The Role of Significant Others in Shaping Fathers' Identities and Behavior

Jessica L. Collett, Kelcie Vercel, and Kayla D. R. Pierce

Introduction

All the authors of this chapter are daughters. One of us is also a tenured professor, another a Southerner, and the third, a fan of reality TV. These identities influence how we behave in social life. More specifically, our *understanding* of the identities we hold shapes the *expectations* we have for ourselves. If we understand remaining connected to our families as an important quality of being a grown daughter, we expect ourselves to act in ways that demonstrate that connectedness, perhaps by calling our parents on their birthdays and trying to visit during holidays or other occasions. Engaging in these identity-relevant behaviors and believing others see us as connected to our loved ones allows us to confirm our identities, thus affirming our conceptions of who we are and making us feel good about ourselves.

In the identity theory paradigm (Burke and Stets, 2009; Stets and Serpe, 2013), the connectedness we see as central to enacting our identities as daughters is an identity meaning; by calling or visiting our families we enact that meaning in interaction. Of course, connectedness is not all we value as daughters. We also see unconditional love, understanding, and knowledge about our parents as important to who we are as daughters. These and other identity meanings we hold comprise our daughter identity standards—what it means to us to be a daughter in everyday life. These identity standards are drawn from culture and our own personal views and experiences (Stets, 2006).

Some identities are tied to well-defined, conventional standards and expectations that guide behavior. Others are more vague and thus serve as poor guides for action

(McCall and Simmons, 1978). An example of the latter is the identity of "father." There are rather broad limits on the type of behavior considered consistent with fatherhood. Because guides for action are ambiguous and unclear, fathers' identity performances are largely improvised, and a variety of actions or approaches is seen as appropriate (McCall and Simmons, 1978). As a result, there is significant variation in men's meanings of fatherhood and how these are realized in interaction (Collett, Vercel, and Boykin, 2015; Tsushima and Burke, 1999). This variation has implications for parenting behavior, gender inequality, and how parents perceive and evaluate themselves. To date, however, little research has explored the creation and negotiation of identity meanings in interaction and the resulting variation between them.

In this chapter, we explore the role that significant others, and particularly partners, have in helping men to construct meanings about fatherhood. More specifically, we demonstrate how these partners often translate poorly specified ideas about fatherhood into concrete templates for behavior, thus influencing fathers' involvement in family life (McCall and Simmons, 1978). Using longitudinal, qualitative interviews with parents of young children, we show how men come to understand who they can and should be as fathers in negotiation with others. We show that parents influence each other's identity meanings and processes in several ways. They serve as parenting role models for each other (e.g., Daly, 1993; Masciadrelli, Pleck, and Stueve, 2006), as sources of evaluative feedback that enhance reflected appraisals (e.g., Maurer, Pleck, and Rane, 2001; McCall and Simmons, 1978), or as guides through cognitive efforts to change the identity meanings (Burke, 2006; Burke and Cast, 1997). However, not all parents benefit from relationships with significant others. We explore why some identity meanings remain underdeveloped or unchanged as we demonstrate the *potential* influence partners have on the meanings men ascribe to fatherhood, and the way they realize these meanings in interaction (McCall and Simmons, 1978; Merolla et al., 2012).

The "Good Father"

As one might imagine, when men describe what they believe it takes to be a good father, they emphasize different qualities. Some men prioritize breadwinning and think a good father should support his family financially. Others, often drawing on their own experiences with distant fathers, prioritize involvement with their children. Still others combine these two ideals, viewing neither as enough on its own. For these men, a good father must both provide *and* be involved in family life. We argue that qualities such as provision, involvement, or both are identity meanings and central to who men are as fathers.

Regardless of the aspects of fatherhood a man prioritizes in his identity as a father (breadwinning, involvement, or a hybrid), there is important variation in interpretations of the identity meanings connected to fatherhood and related behavioral expectations.

For example, two men may prioritize "being involved" as fathers. However, one father's interpretation of "involvement" may simply be that he should not abandon his family through separation or divorce, perhaps out of fear that he would lose contact with his children. Another father may envision specific, concrete forms of involvement in his everyday parenting. He may believe that an involved father should spend a significant amount of time talking and playing with his children each day.

These interpretations are crucial, as the men draw on what they see as identity relevant behavior in situations (Stets and Serpe, 2013). They identify how they will behave, and how they believe others will see their actions, to determine whether they are acting as involved fathers in a situation. They compare these situated meanings with those meanings in their identity standard to determine how successfully they are enacting their father identity. If they see consistency between the way that others see them, based on reflected appraisals (Cooley, 1902), and their identity standard, they experience identity confirmation. This results in positive emotions and self-perceptions and may enhance a man's commitment to the identity (Collett et al., 2015). Any perceived mismatch, on the other hand, indicates self-discrepancy, generates negative emotion, and will either prompt increased efforts at involvement or lead a father to alter or abandon the identity, either cognitively or behaviorally (Burke and Harrod, 2005; Cast and Cantwell, 2007).

Background

Before we discuss our data and findings, we situate our research by briefly outlining relevant work on fathers and identity theory. We also discuss why fathers are an ideal case for studying identity meanings and how these are realized in interaction.

Fatherhood

Many fathers today want to "be there" for their children (Edin and Nelson, 2013). This is true across social classes, because the current generation of fathers sees this approach as unlike their own fathers. Poor men aspire to be different from their absent fathers or "deadbeat dads," while working-, middle-, and upper-class men try to be more present than their fathers who seemed to prioritize work, either out of necessity or preference, at the expense of spending time with their partners and children (Parke, 1996). Adopting the relatively new role of "involved father," men increasingly aspire to be nurturing and loving toward their children and involved in the daily rituals of family life (LaRossa, 1988; Wall and Arnold, 2007).

However, aspirations do not always manifest themselves in action. While men's ideas about fatherhood have shifted toward more involvement, the actual behavior of fathers, even those who hold more egalitarian views, has yet to catch up (Dermott, 2008; Humberd, Ladge, and Harrington, 2015). A variety of factors contributes to the lag. Chief among them is that increasing expectations for men to be involved have not dampened

expectations about working and supporting one's family. Instead, involvement is *in addition to* the more conventional expectations (Knoester, Petts, and Eggebeen, 2007). Thus, being a good father is not only being involved in family life, but doing so while continuing to ensure that one's family is financially supported. Of course, mothers have been expected to strike a balance between paid work and care work for as long as they have been working outside the home, and especially since the growth of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996), but men struggle more to balance these roles. As Roy (2004: 9) writes, men do not seem to know how to "do both employment and time with children."

There is also little impetus for men to change, because even fathers who are falling short of expectations can rate themselves as "doing a very good job" (Jones and Mosher, 2013). With the vague directive that a man should "be there" as a central component of new fatherhood, men with various levels of involvement in family life are able to see themselves as satisfying that expectation (Collett et al., 2015). Both the father who stays in an unhappy relationship, despite not doing anything to help care for his home or his children, and the father who serves as his children's primary caregiver as his partner works full time can interpret his behavior as "being there," thus successfully enacting fatherhood.

Identity Theory

In identity theory, one's identity standard is important because it influences how the person feels, thinks, and behaves in an identity (Burke and Stets, 2009). Actors experience negative emotion when the meanings implied by their behavior, as appraised by others in the situation and as reflected to the actors, do not match the meanings in their identity standard (Stets and Osborn, 2008). To alleviate this negative affect, actors deploy additional resources and effort to bring their actions, and others' perceptions of their actions, into line with their identity meanings. This allows them to experience identity verification, an outcome that enhances self-esteem and generates positive emotion.

Although there is a large body of work linking fatherhood and identity theory (see Pasley, Petren, and Fish, 2014, for a review), the vast majority of this research is situated in the structural concerns of Stryker (1980). It focuses on factors that increase the quantity and quality of social ties related to the father identity, thus enhancing salience of and commitment to the identity and the likelihood a man will choose to enact his father identity. In contrast, here we draw on the dynamic, interactional identity perspective (McCall and Simmons, 1978) as we explore *how* a man will enact his father identity, and the perceptual control model (Burke and Stets, 2009) as we investigate evaluations of and responses to his action. Specifically, we examine the meanings associated with the father identity, how these meanings relate to behavioral expectations a father holds for himself and that he uses to evaluate his performances, and what effect these meanings and evaluations have on his self-perceptions. By situating the enactment of the fatherhood identity at the forefront of our research, we follow Adamsons and Pasley's (2013) lead. We consider how significant others, and particularly parents and partners, shape

the content of men's identity standards (Burke and Stets, 2009), the translation of these standards into action (Cook, Jones, Dick, and Singh, 2005; McCall and Simmons, 1978), and the evaluations of fathers' identity performances (Maurer, Pleck, and Rane, 2001). In doing so, we investigate a specific mechanism, the negotiation and cultivation of identity meanings in interaction between co-parents, that may help explain why a healthy mother–father relationship has been shown to significantly enhance a father's relationship with his child (Carlson and McLanahan, 2000).

Because cultural meanings of fatherhood are in flux, fatherhood is an identity that may be imagined and enacted in a wide variety of ways (Miller, 2011). We believe this flexibility makes fathers an ideal case for studying the translation of identity meanings into action (McCall and Simmons, 1978). The evolution in the cultural model of fatherhood from distant breadwinners to the engaged "new fathers" of today offers men a range of fathering approaches to choose from. However, it also means that today's fathers are unlikely to have been raised by fathers whose priorities in parenting match their own. This gives men both more options and less guidance, making identity enactment more improvised and susceptible to the influence of significant others like partners. Exploring men's meanings of fatherhood and the sources of those meanings provides a unique opportunity to see the varied meanings men ascribe to fatherhood and the diverse ways that men realize these meanings in interaction, as well as how men evaluate their performances and come to see themselves as competent and effective fathers.

Data and Methods

Our data come from the Time, Love, and Cash in Couples with Children (TLC3) study (England and Edin, 2008). The data include transcripts from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 75 couples, a subsample of those originally interviewed for the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (McLanahan et al., 2000).[1] The multiple waves of both individual and couple interviews began soon after the focal child was born (ca. 2000) and, when possible, continued annually over four years.

Although the Fragile Families data were collected in many large cities, the couples interviewed for the TLC3 lived in one of three metropolitan areas: Chicago, Milwaukee, or New York. To be included in the study, the couples had to be romantically involved at the time of the birth, neither parent could be incarcerated, both had to speak English, and the mother's household (not all couples were living together) income had to be less than $75,000 (most were significantly below this benchmark). If couples broke up, the research team still tried to interview both parents, as well as "social fathers" (i.e., men

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

who were in relationships with the children's biological mothers and raising the children as their own).

Interviews covered a wide range of topics, from relationship history to role models for parenting. Interviews typically occurred in the couple's home—roughly annually—and with the same interviewers over time, if possible, to help establish rapport. Most interviews lasted between two and three hours and all were recorded and later transcribed verbatim.[2] Interviewers often included postscripts of interviews to provide impressions that might not be apparent from the transcripts.

The Sample

In our research on fathers, we included only 61 of the 75 original couples, omitting couples with fathers who dropped out of the focal child's life or interviews soon after the initial wave and those with too much missing data, particularly on questions related to sources of views on parenting.

The TLC3 study oversampled for unmarried couples and people of color (specifically black and Latino), and our sample reflects that (see Table 17.1). Most of the parents were in their twenties, with fathers a couple years older, on average, than their partners. The majority were not first-time parents and had at least one additional child, either living in the home or with a previous partner. Household incomes varied significantly, but were generally quite low, particularly for raising a family in an urban area. Our couples' median household income was $30,000. Fathers worked in a variety of fields (e.g., construction and trades, transportation, customer service) and many changed jobs or were unemployed at some point during the study period.

Qualitative Analysis

The research team read all the available waves of interviews for each couple, created a cover sheet with pertinent information (e.g., children and their ages, marital status, living situation, occupation), and flagged sections in the transcripts that emerged as relevant to both the meanings and behavioral expectations of fatherhood (e.g., perceptions of parenting, role models, division of household labor and child care, and emotional and behavioral outcomes). The team met regularly to discuss cases and our reading of the transcripts to ensure we interpreted each couple's situation similarly and to, over time, select relevant examples and quotes, generating a summary for each couple that included information from the Fragile Families survey (for more information on the research methods, see Collett, 2018).

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2.   Although the transcripts are verbatim, they have been de-identified (e.g., the names of participants and their families as well as some other identifying information has been changed). To help ensure privacy by reducing the likelihood of triangulation, we changed some other potentially identifying information and opted to use different pseudonyms than the TLC3 project team (e.g., England and Edin 2007).

TABLE 17.1 Descriptive Statistics

	Household at Wave I[a]
Marital Status	**Percent**
Married	38%
Unmarried	62%
	Mean / Standard Deviation
Household Income	$31,941[b] / $21,517
Number of Other Children in Household	1.52 / 1.34

	Mother	Father
	Mean / Standard Deviation	**Mean / Standard Deviation**
Age	25.49 / 5.32	27.46 / 5.34
Racial Identification	**Percent**	**Percent**
White	20%	15%
Black	51%	47%
Hispanic/Latino	29%	36%
Multiracial or Other	--	2%
Education		
Didn't finish high school	21%	29%
Diploma or equivalent	39%	38%
Some college or tech./trade	36%	25%
BA/BS or more	3%	8%

Data taken from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, baseline ($n = 61$).
[a] In Wave 1, the focal child was a newborn.
[b] In 2000, the median household income in the U.S. was $42,148 (U.S. Census).

By reading and rereading our summaries in various groupings, important patterns began to emerge. As discussed in previous work (Collett et al., 2015), we discovered that men's interpretations of identity meanings varied in clarity, and men with more well-developed understandings of who they aspired to be as fathers contributed more and displayed greater commitment to their families and fatherhood. We investigated the sources of specificity and found that diffuse interpretations of what it means to be a father were common among men who lacked a father figure or who used their fathers as negative role models (i.e., men who want to be the person their father was not). Men with clearer identity meanings, on the other hand, tended to develop their meanings of fatherhood and expectations for themselves in relationships with peers, parents, or partners (e.g., Masciadrelli et al., 2006).

Our goal in this research is not to predict what proportion of fathers rely on particular role models, have close relationships with others, or possess clear identity meanings. Instead, we hope to specify and illuminate the processes linking men's social experiences to their understanding of fatherhood and related parenting behavior (Small, 2009). The in-depth interviews we use offer the opportunity to delve deeply into these linkages,

describing patterns between men's relationships and their experiences of fatherhood and demonstrating the considerable influence significant others have on the content of fathers' identity standards and beliefs about how to realize these in interaction.

Identity Standards and Fathering

Men's expectations for themselves as fathers vary substantially. Some of this variation is related to content, with some fathers focused on providing financially for their children and others focused on caregiving and emotional engagement. We focus less on what role a father prioritizes, and instead on what it means to occupy that role and how those meanings are enacted in everyday life.

Some fathers' identity meanings are clearly connected to concrete lines of action. For example, Antoine believes that his job as a father is to teach his son to participate in "anything educational." This is a central component of his fatherhood identity standard. He also can list specific activities he engages in to accomplish this meaning in daily interactions with his son: "I sit down, play with a ball, roll it to him, or [play] with his blocks" (Wave 2 [W2]).[3] With clear behavioral expectations that are linked to identity meanings, Antoine and others are able to compare their behavior to what they expect of themselves and step up to the plate if they see themselves falling short. For example, Alex believes that a good father is "willing to spend some time with his kids. Whether it's sitting at the dinner table together and stuff like that" (W2). This willingness to spend time manifests in his plan to spend at least 30 minutes a day with his children. This clear behavioral intention, with a specified amount of time, provides an important benchmark. When Alex realizes that he is spending less time with his children than he would like, he is able to see that he is falling short of his expectations for himself as a father. Realizing that he is concentrating on money "and working and working and working" (W3), Alex changes his behavior to devote more time to his family.

Other men are unable to articulate what it means to be a father, beyond "being there." For example, Matteo says, "You don't have to be a financial help or anything. Just be there" (W2). When pushed to explain what behaviors demonstrate that a father is there for his children, he is unable to connect the diffuse meaning standard of "being there" or "presence" to any specific lines of action. Tod's identity standard is a bit less general, "Take care of your kids!" (W2), but he is unable to offer clear benchmarks of care. When asked about what he might do to demonstrate that he cares, to generate self-meanings consistent with his identity standard, he says, "Do what you gotta do, you know?" These men's conceptions of fatherhood are incomplete and unclear (McCall and Simmons, 1978). They really do not understand what it means to be a father. As a result,

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3. To provide context to readers, we supply the wave of interviews that they were taken from. In Wave 1, the focal children were newborns. Wave 2 occurred close to their first birthday. The focal children were two years old in Wave 3 and three in Wave 4.

fathers like Matteo and Tod tend to be under-involved in caregiving and household labor compared to those with more developed ideas of what it means to be a father.

In the analysis that follows, we explore how men's identity meanings may be learned over time and in context. Specifically, we show that men with significant others who serve as role models or who provide constructive feedback that serves as reflected appraisals are more likely to perceive a connection between behavior, meanings, and identity standards then men who rely on distant or negative role models or whose significant others avoid criticizing them. We begin by discussing role models, examining the different effects of distant versus current models. We then focus on constructive feedback, highlighting the way feedback from others helps men develop meanings tied to fatherhood and encourages them to consider how to affirm self-meanings in interaction. Finally, we examine whether it is ultimately the couple's relationship quality, rather than direct effects of models or feedback, that results in the patterns we observe.

Role Models

Although research finds that fathers today, and especially poor fathers, tend to lack tangible role models for fatherhood (e.g., Edin and Nelson, 2013), most of the men in our sample cite a specific role model who they believe influenced their approach to fathering and whose example they have incorporated into the meanings they hold for themselves as fathers. Most often, the role model they mention is their own father. However, there is tremendous variety, with some fathers crediting a stepfather, uncle, or minister (i.e., men who served as father figures), and others who believe that to be today's kind of father, their mother or siblings serve as better models.

Not all men who reference their father as a model do so in the same way, as men's feelings toward their fathers are complicated (Daly, 1993). The group is split between those who view their father as a positive role model, and those who think of him as a negative model (Lockwood, Jordan, and Kunda, 2002). The former follow in their fathers' footsteps as they craft their own approach to fatherhood. The latter desperately hope to be what their fathers were not, even the opposite of their fathers, and position their identity standard against those of their fathers. Some men, who tend to have given fatherhood serious thought, strike a balance between these two orientations. They see some of their father's attributes as positive and worthy of emulating, while noting that others are negative, and hoping to learn from their father's mistakes. We offer an example of each here.

Darren sees his biological father as a model and incorporates his example into his own identity standard. Darren believes that a good father is someone who takes care of his family both financially and emotionally, so his identity meanings center on financial and emotional provision. He calls himself "a family man" (W2) and ties this identity to lessons that his own father taught him; that is, to work hard, to be there, and to support one's family. Although Darren calls his father "a hustler," he can attribute this behavior to his father's belief that a man must put his family first and do what he needs to do to

provide for his family. He adopts a similar standard for himself. In describing himself as a father, Darren is explicit about the importance of self-sacrifice:

> I think of my family first. Foremost. [Most people] think about themselves [and] what they're going to do for themselves and how they're going to do. . . . I think about my family [and] what do I got to do for my family. . . . I don't think about myself. I don't say, well . . . I need them new Jordans [or] that new coat . . . I don't think about that." (W2)

In cultivating the father he wants to be, and describing the father he is, Darren draws on the lessons learned from his father.

Nicholas also references his own father as instrumental in influencing his identity meanings for fatherhood. However, he holds him up as a wayward example, one he hopes not to emulate:

> I thank my father for showing me, you know what I'm saying, the wrong way to be a father. . . . Everything I knew I didn't want to do because of what he was doing . . . so that prepared me for when I had my kids, what not to do, you know? (W1)

Concentrating on the flaws of his father, Nicholas focuses on the father he does not want to be, an undesired or feared self (Ogilvie, 1987). Unfortunately, using his father as a negative role model does little to flesh out who Nicholas would like to be. When asked what makes a good father, Nicholas says he should "stand up and assume responsibilities . . . it's [not] just financial . . . [you need] to be there as a father" (W1). This identity meaning, responsibility, is rooted in what his father did not do. Unfortunately, lacking exposure to what it means to be responsible gives Nicholas little insight into how to interpret responsibility, thus leaving him at a loss for how to accordingly behave.

Some fathers can balance what they appreciate about their father with his shortcomings. For example, Jayden learned to parent from his own father. Although Jayden's parents divorced when he was young, and his father was absent for the first few years after they split up, his father "realized [that] wasn't the way to go" and recommitted to being involved in Jayden's life, instilling the value that "family comes first" in Jayden (W1). Jayden embraces this value and does not recreate the actions of his father. He draws on his father's mistakes as he finds new meanings to guide his behavior. Looking to his father as both a positive and a negative role model, Jayden says:

> I try and look at situations, like with my sisters and how my dad handled those situations, and I find he has a lot of good ways. But I try to take a lot of ways that he used to deal with those situations, and I try . . . to come up with better ideas as to how to do it. (W1)

Rather than just saying he will not do what his father did with his own daughters, Jayden considers both his father's strengths and his failures when formulating meanings associated with fatherhood.

We find that having a distant *positive* role model of fathering, like Darren's father or Jayden's, to an extent, gives men more insight and a clearer interpretation of the meaning of fatherhood than if they draw on negative role models as Nicholas does. For example, Darren and Jayden both note that their models showed them that family comes first, generating identity meanings of self-sacrifice and commitment. They also consider how their fathers succeeded or failed in enacting these meanings and use this information to further crystalize their conceptualizations of fatherhood. For Darren, his father's hard work, although as part of the urban poor's underground economy, is how his father prioritized family. For Jayden, his father put family first by reestablishing a relationship with his children even when it required sacrifice. The identity meanings of self-sacrifice and commitment are interpreted in different ways and revealed in the expression of different behaviors, depending on the men's situations. When men with these kinds of models become fathers, they think back to the important values and related behaviors of their own fathers and develop meanings about being a father in their own lives. Men like Nicholas, on the other hand, who rely on negative role models, lack this direction and have more ground to cover in determining the meanings of good fatherhood *and* how they will bring these meanings about in interaction. Nicholas knows that fathers should be responsible, and that fatherhood is not just about financial support, but he is unable to convert what *not* to do into clear meanings that will help guide his behavior.

Like many of the other men in our sample, these men draw from experiences with their fathers when they were young, rather than from their relationships with their fathers today (Masciadrelli et al., 2006). This temporal distance can make acquiring meanings difficult. We find that even men who credit their own fathers or others from their past as helpful in meaning-making benefit from current role models. Two fathers who benefit from contemporary models are Richard and Ben.

Richard sees the influence that his grandfather, who raised him in the South, had on him and his fathering. "[My grandfather] was a good man. He took me out and worked on cars and did different things and talked to me" (W2). With this experience, Richard regards quality time and good communication between him and his children as core to being a good father. However, while these meanings are inspired by his grandfather, he draws on Dan Conner, the fictional father from the sitcom *Roseanne*, in thinking about how to realize them in daily interactions. Richard sees Dan, who is often with his children while Roseanne works outside the home, as taking an active role with his children, and he strives to do the same. Like his grandfather, he wants to spend quality time with his children, to talk to them, and to be firm, but he also wants to try to understand his children like Dan works to do. He sees Dan as having a good balance of loving support system and disciplinarian. He explains, "I'm not their friend, I'm their father. We can do friendly stuff and we can get along eye-to-eye. But when you want to go off the deep end,

my job is to bring you back into reality" (W3). Richard combines his early role model with a more contemporary model of parenting to generate self-meanings related to how he interacts with his children.

Ben began thinking about the father he wanted to be when he was young. He knew that he wanted to be nothing like his absent father. He thinks about all the things he missed out on as a child, and all the things his father missed out on by not being around, in crafting a different fatherhood for himself. When he met Carla, they began talking early on about the life they wanted together, including the kind of parents they wanted to be. Unlike Ben, Carla had a close relationship with her father. Even today, he is the kind of father that she hopes her children will have, balancing both presence and provision. In sharing why her father was a good father to her growing up, Carla says, "He was always there. He was always there. We never went hungry, we never . . . had the lights got cut off, never. Water, gas, none of that stuff got cut off."

Although Ben and his father-in-law have a strained relationship, Ben hopes to achieve a similar balance as a father. Aspiring to that contemporary, cherished model who is both involved and a financial provider makes it difficult for Ben when he becomes disabled and is unable to work outside the home. He feels that he is failing to live up to his identity standard. However, to verify his identity and to protect his self-esteem, he reinterprets his meanings by underscoring the importance of being involved and reframing what it means to provide. In describing how to be involved and provide, Ben emphasizes experiences:

> Doing things with the children. They tend to remember that stuff when they get older . . . take your child to a restaurant, you know. . . . [Get] some culture in them. . . . Teach them some manners. . . . Let them have some memories. Some FOND memories. . . . Reading with them. Taking them to museums . . . not just sitting in front of the TV all day. Getting out, just getting some fresh air. That kind of stuff. Play ball with them. That type of stuff. (W1)

In this exchange, Ben describes a clear picture of what it means to be involved, alongside a detailed account of what a father should provide, including skills, culture, and memories, with no mention of a paycheck. He modifies his identity meanings of involvement to align with his current situation.

Ben knows that he does not want to be an absent father, but by drawing on close, contemporary relationships, his partner Carla and her relationship with her father, he cultivates clear meanings for himself with a clear benchmark against which to judge his performance as a father. Carla also recognizes all that Ben does, sharing: "I think Ben's a good father. I believe he is. He loves those boys. He'll do anything for them." Her admiration serves as positive feedback, a reflected appraisal that offers identity verification and reinforces Ben's identity meanings for fatherhood. We now turn to the explicit role of this type of feedback in aiding in identity verification or the lack thereof.

Evaluative Feedback

Brandon had a strong model of fatherhood: his stepfather. Brandon thinks back to when he was young and the things that he was able to do with his stepfather simply because they lived together: "I owe him a lot, you know what I'm saying? [He is a] real good guy, [takes] care of my mother real well and taught me a lot of things my father couldn't teach me, just from his presence" (W2). Because he lived with his stepfather, Brandon remembers the everyday interactions they shared, like shooting hoops in the back alley or him helping Brandon with his homework. By comparing his stepfather, who was always there, and his father, whom he had to visit, Brandon generates identity meanings of fatherhood oriented around presence and involvement. He says, "A good father is just his physical presence and his physical showing of love and all that kind of stuff" (W2). He sees involvement as something that will emerge from being present, but it doesn't, and he struggles to live up to his wife's expectations for a partner in parenting.

After two children, Amelia has seen what "present" looked like with small children, and, like many new mothers, she wants more. Realizing that Brandon is unlikely to become more involved on his own, as his memories of involvement are wrapped up in things fathers do with older children like playing sports or schoolwork, she realizes that she needs to explicitly ask for what she wants. When Amelia goes back to work after giving birth to their third child, she leaves Brandon to watch the kids during the day. She expects him to manage things on his own. When she calls him one day during her break at work and Brandon tells her he is overwhelmed and needs her help, she says, "Oh! Welcome to parenthood. Now you know what I go through [while you're] at work" (W2). This serves as a wake-up call for Brandon. They enroll in a church marriage class and begin focusing on open communication. "We teach each other. We teach each other, put it like that," Brandon says (W2). Amelia's explicit feedback and their open dialogue helps Brandon interpret involvement as being engaged rather than simply being around as daily life unfolds. He begins to believe being involved means meeting the day-to-day needs of his children rather than participating in occasional activities.

Because of his interaction with Amelia, he also acquires new meanings for his identity standard as a father. In a later interview, when pressed to share what it means to be a good father, Brandon expresses meanings oriented around responsibility and an openness to doing whatever one believes a mother might do, as parents are parents:

> **Interviewer:** Now, what is your ideal image of a good father? What do think of when you picture that?
>
> **Brandon:** Just . . . just responsible. Exact same way as the mother. . . . I really do believe there is an equal rights kind of thing. I believe that a good father should be able to step in and change those diapers, [cook] that meal, and run those kids wherever they have to go. And bathe those kids. And wipe your kids' [bottoms]. Whatever a mother would typically do, this father should be able to do. This father would be a father who can be responsible and there for their [kids].

> **Interviewer:** Now how would you say you've been [at] this?
>
> **Brandon:** I think I've been pretty good. I feel pretty good. I really believe that. I think I do, if I'm here by myself and they need me to dress them, iron clothes, I gotta be there. I'm there.

Now, Brandon can enact his identity as a father at home with his young children by behaving in ways consistent with his newly developed identity meanings. With Amelia's work schedule and no one else to help regularly, Brandon needs to perform daily care work for his children. "My responsibilities have increased. . . . I have no choice but to be more responsible" (W3). However, his understanding of who he should be as a father does not just come through what he has learned by being at home with the children. In the same exchange, he specifically acknowledges Amelia's influence in teaching him what it means to be a father:

> She's taught me a lot, too. She's taught me to be a better parent. . . . A father learns from the mother how to be the parent. So, you have to have a good mother. You have to be a good mother for me to be a good father. . . . It takes a good woman to make a good man. (W3)

In other words, despite having models to choose from, Brandon also benefits from his partner's explicit discussions of what she expects from him as a father. Amelia is both a source of his identity meanings and the person who helps verify his father identity. This, combined with the opportunity to serve as his children's primary caregiver while Amelia is at work, helps Brandon realize his meanings of being a father in everyday interactions with his children.

Without explicit feedback like Amelia's, it can be difficult for men to know whether their father identities are being verified within and across situations. When Gary's daughter, Jandy, is born, he is desperate to be more involved than he was with his son from a previous relationship, but he is unsure how to interact with a child. He has nothing to draw on from childhood, as he had no relationship with his father, so he tries to draw on contemporary models for meaning. He knows that his cousin takes care of his family, but Gary is unsure how this works in day-to-day life. Similarly, he finds that television dads offer incomplete information on how to father. Looking for something more tangible, Gary thinks back to all that his mother did for him as a single mom, but is unable to translate that into fathering. Ultimately, he hopes fatherhood is something he will grow into: "you just learn what not to do and what to do" (W2).

Unfortunately, Gary's girlfriend, Tonisha, is unable to offer much guidance. Also raised by a single mother, Tonisha does not know any fathers other than Gary. She is unsure what a father, let alone a good father, should do. Despite Gary's eagerness to be involved, in the early months of Jandy's life, Tonisha refuses to leave Gary alone with her for more than an hour or so.

> I don't think I would be comfortable with him watching her for the whole day. I mean he's never done it. I'm usually here when he's playing with her. . . . I'm just nervous about leaving her alone with him the whole day. I don't think that he would do anything. . . . I don't know if he could handle [the pressure]. (W1)

When a mother takes charge of everything for a child, not allowing the child's father to connect with, or care for, their child, she is engaging in "gatekeeping" (Adamsons, 2010). This limits fathers' opportunity to be as involved as either parent might like and prevents men from acquiring meanings associated with the father identity. It also signals that the women in their lives do not trust them as fathers, and this non-verifying identity feedback implies a man is not a good father, further alienating him from his child or his family.

Both Gary and Tonisha are hurt by her gatekeeping. He fears that he is headed down the same path with Jandy that he took with his son. "When I hear stuff [from Tonisha] about not seeing her, [it] just upsets me. To no end. [How am I] going to get to know her? And then all the time I'm not spending with my son, it's hurting me. You know. It hurts inside" (W1). The gatekeeping also becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, leaving most of the parenting to Tonisha. She claims Gary "doesn't really do that much" (W3) when it comes to taking care of Jandy, although she admits that she does not ask much of him. "I think that part of [our lack of communication is] me, I don't want to, you know, really say anything" (W2). Without experience or instruction, the things that would help provide meaning to the father identity, it is unlikely that Gary's behavior will change. In fact, locking him out of parenting makes him less involved and less committed to the family. Ultimately, Tonisha and Gary break up, and he moves to Wichita, seeing Jandy only occasionally.

For these men, significant others influence the meanings of their identity standard as fathers, for better or worse, through explicit teaching and evaluative feedback. Opportunities to enact the father identity in response to constructive criticism generally lead to clearer father identity meanings. Gatekeeping, on the other hand, makes enacting the father identity difficult. This not only pushes fathers away, but leaves them unlikely to refine their standards or to consider how they might be realized in interaction.

Is It Ultimately Relationship Quality?

Although one might assume that the difference between Gary and Tonisha and many of the previous couples' communication about fathering is related to the quality of their relationships, our results suggest that a good relationship does not guarantee the type of feedback that helps to foster clear identity meanings or corresponding behavior. Many significant others also lack clear meanings about fatherhood. Some mothers, like Tonisha, have no idea what to expect, let alone desire, from a father. Others are hesitant to be critical even if it might help develop meanings because they fear the men might leave or because they lack leverage in the relationship (Collett, 2010). However, by withholding criticism, women deprive men of important feedback that could compel them to become

more engaged as fathers and to sharpen meanings that could guide men's behavior and enhance their ability to experience identity verification.

Larissa and Robert have a strong connection. In postscripts of interviews, interviewers describe the two of them as a solid, committed couple. Larissa spends much of the interviews lovingly touching Robert, and the interviewers note that the couple spend a lot of time looking at each other and tend to interact in a warm, lighthearted way. Although it takes two people to make a relationship, the interviewers credit Larissa for their closeness and success. "She really carries them," one interviewer says (W2). One of the ways she does this is by showering Robert with praise. It is not that Larissa thinks that Robert could not be a better father; she holds back because she is afraid that any criticism will validate Robert's biggest fear: failing at fatherhood.

Larissa knows that Robert was terrified at the prospect of becoming a father. His own father left, abandoning him, his mother, and his siblings, when Robert was very young. Robert hates his father for leaving and desperately wants "to be the father he never had" (W1). However, growing up without a father left Robert with "no idea" what makes a good one. When pushed to come up with something by the interviewer, Robert emphatically replies, "A good dad is THERE" (W2). Unfortunately, this unclear meaning of fathering provides Robert with little direction for how he should behave, and makes it difficult for him to evaluate his success in the role. As a result, when asked if he is a good father, Robert says, "I have NO idea."

Larissa realizes that Robert's fear of failing as a father is a big burden for him, and she seeks to alleviate that fear. "I don't think he feels he can stand up [to this image of the father he never had], but he's a great father" (W1). Throughout the interviews, she is one of Robert's biggest cheerleaders: "He's doing a great job of being a dad. I mean, it's hard to do something that you've never done before. You know?" (W2). Each interview wave, Larissa talks about how much their son Garrett loves being in his father's lap, about how he clamors for his father whenever he is around, and how he waits at the door for his father to return from work. "He loves his father to death," Larissa says (W2). Consistently linking Robert's success as a father not to what Robert does, but to what Garrett does, disconnects Robert's identity as a father from anything he has control over.

Larissa's positive appraisal of Robert's fathering, rooted in Garrett's actions rather than Robert's behavior, also does little to cultivate a clearer identity meaning for Robert. Although he often takes care of Garrett on his day off and is as comfortable bathing him or cooking for him as Larissa is, these behaviors are not linked to an understanding of what it means to be a father. Even after these experiences, Robert says, "I don't know where the father really fits in" (W3). This is largely the result of Larissa's hesitation to express any disappointment, and her use of Garrett's behavior, rather than Robert's, to situate the father identity. As the interviewers note in an early interview, "there may be some stuff that mom's not talking about and dad's overlooking" (W2). Ultimately, Larissa's concern about confirming Robert's fear of being a bad father is an obstacle to his development of identity meanings associated with fatherhood. Without such

meanings, Robert struggles to determine appropriate fathering behaviors, and misses out on the positive affect and commitment he might gain with lines of action that could produce identity verification.

Larissa is not alone in focusing on her child's behavior rather than her partner's. Other mothers also evaluate fathers by emphasizing their young children's reactions rather than by critiquing the men's behavior. This allows them to provide positive feedback with little substance, and ultimately perpetuates men's unclear identity meanings that offer meager behavioral guidance. This is true even for men like Robert who play an important role in the day-to-day life of their children.

Scott tends to be under-involved, even though he spends a lot of time as his children's primary caregiver while his partner, Laura, works. Laura chooses not to give Scott any negative feedback about his fathering or to express that she wants him to do more around the house while she is at work. Unlike Larissa, who holds back out of fear of hurting Robert, Laura does so out of fear that Scott will leave if she is too critical. She worries that being raised without a father would negatively affect her children:

> Let me tell you something . . . I've left [relationships] before, the only difference is I have children involved. And [I] really don't want to leave, cuz . . . cuz that would break my children's heart, you know. But he's not a bad guy, I just don't want [to be] used. (W1)

Scott is confident about his performance as a father, saying, "Put me in a father contest and I would win" (W3). Laura disagrees and sees him as an under-involved partner, someone who focuses only on daily care and nothing else, but her avoidance of negative feedback perpetuates Scott's under-performance.

Although the fathers in this section demonstrate unclear meaning-making, significant others could help sharpen their identity meanings. If these men received explicit feedback, or even more subtle evaluation cues that could help inform reflected appraisals, it is likely that they would develop clearer meanings and corresponding behavior tied to those meanings.

Conclusion

The experiences of these fathers highlight the role significant others, and particularly partners, play in men's development of clear meanings for themselves as fathers. Even for men who grew up with strong, positive models of fatherhood, significant others can help men shape their identity meanings in everyday parenting through modeling and feedback. The most influential others are those who are temporally, spatially, and relationally close, although close relationships do not always foster open communication, the construction of clear identity meanings, or related behavior that demonstrates good parenting.

In situations where women and others make their expectations clear, men often develop identity meanings that translate into specific behaviors. However, if significant others hold their criticism back, men may interpret this as evidence that their current approach to fatherhood, even if lackluster, is acceptable. They are also left without a clear idea of what lines of action make a good father. Without meanings to guide their behavior, these men flounder and tend to be less engaged with, and less committed to, their families.

Our results offer a specific mechanism for how a healthy mother–father relationship might enhance the father's relationship with the child (Carlson and McLanahan, 2000), as it is in these relationships that men come to understand who they can and should be as fathers. Strong connections between parents provide multiple avenues for constructive influence in identity processes. However, good relationships alone are not sufficient. Men who have significant others who are willing and able to help them develop meanings for themselves as fathers, either explicitly through dialogue or implicitly as models, and who offer honest evaluations of their performances considering those expectations, are more likely to have well-developed, clear identity meanings tied to fathering than those whose partners hold back to protect egos or to keep the peace.

Consistent with other research, we find that modeling is a key way that men learn what it means to be a parent (Hawkins, Christiansen, Sargent, and Hill, 1993), and in this process, significant others are more influential than models who are distant or estranged (Masciadrelli et al., 2006). Fathers like Brandon demonstrate that even men who enter parenthood with strong, positive models may be influenced by more proximate others. Although expectations that fathers have for themselves may be a strong predictor of their affective and instrumental involvement with infants (Cook, Jones, Dick, Singh, 2005), expectations are part of a dynamic process. Men modify their early expectations of themselves as fathers in response to the reality of parenting. For example, when Ben is no longer able to work outside the home as the family's main provider, he transforms his view on what it means to provide to a form he can deliver on.

Although it should not be a mother's responsibility to make men into fathers, we find that they are instrumental in the process. Mothers who are unable or unwilling to communicate what they want from their children's fathers tend to be in relationships with fathers who fall short when it comes to care work. Larissa wants to help generate a "good father" identity for Robert, but her endless praise only serves to support the unclear identity meaning of fatherhood he already has. Her praise does little to cultivate clearer meanings for Robert. Part of the problem is Robert's lack of a father figure or role model in early life. Both men and women who are raised by single mothers struggle to obtain specific meanings for fathering. They are generally satisfied with the vague meaning of a father who is "there," unlike their own absent or deadbeat fathers.

Our results not only enhance our understanding of fathers, but also of identity processes in general. We see the power others have, not only in providing feedback

on performances, but also in shaping identity meanings that are used to guide and evaluate future behavior. This insight contributes to recent efforts to merge divergent, yet complementary, approaches in identity theory (Serpe and Stryker, 2011; Stets and Serpe, 2013). Although the perceptual control approach (Burke and Stets, 2009) has largely assumed that meanings come from socialization or culture, here we draw on the interactional approach (McCall and Simmons, 1978) to show how others can be direct sources of identity meanings. Combining the two, we demonstrate how important our current significant others are in the process of negotiating and developing the identity meanings that are central to action (Merolla et al., 2012). One of the primary explanations for men's under-involvement despite the adoption of the "involved father" identity is that they lack role models, either because their fathers focused more on breadwinning or because they were absent altogether. In this research, we see that interactions with others can directly shape the meanings that constitute one's identity standard, in addition to increasing the salience of, and commitment to, specific identities (Merolla et al., 2012).

Although we expect significant others to have a similar impact on the relationship between one's identity standard, meanings, and behavior across a variety of identities, particularly those related to families and household, we are unable to explore this with our data. Similarly, although we believe that the rapidly changing expectations for fathers have affected access to models for men across the socioeconomic spectrum, and that partners play key roles in men's identities as fathers and partners in general, we are unable to generalize to other social classes and demographic groups. Future research should continue to explore these processes.

We also hope that others will continue to attend to the connection between the various research programs in identity theory (structural, interactional, and perceptual control). Although these programs have developed in relative isolation, they are complementary and often connected (Stets and Serpe, 2013). The structural model (Stryker, 1980) helps us understand the importance of the father identity and the likelihood that a man will enact it; why one father will spend his Saturday taking his children to the zoo, while another goes into the office or plays golf with friends (Serpe and Stryker, 2011). The interactional model (McCall and Simmons, 1978) complements this, adding insight into individual variation in what it means to be a father and the importance of others in shaping those perceptions, perhaps explaining why one man might see going into the office on a Saturday as much related to being a good father as another does a trip to the zoo.

Finally, the perceptual control model (Burke and Stets, 2009) imports those meanings into internal processes, thus linking them to behavior, self-perceptions, and emotions and helping us understand why clear meanings tend to generate an involved, intentional approach to parenting (Collett et al., 2015). As this research on fathers shows, integrating the interactional sources of variation in identity standards is an important line of inquiry for social psychologists to continue to explore.

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