

“It’s Like . . . You Discover a New Sense of Being”

Involved Fathering As an Evoker of Adult Development

ROB PALKOVITZ
University of Delaware

MARCELLA A. COPES
Coppin State College

TARA N. WOOLFOLK
University of Delaware

This qualitative study of forty men from a wide range of family contexts examines the relationships between fathering and men’s early adult development. Through assuming responsibility for fathering and continued involvement in child rearing, the fathers in this study perceived significant changes in their life course and personalities. Modes of change, while pervasive and profound, varied along divergent paths. One path characterized engagement in fathering as bringing a “jolt” to the life course. Substantive, but less dramatic changes were perceived by a second group of men who characterized father involvement as a “gentle evoker” of latent personality traits. A majority of men saw fatherhood as the single greatest shaper of their lives. As such, the study offers empirical support to the theoretically and anecdotally based idea that fathering alters the course of adult male development.

Key words: fathering, father involvement, adult development, parenting, generativity

For nearly fifty years, developmentalists and family scholars have discussed parenthood as a set of conditions and roles that facilitate adult development. Erikson (1950), for example, conceived the notion of *generativity*, simply defined as the ability to care for the next generation. He maintained that parenthood, the most frequent route to generativity, is a major developmental milestone in adulthood characterized by numerous opportunities and

Authors’ Note: This research was supported by a grant from the General University Research Fund, the College of Human Resources, and the Department of Individual and Family Studies at the University of Delaware. The Medical Research Institute of Delaware provided valuable support by recruiting and scheduling participants, providing research space, and assisting in transcription.

Men and Masculinities, Vol. 4 No. 1, July 2001 49-69
© 2001 Sage Publications

requirements for personal reorganization and growth (Erikson, 1968). His writings have depicted parenthood as “the first, and for many, the prime generative encounter” (Erikson 1964, 130). More recently, some Eriksonian theorists have explicitly described parenthood as a necessary, but not necessarily sufficient, condition for the achievement of generativity (cf. Anthony and Benedek 1970; Farrell and Rosenberg 1981; Snarey 1993). Simply stated, parenting has been broadly recognized as a central catalyst of adult development, but the details of causal links between parenting and adult development have not been elaborated.

During the past ten years, numerous statements published in the professional literature have attempted to establish more firmly the theoretical relationship between parenting and adult development (e.g., Hawkins et al. 1993). Some authors have explored the notion of parenthood as an impetus for developmental changes (Colarusso and Neimiroff 1982; Daniels and Weingarten 1988), while others approach the issue from an angle that considers parenting to be a catalyst for learning and for the development of new coping strategies (Newman and Newman 1988). Cowan (1988, 14) took this theoretical connection one step further, asserting that while it is not appropriate to view fatherhood as a developmental stage, there is “merit to considering fatherhood as an opportunity for increased differentiation and integration, a qualitative developmental change that can be summarized using . . . [Allport’s 1961] . . . concept of maturity.” The implications of making this connection between parenthood and developmental change are also explored in the literature by writers such as Palkovitz (1996), who hypothesized that parents engaging in greater involvement with their children will show greater developmental change in comparison with parents who are less involved in child rearing or adults not involved in raising children. Although this type of reasoning is widespread and congruous with developmental theory, empirical research specifically designed to test such assertions is rare.

Despite the clear acknowledgment that parenting has a potentially far-reaching effect on the adult development of those who have the experience, it seems that the dynamic nature of these effects and the implications of the ongoing exchange between parent and child are discussed somewhat less frequently. In her 1992 book *The Effect of Children on Parents*, Ambert (p. 5) addressed this partially by stating that “while the topics of reciprocity of effect and child effect were brought in two decades ago, the general literature merely pays lip service to them.” Still, even without extensive coverage of the issues of reciprocity and ongoing adult development, the general perspectives expressed in the professional developmental literature do indeed seem to reflect the nearly unanimous position of layperson parents: they are certain that they are very different people than they would have been had they never had children (Palkovitz 1994a). What is even more interesting than Ambert’s observation of superficial coverage of child effects on parents is the fact that no data seem to be available to decisively support the position that parenting

causes the *development* of adults. Certain demographic trends may point to a decline in people choosing parenthood: for example, fewer people becoming parents than in the past, increased prevalence of out-of-home child care, larger numbers of single-parent families, and fewer people able to spend large amounts of time in families with young children than seemed to be the case in the past. Even taking these trends into account, parenting is still the most often experienced developmental context of adults around the world. Since more than 90% of all people currently spend a significant portion of their adult years parenting children, it seems clear that it would be quite useful to study the effects of parenting on adult development. Although there is a considerable theoretical base and a prevalent understanding by professionals and laypersons alike that the experiences of parenting significantly affect our daily lives, until recently the long-term developmental consequences of parenting have been largely ignored.

There is a small, yet growing collection of empirical studies that report relationships between parental involvement in child rearing and adult development outcomes but that also leave room for the explication of more themes in future research efforts. Though a comprehensive and systematic review of this literature is beyond the scope of this article, Palkovitz (1996) has synthesized the central writings (see, e.g., Gutmann 1991; Heath 1978, 1991; Hooker and Fiese 1993; Livson 1981; Palkovitz 1984, 1994b; Pruett 1989; Rossi 1980; Sachs 1983; Snarey 1993; Vaillant 1977) and concluded that the empirical base is insufficient to unequivocally support causal links between parental involvement and adult development. However, even in literature that reports relationships between parent involvement and developmental outcomes, direct linkages between empirical findings and theories of adult development are seldom elaborated; samples have been unrepresentative; and often measures of adult development or parental involvement were not central to the data collection, largely due to the use of instruments derived from other measures less concerned with involvement. For all of these reasons, it seems important to undertake some empirical investigations with the primary focus being to explore the relationships between involvement in parenting and adult development.

Due to the sheer scope and range of potential independent and dependent variables and possible confounds (see Palkovitz 1996) in any single study that might attempt to address the issues comprehensively, the authors determined that the appropriate focus was a detailed, open-ended interview centered on participants' perceptions of the relationships between parenting and adult development. In this way, the empirical exploration may more closely reflect the voices of those who are "living" the implications of parenting as well as reflect the need for further exploration of what the relevant issues may encompass. Because the authors have been developing a program of research focused on fathering, and because past research has demonstrated that men and women may have certain distinctly different (i.e., gendered) experiences

with parenting, the decision was made to narrow the scope of the current project to focus on the relationships between fathering and adult development.

METHOD

Sample

The forty fathers who voluntarily participated in the interviews were recruited through newspapers in a suburban area in the eastern United States. The sample was chosen purposively with the intent of including a group of men whose fathering contexts encompassed a wide range and whose varied personal characteristics, ethnicities, and experiences would reflect the heterogeneity of these fathers, who might otherwise be seen as homogeneous on the basis of their choice to be involved. The sample included nine (23%) non-Caucasian fathers. The sample represented diversity in marital history, family structure, residential status, education, occupational achievement and status, degree of paternal involvement in child rearing, and father's age at time of first child's birth. Due to the qualitative nature of this study, the individual differences of the participants are not used to exert systematic control in regard to the study questions but rather to begin to identify and understand a range of patterns in contextual influences on fathering as it facilitates men's adult development. To qualify for inclusion in the sample, fathers could have children of any age, and the children could be biological, adopted, stepchildren or fictive kin. The fathers could either be coresident or living in another household. All men in the sample had at least one biological child, and the average father in the sample had two biological children ($M = 1.98$, $SD = 0.83$). Ten of the forty men fathered a total of nineteen stepchildren (range 1-4, $M = 1.90$ stepchildren per stepfather). The average age of first-born biological children was 10.00 years ($SD = 6.23$), and the average age at the time of men's transitions to fatherhood was 26.15 years ($SD = 5.03$).

Because previous research has demonstrated the importance of timing of fatherhood in affecting men's life course and intergenerational relationships (Cooney et al. 1993), particular attention was paid to the timing of fatherhood among men in the sample. For analytic purposes, fathers were divided into early-timing (ET), on-time (OT) and late-timing (LT) groupings. Men who were within one standard deviation of the mean age for making the transition to fatherhood were considered OT (22-31 years of age at birth of first child, $n = 28$, or 70% of the sample). Those one standard deviation below the mean (men 21 and younger) at the transition to fatherhood and those one standard deviation above (men 32 and older) were considered to be ET ($n = 7$, or 18% of the sample) and LT ($n = 5$, or 13% of the sample) fathers, respectively. A

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics (N = 40)

	<i>n</i>		<i>n</i>
Age		Education level	
20 to 25	5	Less than high school	1
26 to 30	6	High school/GED	8
31 to 35	10	Some college	15
36 to 40	9	Two-year college degree	5
41 to 45	10	Four-year college degree	5
Ethnicity		Graduate course work	5
White	31	Master's degree	1
African American	8	Doctoral course work	1
Hispanic	1	Ph.D.	1
Income ^a		Timing ^b	
0-10	4	ET (≤ 21)	7
>10 to 20	4	OT (22 to 31)	28
>20 to 30	5	LT (≥ 32)	5
>30 to 40	7		
>40 to 50	8		
>50 to 60	3		
>60 to 70	3		
>70 to 80	3		
>80 to 90	2		
>90 to 100	0		
>100	1		

NOTE: ET = early-timing father, OT = on-time father, LT = late-timing father.

a. Gross family income reported in bands of \$10,000.

b. Age at first transition to fatherhood.

summary of the demographic characteristics of the sample is presented in Table 1.

Procedures

All of the semistructured, open-ended interviews were conducted by the first author in a face-to-face setting, audiotaped, and transcribed. Interview questions and responses were assigned alphanumeric codes to allow the sorting of transcripts via computer for subsequent inductive analysis. Specifically, unique codes were created for each question that included participant identification numbers. Thus, transcripts could be searched by question codes, and respondents' remarks could be sorted by question and or participant number. This allowed manipulation of the data set so that completed transcripts could be analyzed for emergent themes. The researchers performed inductive data analyses loosely based on a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1998) without a priori categories of themes or theories to

classify men's responses to interview topics so that the themes could emerge from the participants' own voicing of the responses, rather than from the theoretical literature on fathering. The authors' career and role development contexts undoubtedly exerted influence in the analytic process and, as such, a word about those contexts is warranted. The first author is a father, is trained as a developmental psychologist, and has been studying fathering and development for a number of years. The second author is a parent and has researched and written about single-parent fathers and social support. The third author has engaged in nurturing behavior of other parents' children and has researched and written about both mothering and fathering as they relate to identity development.

In this investigation, analyses are limited to open-ended questions raised at the beginning of the interview and the closing questions from each session. The responses of the forty fathers to this series of four questions are summarized in the Results section. The questions were as follows:

1. Sometimes you hear men make statements like, "I'm a really different person than I would have otherwise been because I have children." Other men may feel that fatherhood has had little or no impact on who they are as people. Do you feel that fatherhood has played a major or a minor role in shaping who you are?
2. Aside from how you spend time and money, those are quantitative things, things you can stick a number on; "X hours here and X dollars there," do you feel that fatherhood has made you a qualitatively different person? Has it caused you to develop differently than you would have developed had you never been a father? Has it significantly affected who you are, your skills, your personality, or the course of your life?

Intervening between questions 2 and 3 was an interview lasting from sixty to ninety minutes that examined specific effects of fatherhood on marriage (or relationships with significant others), sexuality, relationships with other relatives, friendships, work history, community involvement, morality, religious beliefs and practices, values, household location, household organization, health practices, emotional experience, emotional expression, paternal roles, patterns of paternal involvement, and preparation for fatherhood. The final portion of the interview included the following:

3. We've looked at a lot of areas of your life, and in some of them you've said that, "yeah, fathering has made a difference" in who you are as a person. What I want to know now is how can you be sure that it's fatherhood that has changed you? How do you know that it's not just maturity or aging or your job or your marriage or your education? How do you know that it's fathering that has changed you?
4. In terms of rough percentages, if we take a look at who you are today, as a person, as a man, what percentage of you is who you are because of being a dad?

RESULTS

For the most part, study participants experienced the changes associated with fatherhood to be pervasive and profound. Some men were so invested in their roles as fathers that they could not even imagine what their lives would be like without children. Fatherhood had become central to their identities. Glen (34, OT, C),¹ a marketing executive and father of two biological children younger than seven years of age, stated,

I'm not sure I could separate what percent of me is not because of fatherhood. I'm just so enamored with it that I don't ever look at what I might have been, what could I be doing instead, where would I be. I'm where I want to be, I'm happy with what I'm doing. I don't feel the ability to disassociate myself from fatherhood.

When asked how much of who they were was accounted for by fatherhood (see question 4, above), the mean response was 56.33% (range = 20%-100%, *SD* = 27.52%). None of the study participants perceived that fatherhood had failed to exert an effect on them. Nelson (32, OT, H), a single-parent father of two children, equated fatherhood with change and indicated that those who disagree must not be "real" fathers:

The people who say they've changed are real fathers, I believe . . . fathers who say they haven't changed are just as selfish as they were prior to being fathers.

In one way or another, virtually all men expressed that fatherhood gave them purpose or further direction in life. This theme was voiced by Chris (25, ET, AA) a father of a biological daughter and stepfather of two teenaged children:

You can learn a lot about yourself as far as the person, if you could handle the pressure or the stress or whatever of being a father. It's just opened up a whole lot of doors because then you can want to teach your child something that you know . . . it's opened so many doors. You have a lot of places that you can go with this child, you know, than if you were just getting old or just getting mature, you're like, well, my life is over, I don't have too much to do. But you got a child, it gives you a second wind in life.

Thus it was apparent that, overall, fatherhood was perceived by the interviewees to be an opportunity to reflect on who they were as persons, and it provided them a context within which to refine their personalities.

MAJOR THEMES

Five major themes were represented in the responses of fathers to the study questions. First, fatherhood stimulates a "settling down" process; this

was expressed by almost half (45%) of the sample. Second, as expressed by 35% of the participants, fatherhood can cause one to become more "giving." Next, almost one-third (32%) of these fathers asserted that assuming a paternal role involves major "responsibility," and almost as many (29%) expressed themes reflecting concerns with "generativity." Finally, many of the fathers (29%) also reported that they experienced the effects of fatherhood as if they had been given a "jolt."

Settling Down

The most frequently expressed theme was that fatherhood had stimulated the men to settle down. Some men communicated the theme in terms of eliminating "wildness" from their lives, while others focused more on needed direction, maturity, and focus. Differences in how these themes were expressed seemed related to the relative degree of maturity the men had achieved before the transition to fatherhood. Donald (23, ET, C), a father of two, focused on putting away rebellion and the need to define a set of direction in his life when he said,

I think it [fathering] kind of settled me down a lot because I used to be like a real rebel. Then the kids kind of made my life a little bit more significant and my decisions more significant. It gave it more meaning . . . I would have been on a course setting really for nowhere for no reason and now I have definite points for definite reasons.

Donald's comments show that fathering led to a self-reflection and self-evaluation of his life course that initiated changes in his behavior and lifestyle because he had adopted a sense of responsibility. This was not uncommon. Similarly, Manuel (33, OT, AA), a father of two biological children and four stepchildren, stated,

When you have a child, you've got to take a serious look at your life. You got to really say to yourself, "Do you really want to keep going the way you're going?" I did still do a lot of things I was doing. I'm not going to say that I didn't. But I kind of cut back on a lot of them. I knew that I couldn't go to jail. Because I had a responsibility to a child. I knew that I had to be around in case that child needed me. And I always was.

Even where there are not obvious characteristics that warrant profound changes in the direction of one's path, fathering can initiate "settling down" types of transformations that are still significant, although seemingly more characterized by a commitment to activities and emotions consistent with one's path prior to the initiation of fatherhood than by an abrupt transformation. The perceived changes were, thus, more subtle for Neil (34, OT, C), a

father of three biological children, than they appeared to be for men like Donald. Shifts in self-perception appear to have been brought on by role engagement.

I've become someone different, actually, than who I thought I was. I would have to say and put it that way. I thought I was a kid. I always saw myself as a kid. But when I have to be a dad, I can't be a kid, I have to be a dad. And so even though I may act like a kid and kind of want to be like that, I have to be a dad sometimes even when I don't want to be, and I have to make those decisions and I have to reason with my children So I guess that's helped me to grow up, become a lot more mature, slow down maybe. Not too much.

Becoming Less Self-centered and More Giving

Neil's aforementioned expression of the deepening sense of responsibility and caring brought on by fatherhood raises an additional issue that emerged as a major theme across the transcripts as a whole. While he speaks of the changes in his self-perception that came with the acceptance of his role as a father, his answer also connotes the sense that becoming a father may have intensified the desire to give to others rather than to center solely on oneself. That is to say, these men often stated that fatherhood had caused them to become more other oriented. Specifically, fathers had come to see that they were selfish and self-centered prior to having children. Interestingly enough, marriage did not seem to bring this revelation; it was engagement in fathering that caused men to become more family oriented, even when it cost them their own plans. Neil stated this theme in the following manner:

My life . . . when I'm by myself, a lot of times is for me, what I want to do for me, where I want to be headed or what I want. Me, me, me, my, my, my, now, now, now stuff. When I'm with them I have to refocus and say what they need, what they want—not always what they *want*, what would be good for them and to try to find a direction for them, especially when I don't know what direction I want to go . . . sometimes . . . I'd have to put what I want aside.

It was common for involved fathering to lead to a realization that men had to decenter from their own interests and pursuits and become oriented on what was best for the children. Nelson's comments reflect a major reordering of priorities:

You don't come first any longer. Once you have children they come first . . . they become number one in your life. Without children you can pursue any goal or anything in life that you want to provided that the money is there to do it . . . it's only you yourself that you have to worry about as opposed to when you have a child or children, you know, you have to worry about them as well. You can't be selfish when you have children.

For some men, having children and being involved with them led to a greater awareness of others' perspectives, needs, and a generally enhanced sensitivity to others' emotions. The reorganization of priorities is not just theoretical; it has consequences in terms of decisions, time management, and relationships. Bruce (41, LT, C), an office manager and father of four children, said,

Well, it's what I do with my activities, my spare time. There is no spare time. If there is any, it's spent with the children. I have absolutely no time for friends . . . before I'd socialize more with friends. You know, it's just completely even changed the way you think.

With other men, the change in priorities was not as radical as it was in Nelson's or Bruce's cases, but the shift in priorities and perspectives is no less real. Involvement with children leads to an increased awareness of others' perspectives and needs. Jeff (38, OT, C), a father of a school-aged boy and girl, stated,

I guess the joy of having them has made me more sensitive to things around me, especially as they pertain to the kids.

Fathering Entails Major Responsibilities

Approximately one-third of the sample spontaneously discussed the responsibilities of fatherhood. Assuming responsibility as an involved father ties to the previous theme, in that once responsibility is "bought into," choices are made that are nonoptimal in regard to self-gratification or self-advancement. Clifford (33, OT, AA), a father of two children and stepfather of one, put it this way:

I think I'm a more responsible person because I have children. I have to look out for them and not just me. I have to be more responsible to them. I have to worry about other people beside myself. If it wasn't for my children I would probably blow a lot of money I guess. It's a lot more responsibility, making me a more responsible person, I guess, basically.

Steve (35, ET, C), father of three and stepfather of one, makes a statement that shows how buying into responsibility then triggers other nonoptional aspects of fathering. He said,

There's no doubt about it. With kids comes responsibility. You have responsibility for another life and that changes your direction of what you want to do, what you can do, or what you don't want to do. You don't have certain choices, you have to provide for these kids. . . . I have to pretty much consider other people's aspects . . . my kids' especially.

Joseph (39, OT, AA), a divorced father of two young sons, noted a marked change in his assessment of responsibility with the birth of his children. It caused him to reflect on and ultimately change his career track, the lifestyle he was leading, and his social networks. The shift in emphasis on his responsibility to his children radically transformed his life course. He said,

See, I was a cop before. So I was like, I would be volunteering for anything. It's like anything. Before then [having kids], any kind of job they had, any kind of danger they had or something like that. I had no responsibilities or nothing so I would have kept on going as far as I could, looking for that ultimate rush somewhere. That's the way I looked at it. And then once they came in [the children], I started looking and seeing something called responsibility, like a lot of things slowed up after that. I couldn't work the way I wanted to, the company I was keeping, I don't know. Looking around, you just couldn't destroy as many people's lives as you wanted to, that's the way you look at it. It's like every day is a reckless one. Then all of a sudden you discover a new sense of being.

There are times when the responsibilities of fathering loom large in men's minds. They seem to confront their own limitations and inadequacies in new ways, in a context of involvement that has salience and subsequent cognitive and emotional repercussions. Specifically, engagement in fathering causes men to think about themselves in different ways. For example, multiple emotional and cognitive changes would occur in a former gang member who knows that he still takes illogical risks but who has thought about the consequences of risk taking and fathering (new cognitions concerning behavior) and recognizes the shame and longing associated with imprisonment and experiences strong feelings (emotional change) toward being there for a child.

When men have found a way to embrace the responsibilities of fatherhood, and yet at the same time see their inadequacies, a developmental pull is exerted. The relationships they have with their children seem to compel men to make themselves people who are more mature and responsible than they think they currently are. Thus, when men embrace involved fatherhood as something worth investing in, it has developmental consequences. Specifically, men's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are characterized by qualitative and long-lasting change associated with the experiences of fathering. The multifaceted nature of fathering leads men into complex balancing acts as they realize that they hold authority and power in their children's lives. And yet, this elicits ambivalence because of concern with abusing the authority and power they hold. Men engaged in involved fathering may confront their own shortcomings, yet see the need for growth, empowering, and transformation to give their children the best that they deserve. Neil elaborated on these responsibilities in the following manner:

Who I am. Yeah, it has affected who I am because when I come home through the door I'm not just Neil, the employee, Neil, the nice guy, Neil, the gospel singer, Neil, the whatever else I am. I'm *daddy* to them, and I've had to see that a lot of times. I have to force myself to see it sometimes because I come home thinking I'm somebody else, but they see me as somebody totally different. They see me as daddy, and so I want to be the person that they see. It doesn't really change me, but I have to change my thinking. And so it's quality-wise, it has helped me to be a dad and to try and fill that—that word *daddy* is just, to me it's like a huge gap that has to be filled in by an insignificant person, a person who's not sufficient to fill in that need. So I try to do that because I see that they need that. So it does change me and it transforms me from who I want to be outside of fatherhood to be a father. . . . It turns this guy that still thinks he's a high school teenager in some ways, maybe emotionally and financially, and other ways into somebody that holds great power and authority—even though I don't want those things, really I guess I do, part of me wants to. But I don't want to use them against the kids or anything. I have to hold that position.

Neil's comments suggest that he has the desire to provide guidance and direction and to fit his children's expectations of what a "daddy" is. His desire to grow personally to the place where he can be trusted with the great power and authority he holds in their lives illustrates the draw or developmental pull that children can exert on their fathers. This leads to a related theme, that of generativity.

Generativity Themes

Generativity can be simply defined as the developmental task of caring for the next generations (Erikson 1968). It was common for men in the sample to discuss their desire to see their children do better than they had personally, to overcome obstacles, to avoid mistakes, and to have greater opportunities than they themselves had experienced. Implicit in these desires was the realization that these results would not just come about by chance, but that they required investment and oversight by the fathers. James (43, OT, AA), a father of three biological children and three stepchildren, stated generativity themes in this manner:

The way I grew up, I grew up rough, and . . . now I have children I have to worry about. I have to mold them to keep them from doing the things I done. I want them to do better than me and their kids to do better than them. That's why I keep after all my kids. . . .

Men's desire for children to supersede their own growth, achievements, or stature involved a sense of fathers' transcending time and their own lives through the development of their children. Men spoke of having a stake in the success of the next generation by involved structuring, provision, guidance, and a push. Vicente (27, OT, AA), father of a nine-month-old biological daughter, said,

I was pretty much content with just life going on day-by-day, and one day I'll leave from here. Whereas now, I don't just want to leave from here. When I go, I want to make sure that I leave something behind to be remembered, which would be my daughter. Whatever I put in comes out.

Some fathers were cognizant and appreciative of the personal development they experienced by engaging in involved fathering. Though they were well aware of the personal investment and sacrifice that fathering cost them, they were able to articulate the reciprocally occurring development of their own character. Ken (45, OT, C), an upper-level executive who had been married, divorced, and remarried and who had fathered three children, all teens or in their twenties at the time of the interview, stated,

Ken: I think the quality of my life has been greatly enriched by having kids. I couldn't imagine not having that relationship . . . with kids.

Researcher: So, when you say it's been enriched, in terms of what?

Ken: A satisfaction out of being able to help another human being grow and develop their potential. And I think an enrichment in just being able to see life through their eyes . . . that's enriching and uplifting and rewarding and all those sorts of words.

Fatherhood May Be Experienced As a Jolt

Although many men in the sample stated positive effects of involved fathering, a significant proportion discussed fathering's having brought a shock to the system under which they were accustomed to living. Nearly one-third of the sample expressed the theme that fatherhood can be experienced as a major changer of lifestyle or self-concept. Bruce said,

It just seemed like . . . you just get jolted into these things. And it wasn't a direction I was headed in being single without, married without children.

In a similar manner, Chris indicated that becoming a father had been central in making major changes in his life trajectory. His relatives had predicted that he would be incarcerated prior to turning eighteen.

Researcher: Do you think they're right? Do you think you would have ended up [in jail]?

Chris: Yeah. I know that for a fact, yeah.

Researcher: What is it about having a kid that keeps you out of jail?

Chris: Thinking that I wouldn't want my daughter to come see me through eight inches of glass. That's not a very proud thing to me for kids to be out playing and saying, well, your dad's in jail. That's not a very good thing to a kid. So I try to stay from that as far as giving her that image of her dad. Then again, you're not really there as a dad either if you're in jail.

At times, assuming the responsibility for children causes men to postpone, alter, or give up pursuit of a dream, goal, or interest. In a sense, this is a different type of jolt, but nonetheless it derails the previous life trajectory. Michael (23, ET, AA), a father of three biological children younger than ten and three stepchildren in their teens, said,

I think fatherhood has played a major role because I had my kids so early . . . if I hadn't had my kids so early, if I hadn't had them at all, I probably would be . . . Let's see. My plans were to go to college and get a good job and all that, but all that had to be curtailed. Instead of going to the school of my choice, I ended up going to a community college and putting myself through. . . . Yeah, things are different because I have kids. But it's a decision that I made. That's pretty much it.

CLUSTERING OF THEMES RESULTS IN DIVERGENT PATHWAYS

While the five major themes could stand independently, they often came in clusters that suggested that there are distinctly divergent developmental consequences of having children and becoming involved fathers. Modes of change, while typically pervasive and profound, varied along two divergent paths. In one pathway, major, catalytic changes were perceived to be ushered in. Men fitting this pattern tended to have significant personal characteristics or life circumstances that they saw as obstacles to effective fathering (e.g., gang involvement, substance abuse, or a "partying" lifestyle that is inappropriate for involved fathers). Early-timing fathers more often experienced this pathway than men who made the transition to fatherhood on time or late in the life course. In this pattern, men tend to emphasize a cluster of themes including settling down, responsibility, and the jolt aspects of fatherhood. The jolt of fatherhood derails the path that men were on and brings a radical and deliberate change in lifestyle. As such, fathering is seen as catalytic in precipitating life course alterations. Manuel had a particularly profound transformation that he attributed to fatherhood. The following quote, though lengthy, weaves in each of the central elements of this developmental pathway and provides richness in description that is valuable in illustrating this more dramatic life course change. Manuel said,

I can even take this back to when my seventeen-year-old was born. Before then I was really rough and tumble on the street. My reputation is still known on the Westside. When I got around her I would mellow. There's a lot of things I would have done if it wasn't for her. There's no doubt. I would've been in jail for murder, there's no doubt. I would have been dead, there's no doubt. The things, the reason that I wouldn't put in to effect the things I wanted to do was because I would think of her. When the rest came into play, I knew that I had a responsibility to see that they go to school. That they're clothed, that they're

bathed, that they had the essentials of life. So there was a lot of things I cut out. Sure. I drank, I did my dirt out there, I still did my dirt, but when I was around them or when they needed me, I was there. Yeah they did turn my life around as far as I stopped carousing as much, I stopped raising as much hell as I did. I was more focused on them than I was on myself. I didn't take the drastic measures that I would have took before. I still would get somebody back. There was no way I could let go somebody doing something to me. But the ideas that I had in my head would not materialize. . . . When I was fourteen, I hung in gangs. I was known all over [this city]. I was one of the few people that could go through everybody's territory, okay. I had an attitude that if you did something to me, I was quick to get you back. I was a loner as far as hanging around people were concerned. I fought and had my head busted. I have been to jail eight times. When I say change of attitude, as I got older I thought of different ways of retaliation. Shooting people was not far off the mind. But when you have children . . . I tried to explain this to other people who talk about well I'm going to kill so and so and they got kids. When you have children, the thought might come to your mind, but you also think about what you're doing to the child. That's what I'm trying to say is that, yeah, the attitude has changed some, but as far as me going out here and shooting somebody or blowin' up somebody's house, throwing a Molotov cocktail, something like that which I was inclined to do in earlier years, after [my child] was born and the rest, you know, I kind of let things slide now . . . yeah I would say they changed my attitude in that retrospect. There's no doubt I would have been in jail years ago for murder without question. So I would say yeah it changed my attitude toward, I guess towards, I guess what I'm trying to say is I would be taking something from them if I go to jail. I would be taking away the father image away that they need. It wasn't necessarily taking the life, at that time it didn't matter, but I would be taking from them. I couldn't live with that.

In a life path that men experience to be considerably different than the radical transformations represented previously, some of those men interviewed felt that their lives were not significantly different than they would have otherwise been except that their children had somehow drawn out tendencies that had remained dormant until they became involved as fathers. Vicente stated,

Because of being a dad. Hum. I would say 45% of me is who I am because of being a dad. Because all these things have always, has always been in me. There again, it just took the fatherhood to really bring them out. It caused me to stand still for a minute and just look at everything, put a stop on everything just for a minute to take a real good look at life, where we're going with this thing now.

Study participants who perceived fatherhood to be more of a gentle evoker of latent tendencies were men who were relatively mature or well adjusted prior to making the transition to fatherhood. Some had stated that they had "sown their wild oats" earlier and had gotten such things "out of their systems" by the time they became fathers. Others felt that fatherhood had required relatively minor adjustments to their life course because they never

had major problems to begin with. Gilbert (42, LT, C), a father with one adolescent son, expressed this theme:

I don't believe I had any, should I say like, antisociety behavior before I married. I mean, I never was, I never had any—I would consider that I never had any real bad habits, whereas, I got older and became a parent that I would have to change because of my responsibilities. That's just the way I feel.

Men who experienced fatherhood as a more subtle elicitor of latent tendencies stated the theme in a manner consistent with Vicente's observation:

I never really gave it any thought until fatherhood came along . . . I never really focused on . . . thinking about some goals and achievements and accomplishments that you have to make in life now, until fatherhood came along. . . . It's not so much as a change as more a development of certain underlying traits.

DISCUSSION

First, it must be noted that although this sample is reflective of levels of ethnic diversity that might exist in a random sample in the geographic region where this research was conducted, and that it is a richly varied sample in many ways, the group may also be considered unrepresentative in some ways. The most noteworthy dimension that is largely constant in the sample is that all of the men are "involved" fathers, though there is variance along this dimension in that these men have assumed responsibility for their children to varying degrees. In this regard, the sample may be atypical. Some men seem to bring baggage from their personal histories that disallows them to react by developing a bond or making a commitment when fatherhood enters the picture. Thus, impending fatherhood does not change certain men; they do not accept responsibility and give themselves over to involvement. If men are not mature and responsible before fatherhood, but assuming that they use the parenting opportunity to accept responsibility, then having children can be a major direction changer. If they were already mature and experienced in assuming other responsibilities when they became fathers, then fatherhood seems to serve as more of a refining agent. It appears, then, that in assuming responsibility a major forging takes place. So, it may be that taking responsibility is a prerequisite to involvement that may potentially become meaningful enough to make positive contributions to either the development of children receiving care or the adults providing it. It is in the context of daily or ongoing involvement that one continues to be shaped in singularly minor but cumulatively significant ways. Without a commitment to responsibility, involvement would not exist. Men who make the decision to meet the initial challenge seem to place themselves into a different trajectory than those who see the responsibilities of fathering as too limiting or too demanding and, as a

consequence, cut and run. Admittedly, none of the men in this sample fit the latter pattern. In sum, each of the men in the sample had made a commitment to involved fatherhood in one way or another.

Forty-five percent of the sample expressed themes of settling down, the most frequently expressed perceived effect. In addition, 29% of the sample expressed that fatherhood presented a major jolt to their system. As such, the most dramatic path of development was perceived by the fathers to represent a radical life course turn. Perhaps this came in the form of a substantially altered lifestyle or a delay or abandonment of plans and desires for personal fulfillment.

A differing experience of fatherhood suggests that, for some men, fathering draws out latent tendencies that always existed but lacked expression or development. Active participation in fathering provided the men on this type of trajectory with a catalyst or context to develop these tendencies to a fuller extent. Palkovitz (1996) has theorized that the level of involvement in fathering will directly influence developmental outcomes for men during young adulthood. Consistent with this assertion of the possibility for reciprocal outcomes emerging from ongoing involvement with one's children, participants expressed the themes of becoming more giving and assuming greater degrees of responsibility and generativity themes.

Life circumstances and degree of maturity seemed to distinguish between the men representing these two different reactions to parenting. Specifically, the ET fathers, those who accepted responsibility for fatherhood at young ages (approximately 18% of the sample), tended to express the major life course alterations. In contrast, OT and LT fathers, those who were already relatively mature or who delayed child rearing, tended to focus more on the gentle evoker mode.

The findings concerning the gentle evoker pathway might also be viewed in a slightly different way. It has been established that men's personalities remain relatively stable throughout young adulthood (Costa and McCrae, 1988). Thus, we may assume that their personalities are relatively stable and apply this assertion when viewing the experience of fatherhood as a context that hones already existing (although possibly dormant or latent) tendencies, rather than viewing it as a catalyst that introduces new tendencies that happen to be consistent with past behaviors only due to the presence of "maturity" prior to the fatherhood experience. Though the men do not perceive major adjustments to *who* they are, they do perceive their life course to be altered significantly. However, it is worth noting that this alternative view of the gentle evoker pathway may continue to depend on the presence of a prerequisite, reasonable level of functionality present in men who become fathers.

No matter what the reaction to parenting reported by the interviewees, it should be noted that virtually none of the men saw fatherhood as merely a negligible contributor to who they were, and by far the majority of men

perceived fatherhood to be the single greatest shaper of their current self. Their fathering experiences defined a major part of who they were as people. Men perceived this to happen through experiencing occupied thoughts, the modification of short-term and long-term goals and life choices, and by shaping experiences of discrete events. These findings are consistent with other statements by experts in this area of study who have concluded that parenting was a prime candidate in assisting to stimulate new coping strategies (Newman and Newman 1988), an opportunity for increased differentiation and integration (Cowan 1988), and a strong stimulus to continued adult development (Colarusso and Neimiroff 1982).

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

As was aforementioned, the sample represented a great deal of variability in terms of men's career development, age, socioeconomic status, education, marital and family history, and ethnicity, which are all appropriate when performing purposive sampling for qualitative research but clearly not necessarily indicative of a sample generalizable to fathers as a whole. The participants in this study had each decided to assume responsibility for fathering and to maintain relatively high degrees of investment or involvement in their children's lives, even when not coresident. As such, the sample is more likely to be representative of voluntarily responsible, involved fathers than any other kind.

Second, as is the case with any self-report data, there is always the concern that the views expressed by the men in the sample might not be consistent with an "objective" observer's view of their developmental pathways. However, as Tim (27, OT, C) seems to state in his perspective on this issue, the perceived accuracy of the understanding one has of the effect of fathering may not be the most important aspect of it to grasp:

It's been a wild year. And even if it's not the kid that's changed me, if I think it's the kid that's changed me that's what's really important, isn't it?

Perhaps a greater concern is that no triangulating data were collected from participant's children or spouses or through observational methods. This was a choice that the researchers made at the outset of the study in order to devote maximum resources to collecting extensive interview data from as diverse a sample as possible. However, future research efforts would likely reap rich data by addressing and refining this issue.

A majority of the questions required retrospective answers by the participants, and no data were collected longitudinally. This may also have

implications for the application of these men's reports. In addition, the scope of the current project did not allow for interviewing a theoretically comparable group of men to deconstruct the influence of fathering by determining the sort of developmental issues that men might face in the absence of the opportunity to father children. Given these parameters, it is important to recognize that the data in this article represent involved fathers' self-stated, retrospectively constructed perceptions of the effect of fathering on men's adult development. Thus, as no longitudinal data with comparison groups are available, it is important not to utilize this information to make specific causal attributions but instead to take this as an exploratory study that brings qualitative empirical support to the anecdotally and theoretically salient perspective that fathering affects adult male development.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study provided support to the notion that involved fathering changes men's life course and development. To begin to explore assessments of causal direction and to rule out other explanations for change over time (e.g., aging, maturation, education, or other life experiences), it would be useful to collect data from fathers and nonfathers or to track a sample of men prospectively with several data collection opportunities before and after the transition to fatherhood. In comparison, this sample consisted of fathers who were involved and who had assumed responsibility for some level of responsibility for their children. It might also be informative to explicate developmental change in men in a manner that could elucidate the effects of various experiences with father involvement over time, along with other life circumstances. In exploring the relationship between involvement in parenting and adult development, it would also be instrumental to address possible differences between those fathers who choose to be involved in the parenting of their children and those who do not. Although traditional funding sources have sometimes been reticent to sponsor such theoretical research, some of the most thought-provoking questions concerning the nature of human development and its chains of causal links await exploration in the "everyday" contexts of fathering during adulthood.

NOTE

1. First name pseudonyms have been assigned to each participant to help maintain anonymity. The notations found inside parentheses following participants' pseudonyms provide information about demographic characteristics. The first digit represents the participant's age at the time of the interview. The next field contains the designation *ET*, *OT*, or *LT* for *early-timing*, *on-time*, and *late-timing fathers*, respectively. The final field contains *C*, *AA*, or *H* for *Caucasian*, *African American*, and *Hispanic*, respectively.

REFERENCES

- Ambert, A.-M. 1992. *The effect of children on parents*. New York: Haworth.
- Anthony, E. J., and T. Benedek. 1970. *Parenthood: Its psychology and psychopathology*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Colarusso, C. A., and R. A. Neimiroff. 1982. The father in midlife: Crisis and growth of paternal identity. In *Father and child: Developmental and clinical perspectives*, edited by S. H. Cath, A. W. Gurwitt, and J. M. Ross. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Cooney, T. M., F. A. Pedersen, S. Indelicato, and R. Palkovitz. 1993. Timing of fatherhood: Is "on-time" optimal? *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 55:205-15.
- Costa, P. T., Jr., and R. R. McCrae. 1988. Personality in adulthood: A six-year longitudinal study of self-reports and spouse ratings on the NEO Personality Inventory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 54:853-63.
- Cowan, P. A. 1988. Becoming a father: A time of change, an opportunity for development. In *Fatherhood today: Men's changing role in the family*, edited by P. Bronstein and C. P. Cowan. New York: John Wiley.
- Daniels, P., and K. Weingarten. 1988. The fatherhood click: The timing of parenthood in men's lives. In *Fatherhood today: Men's changing role in the family*, edited by P. Bronstein and C. P. Cowan. New York: John Wiley.
- Erikson, E. 1950. *Childhood and society*. New York: Norton.
- . 1964. *Insight and responsibility*. New York: Norton.
- . 1968. *Identity, youth and crisis*. New York: Norton.
- Farrell, M. P., and S. D. Rosenberg. 1981. *Men at midlife*. Boston: Auburn House.
- Gutmann, D. 1991. The father and the masculine life cycle. In *Institute for American Values working paper for the Symposium on Fatherhood in America* (publication no. W. P. 13). Retrieved from <http://www.cyfc.umn.edu/documents/a/b/A131008.html>: Institute for American Values.
- Hawkins, A. J., S. L. Christiansen, K. P. Sargent, and E. J. Hill. 1993. Rethinking fathers' involvement in childcare: A developmental perspective. *Journal of Family Issues* 14:531-49.
- Heath, D. 1978. What meaning and effects does fatherhood have for the maturing of professional men? *Merrill Palmer Quarterly* 24:265-78.
- . 1991. *Fulfilling lives*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Hooker, K., and B. H. Fiese. 1993. Temporal perspectives on changes in self related to parenting. Paper presented as part of a symposium at the biennial meetings of the Society for Research in Child Development, New Orleans, LA, March.
- Livson, F. B. 1981. Paths to psychological health in the middle years: Sex differences. In *Present and past in midlife*, edited by D. H. Eichorn, J. A. Clausen, N. Haan, M. Honzik, and P. H. Mussen. New York: Academic Press.
- Newman, P. R., and B. M. Newman. 1988. Parenthood and adult development. In *Transitions to parenthood*, edited by R. Palkovitz and M. B. Sussman. New York: Haworth.
- Palkovitz, R. 1984. Parental attitudes and fathers' interactions with their five-month-old infants. *Developmental Psychology* 20:1054-60.
- . 1994a. *Men's perceptions of the effects of fathering on their adult development and lifecourse*. Minneapolis, MN: National Council on Family Relations.
- . 1994b. Rethinking "involvement": Fathers and families in flux. Paper presented at the Anticipating the Future of Males in Families workshop at the National Council on Family Relations, Minneapolis, MN.
- . 1996. Parenting as a generator of adult development: Conceptual issues and implications. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 13:571-92.
- Pruett, K. D. 1989. The nurturing male: A longitudinal study of primary nurturing fathers. In *Fathers and their families*, edited by S. Cath, A. R. Gurwitt, and L. Ginsberg. Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press.

- Rossi, A. S. (1980). Aging and parenthood in the middle years. In *Life span development and behavior*, vol. 3, edited by P. B. Baltes and O. G. Brim, Jr., 138-207. New York: Academic Press.
- Sachs, B. E. 1983. Paternal generativity: The influence of the transition into fatherhood on first-time fathers' relationships with their own fathers and their definitions of their generative identities. Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland at College Park.
- Snarey, J. 1993. *How fathers care for the next generation: A four-decade study*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Strauss, A., and J. Corbin. 1998. *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. 2d ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Vaillant, G. E. 1977. *Adaptation to life*. Boston: Little, Brown.

Rob Palkovitz is professor of Individual and Family Studies at the University of Delaware, where his teaching and research interests focus on fathering and the developmental outcomes of life course transitions. Trained as a developmental psychologist, Palkovitz became interested in the consequences of fathering over 20 years ago when he and his wife, Judy, had the first of their four sons. Palkovitz has been studying various aspects of fathering, intergenerational relationships, and development ever since.

Marcella A. Copes is dean of the Helen Fuld School of Nursing at Coppin State College. In addition to her administrative interest, she has studied families and their transitions for more than 15 years with the major focus of parenting and the transitions and contexts of fathering.

Tara Woolfolk is a doctoral student who teaches courses such as emerging lifestyles. She specializes in issues such as the dynamics of gender, ethnicity, and personal identity. Her areas of extensive study include the development of fatherhood identity, and mother-daughter relationships among African American women.