LOW-INCOME FATHERING AND FAMILY COMPLEXITY IN AN ERA OF RISING INEQUALITY

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![Image of a group of men with a circle highlighting one individual]
Era of Rising Inequality and Complexity, 1985-2010

- Income inequality gap increases
- Families grow more complex across race, class, and ethnicity; more diverse family configurations
  - Women’s entry into the workforce
  - Men’s stagnant wages

**FIGURE 1**
Share of Nation’s Income Gains Going to Top 1 Percent at Highest Level Since 1920s

Source: CBPP calculations based on data from Piketty and Saez
LINKING COMPLEXITY AND FATHERING

- How do we study family change? (Morgan et al, 2008)
- Who are low-income men and what is their role as fathers in families?
FAMILY COMPLEXITY

• What is family complexity?
  • Families have always been complex (Handel & Hess, Family Worlds, 1959)
  • Conley (2009)
    • Dynamic polygamy
    • High rates of relationship formation & dissolution
    • Fragmentation of intimacies
    • Electrons in network of love & human connection
  • Klinenberg (2012)
    • Living arrangements of “solo” adults
FAMILY COMPLEXITY

- What is family complexity?
  - Goldschneider & Bures (2003)
    - Household that contains family with two or more adults who are related but not married and could be expected to live separately
  - Carlson & Furstenberg (2006)
  - Meyer, Cancian, & Cook (2005); Cancian, Meyer, & Cook, 2011)
    - Multi partner fertility among low income unmarried couples
  - Thomson/McLanahan (2012)
    - Stepfamilies
    - Nonmarital unions with half siblings, step siblings
    - Instability and number of transitions
    - Link to family income, parenting processes, child outcomes
FAMILY COMPLEXITY

- What is family complexity?
  - What do we call these diverse family configurations?
  - How do we measure them?
  - Statuses without norms
  - Relationships we don’t have names for
FAMILY COMPLEXITY

• Theorizing from experiences of low-income families of color
  • Coontz, 2000; Crosby-Burnett & Lewis, 1999; Stack & Burton, 1993
• Starting with experiences of low-income fathers who sit at center of networks of family complexity
# Family Complexity (Roy & Waller, 2012)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension of complexity</th>
<th>Common approach</th>
<th>Qualitative insights</th>
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Low-income men (ACS 2008-2010)

- Between ages of 18-44, twice FPL ($23,404 for individual), and less than four year degree, not in prison or military
- 28% of all men in United States ages 18-44 in 2010
- 93% live in metropolitan areas
- Diversity
  - 45% White
  - 32% Latino
  - 16% African American
- Growing population
  - 13 million in 2000
  - 16.5 million in 2010
Number of children under 18 living with mother only by family income: 2011

Internet Release Date: November 2011
LOW-INCOME MEN IN ERA OF RISING INEQUALITY

- Inequality in income & resources, employment, and educational attainment (Johnson, 2010; Hamer, 2002)
- Incarceration and militarization (Nurse, 2002; McDermid et al, 2005)
- Immigration (Cabrera & Garcia Coll, 2004)
- “Glocal” economic shifts (Bergmann, 2009)
- Family life
  - Polarized father involvement (Pleck, 2010)
  - Splitting parenting from partnering (Waller, 2002)
**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

- **Life course** (Giele & Elder, 1998)
  - Agency
  - Location in context
  - Linked lives
  - Multiple rhythms of time
    - Individual
    - Generational
    - Cohort
Kin work (Stack & Burton, 1993)

- Family members’ ongoing actions to regenerate families, maintain lifetime continuities, sustain intergenerational responsibilities, and reinforce shared values
- Shifts from couple focus to pedi-focal perspective
METHODS: SITES AND SAMPLES

• Life History Studies (2000-2004)
• Emerging Adulthood Study (2007-2012)
• Welfare, Children and Families Three City Study (1999-2004)
Methods: Sites and Samples

Life History Studies
• 150 low-income fathers in 4 community-based projects
  40 African American men in a fathering program in Chicago;
  40 incarcerated men in a work release correctional facility in Indiana;
  35 young African American men in a fathering program in Indianapolis;
  35 low-income men from child care programs in Chicago.

Race/ethnicity
  66% African American
  20% European American
  13% Latino

Diversity in age
  35%, 18-24 yrs
  36%, 25-35 yrs
  29%, 36 yrs and older
METHODS: SITES AND SAMPLES

Emerging Adulthood Study
22 African American men, Baltimore GED program
19 Salvadoran men, Langley Park GED program
Ages 18 – 24 yrs
**Methods: Sites and Samples**

**Family Ethnography**
- 215 African American, Mexican American, Puerto Rican, and Non-Hispanic White Families, with target child age 2 to 4, interviewed 18 to 24 months
- Follow-up interviews will take place every 6 months until completion of study
- ½ TANF and ½ Non-TANF
- 45 Families with a child under 8 years old with a disability

**Neighborhood Ethnography**

**Ethnography**

**Survey**

**Embedded Developmental Study**

Welfare, Children, & Families: A Three City Study
Methods: Data Collection & Analyses

Approach
Processes, contexts, and constructed meanings; discovery (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994)

Data Collection
Fieldwork and participant observation in community-based programs
Semi-structured retrospective protocol based on the life history calendar methodology

Analyses
Grounded theory approach with open, axial, and selective coding
(Now usually in that time spent what do you usually do?) In the morning when I pick him up, I usually feed him and change him and things like that and get him to my cousin’s, things he needs throughout the day. Spend some time playing with some things or I let him look at a little TV show with some bright colors stimulate him like that then I usually get him ready to go and we go to my cousin’s house. When I get there I kind of sit around with him for a little bit before I have to take my mother to work, she has to be at work by 8. So usually get to my cousin’s house about 7 and stay till about 7:30 spend a little time with him. Then I take my mother to work and then I begin my day. Then in the afternoon when I go and get him I usually spend at least a good hour and a half at my cousin’s house with him. Just seeing how things went throughout the day, playing with him, and playing with my other cousins - she has 3 others. Playing with them and then usually after that I take him over to his mothers. Depending on the time I sit over there for a half-hour or so before going home myself. So it’s a pretty good time, he recognizes me, he knows who I am, he acknowledges me, pleased to see me, things like that so I can tell that he distinguishes who I am.

(What’s that like for you? That he distinguishes you? What does that mean to you?) It means a lot because he’s young, and him being able to do that it’s developmental and that tells me that genetically, biologically he has an attachment to me being his father and that makes a difference to him as a child he can acknowledge who I am as opposed to other men that he may be around. It’s good for the limited time that it is, it’s not an all day every day thing that I’m seeing him and for him still being able to make the connection, that means a lot. And as it is that I’m not involved with his mother like that and don’t really see it going that way, I’m involved elsewhere right now and that makes a difference as he matures and grows older he’ll be able to see who I am in his life.

(How is it different? Your relationship with your father? How has that impacted you as you as you look at your son?) It’s impacted a lot. Often times it seems omniscient to me, it’s kind of eerie that the situation that’s becoming a young version of what father was. For whatever reason he was separated from my mother, was the same time participated in trying to raise me as best he could with the resources and assets he had out or to help me out or have knowledge of who my family was and things like that. It seems like I’m asking for this one because the way that he was brought to my attention and the way that it was acknowledged I was already in a relationship and had no idea. His mother was pregnant from the one time we were together we hadn’t talk much and I was under the impression that our relationship at that level was dissolved and not anymore. I didn’t think to make any effort to contact her and I moved on to a different mindset and my son we’ve been in a steady relationship up until the point that she acknowledged that he was about to be born even knowing it.

(If you didn’t know, this was a big secret?) Big secret. (Did you have any interaction with her during this period?) Actually one, I was involved with her Christmas break when I came home from school in December, via email and a few phone calls after I went back to school in January. And after that point she had
## Life History Grid Data

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1. Men’s development in complex families

2. Place:
Nurturance of children

3. Parenting relationship:
Kinscription

4. Family:
Extended multigenerational networks

5. Time:
Processes of family change
MEN’S DEVELOPMENT IN COMPLEX FAMILIES

• Socialization to care work at young age is critical
  • Adultification as “man of house” (Roy, Messina, Waters, & Smith, 2012; Burton, 2007)

• Negotiation of risk
  • These fathers are the same boys and adolescents...
  • Being at risk AND being a risk
I walk around and see how far I can go and see what is around - there is a park, so I can take my daughter there. Where I actually live, a three-block radius is OK. And I know where to go at a certain time, at night, I know not to go to this store. It's alright for me. I know how to conduct myself in certain situations. I know I won't be messed with. I am just there to live. Oscar, 25
Men’s Development in Complex Families

- Fathers navigate between mainstream and street expectations
  - Hybrid identity in fathering programs (Roy & Dyson, 2010)
- Health concerns: depression, shame and guilt
  - Trauma and loss, due to exposure to violence and peer survivorship (Smith & Roy, 2012)
Actually for one year I just stepped off and let everybody go. I ain’t do nothing, I didn’t go hang out with friends, I didn’t smoke, I didn’t drink, all I did was just stayed to myself and just thought for about a year. This was like last year. It was crazy. That whole year...that’s when I found out my grandmother was sick but she didn’t tell me she was going to die, not to worry me as much...so much shit I had to figure out...who I was gonna mess with, who I was gonna talk to, re-evaluating myself. I mean now I know what I have to do now. Empire, 18
Men’s Development in Complex Families

- Launch into independence
  - Intensive, concentrated resources
    - Son as recipient of resources
  - Investment over protracted duration
- Claim of dependence
  - Extensive, diffused resources
    - Son as contributor of resources
  - Payback for immediate need
  - Adultification does not allow for prolonged transition
  - Divestment by community and family
    - Son as possible risk, liability
Nurturance of Children

- Nurture means care—physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual—gauged by one’s conduct and the consequences for children’s positive development. It is responsive to the different needs of children at different ages. Thus nurture is not a static conception. It means more than simply doing; it also means the manner in which things are done, and their results for children. (Dowd 2000)
- Nurturance happens in context, in specific social and physical spaces.
Nurturance of Children

- Grand Mother
- Non bio grandfather
- Daughter
- Bio uncle
- Mother
- Non bio boyfriend
- Bio father
NURTURANCE OF CHILDREN

Grand Mother

Non bio grandfather

Daughter

Bio uncle

Bio great uncle

Bio uncle

Non bio great grandfather

Non bio great uncle

Non bio uncle

Non bio uncle

Non bio boyfriend

Mother

Bio father

Non bio neighbor
NURTURANCE OF CHILDREN

• Fatherhood as turning point
  • Personal development (Palkovitz, 2002)
  • Central generative experience
• Situated fathering (Marsiglio, Roy, & Fox, 2005)
  • Identity work across multiple households, living apart
I’m going to get [my daughter] what she needs. If I can’t get it, then I’m hurt because I can’t get something for her. If I ain’t got no way else, I’m going back to the bricks. To take care of mine. Got to do what I got to do for mine. Anything, by any means necessary, to do for mine. A man is one who will take care of his own. Bird, 20
Nurturance of Children

- Disengagement from risky behavior to protect themselves and their children (Roy, 2004)
My greatest fear is walking out of my house someday and getting shot or robbed. I mainly fear things that I can’t control. I don’t hang out in front of anyone’s house. I try not to go outside when it’s late. I don’t go anywhere without a certain plan… And I’m depressed constantly, not able to do things for myself, let alone my children. If I had a job, I could get back on track. The [rehab doctors] had me go see a psychiatrist. I was real stressed out and depressed about my arm and the job. [The shooting] happened right after my child was born. I’m unable to even pick her up. Eddie, 23
Interaction with their children is not confined to a household and stretches across multiple coparents—former spouses, on and off again girlfriends, or mothers of their children with whom they have fleeting intimate contact.

These two aspects—fathering that unfolds in many places and couple relationships that may not be at the center of family life—dramatically alter focus in understanding low income fathering.
Kinscription

• Fathers can play central roles as kinworkers
  • Kinscription (Roy & Burton, 2007)
    • Search for conventional father figures; implications for intimate relationships; protection of children and risk reduction
  • Requires fathers to rework their identities on a frequent (even daily) basis (Marsiglio & Roy, 2012)
    • Demands time and negotiation with other family members
When I was younger, my mom always said “You the man of the family” - a husband, a friend, a big brother, an uncle, a father, and all that in the same boat. I want to go learn, fall down and make mistakes on my own, and it’s harder to do now that someone depends on you to be the benefactor in their lives. It’s what my whole life is based on, me being the only son. It’s all based on family matters, and it’s taking its toll. Lamont, 24
KINSCRIPTION
“Babymama drama” reflects conflict over partnering and parenting roles (Roy & Dyson, 2005)
“Together but not together”
- Having children before commitment leaves unmarried parents in ambiguous relationships
- Suspension (Roy, Buckmiller, & McDowell, 2008)
I always say she’s my wife, we’ve been together since seventh grade, and there’s nothing stopping us from getting married. We just ain’t really right. I’m not working, but she’s working. When I was working, she wasn’t working. But I’m going to be with my kids, hoping that me and her will get married. The only thing I have to do is get my feet in the door, and we can get this thing going right. Leon, 35
Mother-father relationships are strongest predictors of father engagement with children across households

- Multiple partner parenting (Marsiglio & Roy, 2012)
My wife loves my other daughter. Her mother has been over here, my wife has met her, sat down and talked. There’s no animosity between them. I’m married to my wife, but Jackie’s mom still loves me, because I’m the father of her first child. It just works. I don’t know why. I think we all have an understanding for each other. My children understand who I am, who I’m married to. They know the boundaries, my wife does, the other mothers do. They can’t expect more than what I do. As long as everyone has that understanding, it all falls into place. Gil, 31
Mothers help their adult sons to secure involvement
- Paternal grandmothers (Roy, Dyson, & Jackson, 2009; Madhavan & Roy, 2011)

“New fatherhood” sets high expectations for provision
- Support from close relationships with their fathers (Roy, Vesely, Fitzgerald, Jones, 2010)

Men’s relationships with their own fathers differ by cohort
- Stability, liminality, & inquiry (Roy, 2006)
I want to choose to have a relationship with [my father]. He is sixty, and I want to know him, and what it is like. I have been away from my sons and my father has been away from me; my mother was living with someone else, like my sons’ mother is. I feel like I can learn something - I am in the same situation. He can tell me things that were going through his mind at the time, and through his mind now. He can tell me what he should have done but regrets he didn’t do (Miles, 30).
Extended Multigenerational Networks

- Family networks grow in complexity over the life course
  - Fathers’ central location in the networks
- Men link children to broad network of concerned and motivated paternal kin and friends
  - To replenish overly-burdened kin networks, provide additional role models for children, and enhance a range of informal social supports for children.
EXTENDED MULTIGENERATIONAL NETWORKS
EXTENDED MULTIGENERATIONAL NETWORKS
Most common pattern of involvement for low-income fathers, esp. African American low-income men, is flux (Mott, 1992)

- Non-custody to full custody to partial custody
- Care for social children with second partner but limited care for biological children with first partner
TRANSITORY FATHERING

Mother

Bio Father

Daughter
TRANSITORY FATHERING

Mother

Daughter

Bio Father
TRANSITORY FATHERING

Mother

Daughter

Non bio boyfriend

Non bio boyfriend

Non bio godfather

Bio Father
TRANSITORY FATHERING

- Mother
- Daughter
- Bio Father
- Non bio godfather
TRANSITORIAL FATHERING

- Mother
- Daughter
- Non bio boyfriend
- Bio Father
- Non bio godfather
PROCESSES OF FAMILY CHANGE

- Cohort differences (Roy, 2004)
  - Historical change and father involvement shape family complexity
  - Older cohort likely to hold stable job and establish family household by 25 yrs (40%)
  - Middle cohort less likely (20%)
  - Youngest cohort even less likely (10%)
Processes of Family Change

Younger men and family complexity
- Limited thoughts about pregnancy and child development
- Ill-prepared financially, educationally, emotionally
- Early failure in relationships, employment, involvement
- Continue attempts drive new levels of family complexity

Older men and family complexity
- Likely more multiple partnerships and children
- Balance finances, loyalties, time with children across households
- More stress as more is expected and at stake
Processes of Family Change

- Residence as status OR transitory fathering as process over time
- Marginalized status OR marginalization process
- Multipartner fertility status OR multipartner parenting

Rich (2011)
- Bad – need for justice system
- Sick – need for mental health intervention; “what’s wrong with you?”
- Injured – need to examine interpersonal and social contexts and processes; “what happened to you?”
IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH & PRACTICE

- Longitudinal designs to capture fluidity of family relationships
- Experience-based data collection
- Large-scale data collection efforts to capture comprehensive roster of family relationships to follow over time (Morgan et al., 2008)
IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH & PRACTICE

- Policies and programs target human capital resources effectively during transitions.
- Systems to manage transitions – family courts, child support, child welfare - do not recognize nature and level of family complexity.
  - Ill-informed assumptions about deadbeat dads or poor fathers, producing “types” of fathers that drive policymaking.
**Implications for Research & Practice**

- Family complexity, again, becomes a context for opportunities to develop nurturing relationships and partnerships
  - Father alliances
  - Engagement during second marriage
  - Valuing care on par with provision
  - Valuing interaction on par with coresidence
- Multiple avenues to affect change in low-income men’s parenting
IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH & PRACTICE

• Men want to do it all
  • More opportunities for kin work for low income men in complex family configurations

• Beyond motivation
  • Toward understanding of frustrated fathering
    • Due to inequalities
    • Due to challenges of complex family roles
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