Using Identity Processes to Understand Persistent Inequality in Parenting

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Abstract

Despite growing acceptance of a "new fatherhood" urging fathers to be engaged in family life, men's relative contributions to housework and child care have remained largely stagnant over the past twenty years. Using data from in-depth interviews, we describe how identity processes may contribute to this persistent inequality in parenting. We propose that men's expectations for themselves as fathers (i.e., identity standards) influence role-relevant behavior, and that the vague expectations many associate with "new fatherhood" both contribute to and result from men's underinvolvement. Consistent with this proposal, we find that while all fathers face difficulty living up to expectations of "new fatherhood," those with vague identity standards contribute less to carework and are less committed to the father identity than those with specific standards, in part because they are less likely to perceive a disconnect between their standards and behavior. We outline the implications of our results for future research in identity theory and for understanding inequality in households.

Keywords

family, identity processes, self and identity, inequality

Many Americans today believe that a "good father" must do more than simply provide for his family and men across socioeconomic groups "want to have close relationships with their children, and place great value on being involved [and] emotionally engaged" (Day 2011:73; Edin and Nelson 2013; Harrington, Van Deusen, and Humberd 2011).[1] However, men's behavior often falls short of these ideals. Although recent headlines suggest men spend more time doing housework and taking care of children than in the past, the absolute number of hours are small and still just half of women's contributions (Parker and Wang 2013). Even fathers who believe parents should share caregiving equally often report their partners provide more care (Harrington et al. 2011:23). In other words, expectations for fathers may be shifting, but their behavior is lagging behind (Wall and Arnold 2007).

Despite falling short of these ideals, a majority of American men rate themselves as "very good" or "excellent" fathers (Parker and Wang 2013). How is this possible when individuals compare their behavior to role-relevant expectations in order to determine how well they are performing in a particular identity (Burke and Stets 2009)? Furthermore, what effect do these positive evaluations have on the division of labor in households?

We explore these issues by examining identity processes among fathers using data from in-depth interviews, collected as part of the Time, Love, and Cash in Couples with Children (TLC3) study. Before presenting our results, we situate our study in recent research on both fatherhood and sociological studies of identity.

BACKGROUND

Identity and Fatherhood

The self is an ongoing social process. Actors adopt a particular identity—a polite person or a student—and draw on internalized meanings and expectations for those identities (also called identity standards) to engage in identity-relevant behavior in social situations. They use reflected appraisals (Cooley 1902) and other feedback to evaluate their performances and formulate perceptions of self in identity. If their self-perceptions match their identity standard, individuals experience self-verification and positive emotions that reinforce the previous behavior. If their self-perceptions diverge from the identity standard, they experience self-discrepancy, triggering

[1] For middle- and upper-class men, these increased expectations are largely added onto an expectation for financial support, but poor men often draw on the emotionally engaged father as an alternative to providing.

negative emotions that should lead to either a change in their behavior or abandoning the identity (Burke and Harrod 2005; Cast and Cantwell 2007; Higgins 1987). The larger the discrepancy, the more pronounced the response (Cantwell 2011; Stets and Osborn 2008). The process then begins again, either as the interaction continues or as the actor enters another setting.

Identity standards are a key component of this model. It is the comparison between identity standards and how one is perceived in the situation—and the resulting experience of self-verification or self-discrepancy—that leads to many outcomes of interest to social scientists. Despite their importance, current research does not fully consider how differences in identity standards may systematically shape such outcomes. We address this oversight by considering variation in men's identity standards for themselves as fathers and their perception of their performance in that role.

Cultural movement across forms of fatherhood (from distant breadwinner, to role model, to emotionally-involved father) has given men a variety of models to choose from, generating individualized and plural approaches to fatherhood (Miller 2011). This fluidity has advantages. For example, it allows many poor fathers—and others who are unable to provide financially for their families—to maintain a positive sense of self by engaging in alternative behaviors associated with fatherhood (e.g., caretaking, modeling values) (Edin and Nelson 2013). We argue this fluidity also has two consequential disadvantages.

First, fluidity in the fatherhood ideal may perpetuate inequality in households. Behavioral expectations for "new fathers" tend to be vague. A desire to "be there for his kids" or "do the best he can" (Edin and Nelson 2013) not only provides minimal direction for men but is a relatively easy benchmark to meet. Both the father who cares for his children's every need while his wife works nights and the father who chooses to live with his children and their mother, despite refusing to change diapers or feed or bathe his children, could interpret their behavior as "being there." In other words, vague expectations may allow men to interpret consistency between one's role performance and role expectations across a wide variety of actual contributions (Burke 1991; Burke and Stets 2009).

Second, vague expectations may negatively affect fathers' self-perceptions. A man who has a clear idea about what is expected of fathers (e.g., "changing diapers," "picking the kids up from school") has an opportunity to feel competent and efficacious when engaging in those behaviors. Verifying a vague identity, on the other hand, generates little efficacy in the

fatherhood role (Stets and Burke 2014). Therefore, fathers with vague standards could lose out on the opportunity to build efficacy-based self-esteem and may lack confidence in the role compared to those with more specific standards.

DATA AND METHODS

Our data come from the Time, Love, and Cash in Couples with Children study (England and Edin 2008). This project team conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 75 couples who had just had a baby.[2] Multiple waves of both individual and couple interviews began soon after that baby's birth and continued annually over the next four years. To qualify for the study, couples were romantically involved at Wave 1 (W1), with family incomes below $75,000 (and often well below this benchmark), and living in New York, Chicago, or Milwaukee. Interviews covered a wide range of topics from relationship history to role models for parenting. Interviews typically occurred in the couple's home and with the same interviewers over time to help establish rapport. Most interviews lasted between two and three hours, and all were recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

The Sample

The TLC3 study oversampled for unmarried couples and people of color (specifically black and Latino) and our sample[3] reflects that, with fewer than one-quarter identifying as white. Most of the parents were in their twenties, with fathers a couple years older, on average, than their partners. The majoritywere 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 low, particularly for raising a family in an urban area. Our couples' median household income was $30,000.[4] The vast majority of fathers had at least a high school diploma (71%) and fathers worked in a variety of fields (e.g., construction and trades, transportation, customer service). Many changed jobs during the study period. A significant minority (13%) was out of

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[2] These were a subsample of those originally interviewed for the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (McLanahan et al. 2000).

[3] We include 61 of the 75 couples in our study, omitting couples with too much missing data, particularly on questions related to parenting.

[4] In 2000, the median household income in the United States was $42,148 (Census.gov).

work or only working seasonally at some point during the interviews. Despite a widespread lack of financial and cultural resources, when men were asked, "Please think about how you feel about yourself as a father to [child]," the overwhelming majority rated themselves as "very good" or "excellent" fathers (41% and 34%, respectively, in Wave 1). To protect the anonymity of our couples, we use pseudonyms and modify some identifying characteristics when unimportant to the analysis and discussion.

Qualitative Analysis

We read all the available waves of interviews for each couple. The three authors met regularly to discuss cases and our reading of the transcripts. Working together, we classified the fathers on various dimensions (e.g., definitions of fatherhood, positive or negative views of self, involved or uninvolved fathers). By reading and rereading our summaries in various groupings, important patterns began to emerge. We tried to understand these patterns in light of existing theory, but found that although identity theory emerged as most relevant to our findings, the theory—as currently conceived—failed to fit our pattern of results. This prompted us to consider additional dimensions of identity processes (e.g., the specificity of identity standards) and the effect they might have on individuals and their behavior. We revisited the data in this light.

In contrast to a quantitative study that seeks to make empirical generalizations about the population of fathers or to report the prevalence of particular behaviors, our qualitative analysis seeks to specify and illuminate the processes linking specificity of standards and parenting behavior (Small 2009). In the spirit of qualitative inquiry, rather than report percentages or focus on numbers, we use the in-depth interviews to "provide a richly textured analysis of daily life . . . to advance theory" (Lareau 2012:675) about identity processes and effects based on patterns that emerged in our data.

PERSONAL DEFINITIONS OF FATHERHOOD

There is wide variation in the type of fathers men in our sample aspire to be. Some want to "bring home the bacon" (Malcolm),[5] others yearn to be good role models, and many eschew traditional expectations and want to be involved, like "Mr. Mom" (Reggie). Regardless of their

[5] Demographic details about the fathers whom we quote in this section are provided in the appendix.

primary focus, the overwhelming majority embraces some form of the “new father” model and expects to be present in their children’s lives (Edin and Nelson 2013; Harrington et al. 2011). That said, men’s ability to specify how they should be involved or what it means to be present varies substantially.

Men with specific identity standards have well-articulated and clear expectations of themselves that they link to particular behaviors. For example, Lance believes that a father should be “equally involved with the babies” (W1) yet not at the expense of “old-fashioned” expectations of financial support.[6] Over the course of his interviews, he suggests that a good father must work full-time and make the money but also spend whatever time he can with the kids. He should “keep the mother satisfied so she don’t drive the kids crazy” (W2). He should show his son how to protect himself and teach him sports, put together toy sets (because Lance believes women aren’t mechanically inclined [W1]), and teach his son to use the toilet. He also believes it is a father’s duty to chase away his daughter’s boyfriends (W3). Throughout the interviews, Lance and other fathers with specific definitions provide clear standards for how they, and other fathers, should be involved in family life.

However, the majority of men in our sample who embrace versions of “new fatherhood” had vague identity standards.[7] When asked what it meant to be a good father, they generally said it was important to just “be there,” to “be around,” or to “spend time” with their family and children, but few could specify what this meant. Even when interviewers followed up, these men were unable to articulate tangible, behavioral expectations for themselves as fathers. For example, Aaron repeatedly said in his interviews that it was his job as a father to be “responsible” and to “take care of his kids,” but when asked by an interviewer for specific examples of what he meant by “responsible,” Aaron was unable to expand on this vague claim, replying, “Just do what I’m supposed to do. That’s it” (W2).

Such variation is important because identity standards provide both a guide and a metric for identity-relevant behavior. Specific standards for fatherhood offer men tangible ways to enact the identity. When couched in “new fatherhood,” specific standards often involve contributions to child care and housework. By investing more time and effort to live up to their expectations,

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[6] To situate the interview quotes in the longitudinal study, we provide information on the wave of interviews from which the quote was drawn. Wave 1 (W1) were interviews conducted soon after the birth of the child, with subsequent waves (W2, W3, W4) roughly annually thereafter.

[7] Men whose definitions centered on breadwinning were much more likely to have specific standards for themselves.

fathers with specific standards generate confidence (e.g., positive emotion, efficacy) and commitment to the role while contributing to their households. They are able to do this, in part, because of the specific expectations they hold for themselves and the cyclical nature of identity processes. We describe this cyclical process in detail in the next section and shed light on how specificity—or the lack thereof—contributes to the persistent gender gap in parenting.

EFFECTS OF SPECIFICITY

Contributions to Carework

Men with specific definitions tend to contribute more to carework—housework and child care—than men with vague definitions (see appendix).[8] For example, Richard has specific standards for fatherhood that are inspired by Dan Conner, the fictional father on the sitcom *Roseanne*. Dan took an active role with his children, and Richard strives to do the same. Richard defines a good father as someone who is firm but who also spends time with his kids, tries to understand and communicate with them, and who is willing to admit when he is wrong. 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 in to reality" (W3). He sees his approach to parenting as "active" and "family-oriented" (W2). To live up to this expectation, he spends a lot of time with his children: "When I sit and watch television, I usually have one or two on me. . . . When I go someplace, I never go anyplace alone . . . someone is going to go with me" (W2). In addition to the fun, friendly stuff that Richard does—taking his kids out for ice cream or rollerblading in the park—Richard takes pride in the central role he plays in his household: "family cook" (W1). Beyond cooking, Richard and his wife, Ryanne, share in responsibilities for the house and children. Richard is as likely as Ryanne to change a diaper, wash dishes, or clean up the house.

Ron is another father with a specific definition of fatherhood. His is rooted in the belief that his family needs him and he should be there to guide his children and "pick them back up" if they make a mistake. "I need to help them with their homework, [to] know what is going on at school . . . what they're doing, what they're learning" (W2). Ron also contributes to the mundane

[8] This is not true among the small number of men in our sample whose specific identity standards center exclusively on breadwinning, as carework plays a minor role in their conceptions of fatherhood.

tasks of parenthood. His wife, Brittany, who stays home and is the main caregiver, brags about Ron's willingness to pitch in: "Even if he doesn't feel like it, you know . . . he'll come home from work [and] do whatever needs to be done with them" (W2). Ron is as likely to feed his sons and put them to bed as his wife is, Men who make effort to translate the values of egalitarianism or involvement representative of "new fatherhood" into tangible, specific behavioral expectations tend to make consistent contributions to housework and child care.

Men with vague expectations, on the other hand, fail to move beyond "being there," often leaving the day-to-day labor of parenting to their partners. Roberto sees the responsibilities of parenthood—both in caretaking and in financial provision—as equal. When asked to define fatherhood, Roberto emphasizes presence: "It isn't just about paying the child support. It's about being there with them, teaching them, talking to them, you know? . . . Do what the parents got to do" (W1). Even when Roberto is present, though, he is significantly less engaged with the baby than Rosaria. Although Roberto will feed Trina a bottle or help out here and there, he admits that he leaves most of the care to Rosaria, and when interviewers ask the couple about specific caregiving tasks, it becomes clear that Roberto does very little. He has never given his daughter a bath or helped with her hair and openly admits "I won't change diapers. That ain't me" (W1). Telling of his lack of contributions at home, when asked if being a parent is harder than he thought, Roberto responds, "don't know" (W2).

Similarly, Manuel believes that: "a good father [gives his] time. This is very important" (W2), but that "time" is not linked to any particular actions and is difficult to come by when Manuel is working six or seven days a week and coming home after his daughters are in bed. Without specific expectations for how one might spend that time or a specific amount of time, Manuel has difficulty living up to this vague expectation for himself.

Of course, Roberto and Manuel had partners who were stay-at-home mothers and could take on the majority of household labor and child care. It is possible that increased experience with carework helps men hone their standards. In other words, specific standards might not only influence involvement but also result from it (Cast 2003). This was certainly true for Garrett, a father who originally held a vague standard that a father should "be around for his child" (W2). Garrett's definition became more concrete when he lost his job and began staying home full-time with his daughter. In later interviews, when describing why he is a good father, Garrett says, "I take care of her. Make sure she doesn't get hurt. Feed her when she wants to get fed" (W3).

Experience in the role offered a more nuanced vision of what it means to be a father. Unfortunately, men like Garrett were the exception and not the rule. While Garrett's definition of fatherhood was radically changed by his experiences caring for his daughter, other men who serve as their children's primary caregivers are happy to resume a less involved approach to parenting when given the chance.

Self-Discrepancy

Fathers compare their definitions of fatherhood with their actual behavior to determine whether or not they are good fathers. As long as there is alignment between the two, men evaluate themselves positively. In this way, men with vague identity standards benefit from their diffuse expectations because they are able to perceive consistency across a range of behaviors. Consider Angelo, who believes that a good father is someone "who is trying to spend time with [his] family" (W2). Angelo judges that he is doing well as a father because even if he's not interacting with his son as much as he might like, they spend Saturdays together while his wife works. His wife, Paqui, explains:

> I'd rather have Jesus play around the house by his father versus a babysitter. But he's okay, he's not too much in the way. He knows better. . . . He's four and he can pretty much play alone and it's okay (W4).

While Angelo is spending time at home with his son, Jesus is playing alone while Angelo works around the house. Similarly, Jacob thinks that a father should be helpful and spend at least "a little bit of time" with his children (W2), so he evaluates himself positively because he occasionally changes or feeds his daughter (W3).

Not all men interpret their behavior and expectations as aligned. Fathers with specific identity standards, whose expectations for themselves are so well defined that it is clear when they fail to meet them, are much more likely to perceive a disconnect between their standards and behaviors than those with vague expectations. For example, Ron considers what he expects from himself as a father and his own behavior and worries that he spends too much time away from his family (W2). Jayden also sees himself falling short as a father, particularly in his struggle to be "stable enough to provide and support my family." Similarly, Ben has specific ideas about what a father should do with his children: take them to restaurants, teach them good manners, read to them, take them to museums, ensure they get fresh air (W2). However, money

is tight and he cannot always give his children the experiences he believes they should have. Ben admits that he is not a “perfect” father (W3) but thinks he is a “good” one (W2).

However, Ron, Jayden, and Ben are not disheartened. They continue to give fatherhood their best effort every day. Like other men with specific definitions, occasionally falling short does not threaten Jayden’s identity as a father because he views fatherhood as a constant learning process. He says, “I’m learning everyday how to be a better father. . . . Parenthood is something that you really can’t master, I don’t think. Everyday you’re learning something new” (W2). Jayden references his efforts to improve and his willingness to “take on the different obstacles of parenthood” as evidence he is a good dad (W3). Seen through this lens, mistakes or deficiencies in Jayden’s parenting are not fatal flaws but opportunities for growth.

In other words, although men with specific standards are more likely perceive self-discrepancy than those with vague standards, it appears to invigorate them. When the interviewer asks Richard if he thinks he is a good father, he replies:

> Sometimes I don’t. Sometimes I think I could be better. . . . If I thought I was a great dad, then I would probably be the worst dad in the world, so I think the doubt makes me stay on my toes. (W3)

These men appear to embrace the gap between the fathers they are and those they want to be.

Men with vague definitions, on the other hand, appear threatened by any disconnect. Although self-discrepancy is less common among these men because they are able to interpret consistency across a range of performances, when it occurs, men with vague standards appear discouraged. For example, Felix is disappointed in himself as a father. He sees spending time together as a key component of fatherhood, but Felix sees his children so infrequently that his ex-girlfriend has to remind him of the last time that he took them out (W4). Similarly despondent, Matthew says, “Right now if I was to rate myself between a 1 and 5, I would give myself a 1.5, because I’m not always there as much as I need to be” (W3).

Self-discrepancy is likely less problematic for men with specific standards because even when there is room for improvement, their specific standards give them a targeted goal to strive for in the future. For example, Alex says:

> A good father would spend time with your kids, you know? And that’s where most fathers including myself, fall short . . . sometimes I concentrate on getting

> money and working and working and working, and then next, you know, I neglect my kids sometimes. (W3)

When Alex notices himself falling short of his standards for himself as a father, he directs more attention toward his family and feels like a better father for these efforts.

Effort—and a sense that one is trying—is key. When men notice that they are not only falling short but also that they are doing nothing to change that, their self-evaluations suffer. As Aaron said, a man is a good father "as long as [he is] trying . . . and has [his] heart in the right place" (W2). Unless coupled with either effort or success, specific standards for fatherhood are not sufficient to generate positive conceptions of self.

Speaking of positive conceptions of self, although men with specific standards perceive room for improvement, their self-evaluations hold steady or even improve over time as they work to live up to expectations. Fathers with vague expectations, on the other hand, are much less likely to evaluate themselves more positively over time. In fact, these men tend to experience a decline in their self-evaluations between years three and five (see appendix). With little to live up to and little involvement in family life, these men fail to generate positive self-concepts in parenting. As a result, many become complacent or completely disengaged, with a few even dropping out of the TLC3 study (e.g., Roberto, Matthew).

Commitment

Men with specific standards for fatherhood generate greater commitment to the identity as they work to live up to expectations and experience success (Collett and Avelis 2011). When Jayden pushes harder and puts in more effort, he fosters positive relationships with his partner and children and enhances his commitment to fatherhood. Commitment both increases fathers' sensitivity to self-discrepancy and influences their responses to perceptions of shortcomings.

Reggie has a very clear idea about what he wants to be as a father and is very committed to the identity. He is deeply affected when his partner signals that he is not living up to what is expected of a father. Rather than abandoning the identity, Reggie embraces the feedback and works harder to satisfy her expectations. By the end of the study, he reports he is an excellent father. Another father, Patricio, fears that he sometimes fails to live up to his expectation that he is emotionally there for his children (e.g., able to communicate with his children, to talk openly with them). He admits that although he is committed to these standards, "it's hard, it's hard, very

hard," especially because he did not have that type of relationship with his own father. However, he also says, "I think I'm doing pretty good . . . I'm determined 100 percent, 150 percent, that I want to do this this way" (W3). He continues to stay engaged with his family through the highs and lows.

Men's commitment to their children and their identities as fathers is particularly clear when they experience rocky relationships. For example, Sam is able to articulate the specific ways that he lives up to his identity standard: being able to make her laugh and smile, teaching her to throw things in the trash, and knowing her fears (W2). With these experiences, he develops confidence in the role and a genuine commitment to being a father. When he and his wife separate and he moves in with his sister and her children, he desperately wants to remain involved in his family's life, and both he and his wife acknowledge his success in that regard (e.g., he continues to pick his daughters up from school every day) (W4). Other fathers demonstrated similar commitment. Garrett, whose definition became more developed over time, chose to stay married out of concern for his daughter rather than love for his wife. Ben, who felt his role was to provide rich cultural experiences for his children, remained dedicated to his family despite struggles in his marriage after extended family moves in.

Fathers with vague standards whose relationships were strained or ended, on the other hand, signaled lower levels of commitment to their families or fatherhood by being less likely to remain involved. Even though Roberto says that he cannot imagine what would happen to his daughter, Trina, if he and her mother broke up, "'Cause she's real close to me, and I can't even stand [that thought]. I can't even think about not being there, you know?" (W3), he cheats on his wife and leaves the family just a couple months later. When the interviewers ask his wife, Rosaria, if he will still be involved in their children's lives if they get divorced, she says, "He's barely around now. So I don't know" (W4).

Similarly, when Manuel and Alicia break up, interviewers ask Alicia how she thinks they will share parenting responsibilities with the new living arrangement:

> He never helped me when he was here. He never do anything like that—changing them, or. . . maybe like once or twice in their whole life. So, I don't think anything will be any different. . . And hey, I'm fine. I mean, I'm used to it, so (W4).

Although Manuel makes an effort to visit his daughters regularly after he moves out, he struggles to develop an involved, meaningful approach to coparenting after his relationship with Alicia dissolves.

Striving to live up to their specific standards, men like Jayden not only increase their commitment to their identities as fathers but also solidify their commitment to their families. These fathers are often in relationships marked by mutual love, strong bonds, and an expectation of a long life together as a family. Fathers with vague standards, on the other hand, tend to lose interest in the role or disengage from their families and their partners. This weakening of commitment appears to make their relationships more tenuous than those of men with specific standards and offers little opportunity for the development of more detailed definitions of fatherhood (Cast 2003).

DISCUSSION

Our findings suggest that the lack of a widely shared, specific cultural standard for fathers, as well as the flexibility afforded by prevailing ideas of contemporary fatherhood as “being there,” is an important contributor to the gap between the culture and conduct of fatherhood and the related persistent inequality in parenting. Because the definition of fatherhood is in flux, there is no specific identity standard of fatherhood to live up to (Burke and Stets 2009), giving men little role direction. Unfortunately, men who simply decided to “be there”—in contrast to their own absent fathers or other men in their neighborhood—often failed to formulate specific standards for themselves. Saying “I will not be a deadbeat” or “I will not abandon my family” led to vague standards that could be satisfied with any number of behaviors. Like Hochschild, ([1989] 2003), we find that these vague standards contribute to men’s underinvolvement.

Importantly, the consequences of specificity extend beyond behavior to self-perceptions and commitment. Living up to vague behavioral expectations may support one’s position in a father role, but it does little to generate a self-concept built around that identity or to produce the positive cognitive and affective outcomes that come from living up to specific identity standards (Stets and Burke 2014). Men with specific standards are more likely to experience self-discrepancy than those with vague standards, but this discrepancy appears to motivate them to invest more in the identity (Cantwell 2011). This increases confidence and commitment. In other

words, the division of labor in households is not the only thing that benefits from specific standards for fathers; men's self-concepts and relationships do as well.

Given the interconnectedness of the identity model, there are likely reciprocal effects between standards and outcomes. Men like Garrett and Jayden, who are given the opportunity to serve as their children's primary caregivers, may cultivate more specific standards for fatherhood based on their experiences. Similarly, men may draw on their commitment to the identity in forming positive self-perceptions and emotions. Although we present the results in a particular order, we do not mean to rule out the interdependence of these concepts or the potential that the causal arrows point in a number of directions.

We make two important contributions in this article. First, we advance topics currently underdeveloped in identity theory: variation in identity standards and self-processes in role performances that lack clear behavioral rules. Second, we enhance the sociological study of inequality in households—a line of research dominated in recent years by large-scale, quantitative studies—by clarifying the identity-based mechanisms behind inequality in household labor. This approach adds important insight by connecting micro-interactional processes to larger macro-structural outcomes (Ridgeway 2014).

We realize that our data represent a rather particular population, poor fathers. Ideally, a study on fathers would include men from a wide range of social classes. However, we argue that the demographics of this sample (low-income fathers, many unmarried) have little bearing on the processes highlighted here. First, research shows that these men are as likely as those in other groups to value fatherhood and embrace ideas about "new fathers" (Edin and Nelson 2013). Second, we are specifically interested in identity processes that operate across identities and social groups (Burke and Stets 2009). As such, we consider our findings applicable to fathers regardless of class background and an important contribution to sociological studies of families and inequality. In our work, we demonstrate a key mechanism through which identity standards shape fathers' behavior: the specificity of one's identity meanings. Although we believe the processes should hold, future research should explore identity processes among fathers with more economic, cultural, or social resources. Understanding the micro-level processes that sustain inequality is an important step in addressing it (Ridgeway 2014). Although many are keenly aware of the inequality inherent in the gendered division of parenting and child care, without disrupting the patterns seen here, it will likely persist.

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APPENDIX.

Information on Fathers Quoted in the Analysis

	Household Income[a]	Age[a]	Race[a]	Education[a]	Currently Working[a]	Identity Standard	Carework Contributions		Evaluation of Self as a Father[b]	
							Child Care	Housework	Year 3	Year 5
Aaron	$29,015	25	Black	Less than high school	Yes	Vague	None	Little	Good	Good
Alex	$62,500	31	Black	Some college/tech/trade	No	Specific	Majority	Some	Very good	Good
Angelo	$2,960	27	Latino	Some college/tech/trade	Yes	Vague	Varies	Some	Excellent	Good
Ben	$3,750	35	Black	High school/GED	No	Specific	Varies	Majority	Excellent	Excellent
Felix	$62,500	25	Latino	High school/GED	Yes	Vague	Little	Little	Good	Good
Garrett	$17,500	35	Black	High school/GED	No	V-to-S	Varies	Varies	Excellent	Excellent
Jacob	$17,500	24	Latino	Less than high school	Yes	Vague	Some	Little	Excellent	Excellent
Jayden	$62,500	23	White	Some college/tech/trade	Yes	Specific	Equal	Some	Very good	Very good
Lance	$22,500	26	White	Some college/tech/trade	Yes	Specific	Equal	Some	Excellent	
Malcolm	$30,000	23	Latino	Less than high school	Yes	Specific	None	None	Excellent	Good
Manuel	$22,500	33	Latino	High school/GED	No	Vague	Little	Varies	Excellent	Very good
Matthew	$30,000	26	Black	High school/GED	Yes	Vague	Little	Little	Excellent	
Reggie	$7,500	28	Black	High school/GED	Yes	V-to-S	Equal	None[c]	Very good	Excellent
Richard	$62,500	40	Black	Some college/tech/trade	Yes	Specific	Some	Equal	Very good	Very good
Roberto	$22,500	20	Black/ Latino	High school/GED	No	Vague	Little	Little	Very good	
Ron	$30,000	34	Latino	Some college/tech/trade	Yes	Specific	Little	Majority	Very good	Very good
Sam	$42,500	32	Black	High school/GED	Yes	Specific	Some	Some	Very good	Excellent

Note: Carework coding: none (0%-1%), little (<15%), some (20%-35%), equal (40%-60%), majority (>65%). V-to-S: movement from vague to specific; a marked specification of standards over time.

[a]At Wave 1 of Fragile Families.

[b] Year 3 is Wave 3 of Fragile Families, and Year 5 is Wave 4.

[c]In some cases, there were older children or live-in hired help who took care of the majority of housework.