as "uncle." Tracy said that even during the period of nonresidence with his son, both he and Larry tried to see their children as frequently as they could.

When I was at Whitewater [a town located about an hour or so from Milwaukee], I used to come home every weekend and pick him up. I'd take him around the campus and everything, you know, and let him know

what college was all about. People there knew him very well. Larry did the same thing with his daughter. Emily and Little Tracy actually grew up together maybe from two years old. When we had free time, we'd say, "Let's go get the kids." Every time they [the children] had a break from school, they were with us. We had a lot of people there helping us too. They were surprised that we actually had kids, and they were really surprised that we actually were into our kids, were interested in our kids, and into their lives.

Although Larry did not express the same level of prior desire to establish a family as had Tracy, Larry says that those years of working on the relationship with his kids effected a bond that motivated him to take custody. His daughter, in particular, consistently expressed a desire to live with Larry instead of her mother.

We built a bond just a long time ago when she was a baby. Even when I was up at school going two or three months without seeing her, I still could tell. She would run to my arms. And when it was time for me to go, she wasn't ready for me to leave. I mean, she wanted to stay with me. She would really cry, and I would feel so bad. I feel good about it now.

Likewise, prior involvement preceded Ray's bond with his child. Ray was married to his son's mother, and shortly after the birth of Kyle, Ray's wife returned to work. She worked second shift at a food store. He describes how they handled child care responsibilities.

When I'd get off work, we'd have an overlap time for both of us maybe of about forty-five minutes. And then she'd go off to work. And she didn't get off until 11 P.M., and she had stopped breast-feeding him. So then I was the one who was feeding him. I had to change the diapers and stuff. As I look back on it, I think that was how we bonded.

Although Ray acknowledges some logistical reasons for taking custody—his former wife is now a police officer who works third shift—he says that the real reason is that “he [Kyle] and I are kindred spirits. We are the same.”

Even though Richard, the adoptive and gay father, did not have the opportunity to establish a bond prior to custody, he said that parenting had been something he had always wanted to do. After reading Tommy's file and seeing his picture, Richard was convinced that this was the kid for him.

I had been wanting to be a father for years. And I always thought about getting into a relationship, have a good relationship, then we can adopt children and have this nice little suburban family with a white picket fence [he says with a chuckle]. Just build a nice little world here, you know. But



then I ended my relationship in April of 1995, and I started thinking, "It's going to have to wait again." And then I started thinking, "Why?" Financially I felt ready. Emotionally, I felt ready. And so I started trying to get information about it. I just felt I could do it....So when his bio was brought to me in June—at the time he was a three-year-old—I took a week to read the file because I didn't want to just make a jump, a quick decision. So I read his file, and when I saw his picture, I just really wanted this kid....The first night, of course, I was infatuated. I just had this little kid, and they left him with me, with ME.

The desire to enact some form of an idealized family is expressed only among the never-married fathers. The divorced fathers, having already experienced their own family of procreation, do not see that as part of their decision to take custody. In fact, several of the divorced fathers and a couple of the never-married fathers who cohabited with the mothers of their children indicate that they know establishing a family is not that easy.

As mentioned earlier, both the desire to be a role model and the recognition of a father-child bond were more likely (i.e., not exclusively) to be expressed by fathers with regard to their sons, even though a slight majority of custodial children were girls. The number of households with girls or boys was equally divided: four households had girls only (one of these households had two girls), four households had boys only, and two households had children of both sexes. Most previous studies (Chang and Deinard 1982; Greif 1990; Ihinger-Tallman, Pasley, and Buehler 1995; Marsiglio 1991b; Morgan, Lye, and Condran 1988) of single custodial fathers indicate that gender plays a role in father custody (see Furstenberg et al. 1983; Seltzer and Brandreth 1995 as exceptions). In general, fathers are more likely to take custody of boys, perhaps because mothers of boys press for more father involvement and/or because they are more willing to relinquish sons to fathers. Those specific trends were not reflected in this small sample. However, the fathers' discourse about their own motivations to take custody indicates that their vision about what they can do for their child or the bond they can build with their child is somewhat gendered.

### **Availability of Resources**

In the choice to parent, the availability of resources is often a major, though not always a conscious, consideration. The demographic information gathered for each respondent in this study indicates, for instance, that full-time employment was present at time of custody in all but one case. About half were currently employed more than full-time. Only one was receiving some government subsidies in the form of food stamps and housing subsidies. This is congruent with the findings of most studies on single fathers, which usually find that single full-time fathers tend to have higher

incomes and more full-time employment and are less likely to rely on various forms of social welfare than single mothers (Chang and Deinard 1982; Dowd 1997; Downey 1994; Gersick 1979; Greif 1985, 1990; Hanson 1985, 1988; Orthner, Brown, and Ferguson 1976; Risman 1986; Santrock and Warshak 1979).

In particular, the higher level of unemployment among black men has been debated as a factor in determining their lower marriage rates. For instance, Wilson (1987) has argued that black men's marriage rates are low due to high unemployment, since both the men and the women see the men as unable to perform the provider role. Likewise, since black women have higher rates of education than do black men, black women have more difficulty marrying hypergamously as is usually the expectation in society. However, several studies (Lerman 1993) have found that employment didn't make black men more likely to marry; rather, it made them less likely to become fathers prior to marriage. Since seven of the ten fathers in this sample were never married, it is possible that employment may make them more likely to take on full-time parenting if they do become fathers. Nevertheless, most fathers cited employment as a factor they considered but not a driving force in their decision. In fact, several felt they would have taken custody anyway, even if they had not been employed.

Most of the fathers also had a residence in place when they took custody. Those who were divorced maintained the house or apartment they had lived in. Only three of the fathers own their residence. However, residence did play more of a conscious role for fathers of daughters, probably due to their perception that they would need separate sleeping space for a daughter, while if need be they could share a room with their son.

Ronald was living with some friends when he took custody of his son, but he waited until he got his grandmother's home to take custody of his daughter. Larry waited until he was settled in a two-bedroom apartment to get custody of Erica, and he currently is hoping to be able to move to a larger apartment or house to be able to take his son as well. Two of the fathers mentioned the mother's overcrowded or dependent living situation as a motivating factor. For instance, John said his home ownership was a pivotal reason for taking custody of his young daughter Tonya:

As soon as I bought my home, I wanted my child here with me. Tonya's mother was still living with her mom or her father, like off and on staying with either one of them, and I just wanted my child to have a home. I mean, when I was younger, I stayed with my grandparents, you know. My mother didn't get a home, didn't even move out of [her parent's] house until I was twelve years old. And I just wanted my daughter to have a place that she can call her own.

However, the availability of a human support system was more prevalent in the fathers' discourse than the other resources. Only one of the fathers, the gay adoptive father, said his parents were not in favor of his custody of a child, but even they have become supportive now that the adoption has taken place. A couple fathers stated that family members encouraged them to take custody. For instance, John, a twenty-three-year-old plumber and father of three-year-old Tonya, said,

Well, I knew my family would back me wholeheartedly. When it was first announced that I was having a child, they thought I was young and not ready. But once my baby was born and they seen the responsibility that I was taking for her, they didn't mind at all. They just backed me, helped me out as much as they could. And they were proud that I decided to take custody.

The reliance on family support is reflected in the fact that only three of the fathers are not located near family and do not have access to family members for child care, advice, or household assistance. The remaining fathers live within five miles of some of their family members and call on them for assistance to one degree or another. The two fathers with the youngest children also are men who work second- or third-shift jobs, and they receive the most assistance (about forty hours of child care per week) from family members. Mothers and sisters are the most common family member assisters, but aunts, grandmothers, brothers, and uncles play an occasional role as well. The mothers of the children are regularly involved in about five of the families. Four of the men have had or currently have girlfriends who help out.

Maturity, measured by age, is also a resource. While the age range of these custodial fathers is fairly wide (twenty to forty-three years old), what they had in common was that the vast majority of them were legal adults when they first became parents. Eight of these fathers were twenty or older upon the birth of their first child. Only one of the fathers was younger than eighteen at the time of the birth of his first child, of whom he did not take custody. He currently has custody of his two youngest children, who were both born when he was in his twenties.

Research on teen fathers indicates that the majority become minimally involved with their children, let alone take full custody, and some studies suggest that many men who first become fathers in their late twenties and early thirties are more involved in child care than younger first-time dads (Hawkins et al. 1993). Again, it is impossible to know from this sample whether age at birth itself is a determining factor in child custody or whether it is related in some way to employment and marital status, as older first-time fathers would be more likely to be employed and/or previously married. A larger sample would be needed to isolate the effects of these variables, but age or

maturity once again did not play a motivating role, except in the case of Richard, who felt that time was running out to form a family. Otherwise, as many new parents often lament, these fathers suggested that at least in hindsight they weren't prepared for parenting.

In conclusion, resources did not play a pivotal role in the fathers' discourse about why they took custody. Employment, residence, age, and family support were factors they weighed in their decision but were not motives to pursue custody of their children.

## **Racial and Gender Stereotypes**

The issue of stereotypes of black men was raised by the interviewer. Although most of the men said they are very aware of the image of black men as "absent fathers" and a few said that it has come up often in regard to the way people react to them now that they have custody, most said it did not play a significant role in their decision at the time. For example, Alex, father of one-year-old Alex Jr., said, "I see that image out there, but I don't feel that I'm doing this to prove that image wrong. I'm doing it because I'm supposed to." Only one father, Ray, said it played a minor role, and he enlarged it to be for all men as opposed to only black men. In his narrative, the roles of agent, of conscious chooser, and of an action's consequences, are apparent.

Mainly I'm raising my son for his sake and mine. But in a larger sense I'm doing it for every man out there that's in this situation. Or that could be if he only, you know, took it upon himself to say, "Okay, this is the way it is—I'm going to handle my business," as opposed to searching around for reasons not to do it. Because if you look, you know, you can find reasons not to do a lot of things. So in a way, there's a little bit of the crusader in me. I like the fact that I'm doing something that not many men do. I want it to be a situation where someone, maybe a younger guy coming up, maybe one of the young boys at the high school I work at, could look at me and say, "Well, Mr. Abbott did it, I can do it."

However, several fathers said the image affected their decision to participate in the study. Don, a father of one son and one daughter, said, "I wanted to let people know that we are here and we care. Not all black fathers give up on their children."

## **Discussion**

While this sample is neither random nor large enough from which to generalize, the goal of qualitative research is to capture the complex assumptions, meanings, and motivations that guide the decision-making process. The intent of this study was not to test theory but rather to build theory from the ground up, explore new territory in the growing field of fatherhood, give voice to a

previously unheard from group of fathers, and provide a sense of how they choose to parent. The beauty of combining qualitative work with some quantitative/demographic data is its ability to tease out, in this case, the distinction between factors, such as employment, age, and so forth, that might *enable* custody and experiences or meanings that *motivate* custody. While employment and residence make custody more likely among men, the question is whether in themselves they supply the impetus to choose custody. The impetus must be strong enough to produce a decision that challenges the trend of fathers forfeiting custody. This sample of ten fathers indicated that a sense of duty, the desire to proactively prevent the reproduction or consequences of past poor fathering by being there and providing a role model, and the fulfillment of a father-child bond or long-held desire to experience family were the main driving forces in their choice to parent full-time.

From this exploratory study, I see the need for research on black single fathers branching in a couple of directions. First, while only one of the fathers in the first group of men in this study was an adoptive father, there is potential for more. An increasing number of black men are adopting children, particularly boys (Anonymous 1994). In U.S. metropolitan areas, a majority of children in foster care are young African American boys, and consequently a number of adoption agencies are targeting black men as potential adoptive parents. Adoptive fathers are particularly useful for questions concerning the decision to parent because their lack of prior relationship to the mother and the child means their decisions more clearly reflect “free choice.”

Second, research comparing single black custodial fathers to their noncustodial counterparts could both help decipher the impact of socioeconomic status, age, and marital status and tease out the roles played by family background, fathers’ desire to rework their past, and their own sense of capacity to do so. All of the fathers in this study had friends who were noncustodial fathers. When asked why they thought their friends didn’t have custody, a variety of reasons—disagreeable mothers, immaturity, lack of confidence, unwillingness—were offered. A more in-depth study into a matched sample of custodial and noncustodial fathers could be fruitful for the current plethora of government programs aimed at increasing father involvement among lower-income single dads.

According to Polkinghorne (1988), “motivation for action is closely related to the capacity to retrieve in the present experience inherited from the past” (p. 145). The narratives here indicate that the fathers’ inherited past remained salient in their present, motivating them to choose parenting and continuing to guide their steps as they make their way through the new territory of full-time parenting. Kotre (1984) made the point that one cannot rewrite one’s own history, so one is compelled to rewrite it in a new generation. Yet by reworking one’s past in a new generation, one is also repairing one’s self and rewriting one’s future. Among these fathers, particularly since several

(or their siblings) had had clashes with the law themselves, there seems to be some sense of wanting to stop what they fear may be the unavoidable “visiting of the sins of the father” on the next generation and so on. By proactively taking custody of their children, by being there for them, they can be the intervening agent who halts or even reverses the consequences of a previous generation’s mistakes, consequences both for themselves and for their children. In a sense, taking the proverbial bull by the horns, they can be the ones to change the course of history, albeit their own microhistory.

## Notes

1. The rate of teen pregnancy has been declining among African Americans in the past few years, and one of the main contributing factors in the apparent rise in the *proportion* of nonmarital births among African Americans is the increasing tendency to postpone marriage among African Americans and the subsequent declining fertility rates among married black women. The declining rate of fertility among married black women means that nonmarital births form a larger portion of all births.
  2. Dowd (1997) estimated that 41 percent of father-custody families are remarried men.
  3. This is just slightly different from U.S. census figures (Cochran 1997) that estimate that 23 percent of black custodial fathers are divorced and 54 percent were never married.
  4. Throughout this article, all the names of fathers and children are pseudonyms.
  5. Only one of the fathers had been below majority age—sixteen—at the time of the birth of his first child; eight of them had been in their twenties and thirties.
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