Re-envisioning Why Fathers Matter Beyond the Gender Binary: A Case for Gay Fathers

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Mincy, Um, and Turpin (Chapter "Effect of Father Engagement on Child Behaviors") provide new insight into the relationship between fathers' engagement with 5-year-old children, and their subsequent externalizing and internalizing behaviors at age 9. Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Well-being Survey, the authors take on the daunting task to detail, "the extent to which fathers' engagement in activities known to promote success in school differs from the activities of mothers, and whether fathers' engagement in these activities affect childhood behavior…" (Chapter "Effect of Father Engagement on Child Behaviors", p. 141). The Fragile Families dataset provides rich insight into the effects of fatherhood on children over time, and Mincy et al. gives empirical merit to the notion that there is, in fact, a unique influence of fathers on the well-being of children who live in two-parent heterosexual households. As such, the chapter provides inroads into the field of fatherhood studies.

Research on how the effects of fathering differ from those of mothering is an important one that spans across disciplines and decades. Yet, the underlying assumption driving this research question—that we can and should differentiate the effects of fathering and mothering in two-parent heterosexual households—is an assumption I bring into question. In particular, I question the heteronormative logic underlying the idea that motherhood and fatherhood have distinct effects, responding not only to the work of Mincy et al. (Chapter "Effect of Father Engagement on Child Behaviors") but also to the broader fields of parenthood and child well-being studies. In this chapter, I first offer a gendered perspective to complicate the idea of fatherhood and motherhood as distinct constructs. Second, I revise Mincy et al.'s research question with a case study of how fathers might matter in same-sex

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families. Third, I make a case for conceptualizing the "long arm of parenthood," a term which calls attention to the ways early life course parenthood has cumulative consequences for later-life parenthood and likely influences the well-being of both children and parents. My explicit aim is to raise questions for researchers and spark ideas for innovative work.

Motherhood and Fatherhood as Distinct Constructs

It is an underlying assumption in family studies that fatherhood and motherhood are distinct, with a unique set of actions, beliefs, ideas, and roles designated to, and done by, men and women; these actions are assumed, in turn, to differentially shape child well-being. The view of motherhood and fatherhood as distinct appears as social fact, whether or not we celebrate it, even as the nature of this difference has changed over time. Previous research finds that there are indeed basic differences in how women and men parent their children, as Mincy et al. (Chapter "Effect of Father Engagement on Child Behaviors") show. Most notably, fathers are more likely to play with children in more "physically stimulating" ways, while mothers are more likely to provide "comfort" and verbalization to children. These findings are, as Mincy et al. suggest, understood within the context of gendered norms or roles (i.e., gender role theory) that women as mothers and men as fathers embody. The differences are reflected in our everyday family experiences, public policy, public health campaigns, and the media.

Yet, the sociological perspective is one that takes to task "common sense" knowledge or stereotypes of behavior. For example, when we think about statistical differences in what mothers and fathers do differently at the population level, we are talking about averages in behavior as linked to one's reported sex (i.e., male, female). Notably, very rarely do we actually study *gender* as that would require asking more complex questions about masculinity and femininity. The field of family studies is still busy conflating sex, gender, gender identity, and gender behavior with the actions of motherhood and fatherhood. Thus, what is emphasized in national surveys is the notion of complementary motherhood and fatherhood roles—a Becker-esque assumption that each parent fills his or her role in raising children (Becker, 1981). Many believe we can identify how mothers (females) and fathers (males) are independent, complementary, and distinct as a result of the assumption that men and women *are* distinct and complementary. *Why* motherhood roles and fatherhood roles differ is rightfully not the question Mincy et al. attempt to answer—rather this difference is taken as a social fact. Yet, I believe our task is to drill further down to the question: "What is the meaning and consequence of asking how the sex or gender of a parent matters for child well-being?" In the words of the gender scholar Judith Lorber (1993), it is not a matter of "seeing is believing" but rather "believing is seeing," that is, if we look for gender differences in parenting we will find gender differences in parenting.

The purported distinctness of motherhood and fatherhood is murky. The assumption that men and women are distinct is one that gender scholars have been

attempting to undercut for at least 40 years. The gender role approach—the approach described above and used in most family studies research—has been criticized for placing men and women into discrete roles that are largely unchanging over time (Butler, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Gender role theory does not account for nor explains the *variation* in fatherhood and motherhood actions and norms, wherein some men provide more love and verbal support than physical play, and some women provide more physical play than verbal affection. Moreover, if motherhood and fatherhood are seen as complementary, how do we account for "missing" parental characteristics for children raised in households with one parent or two parents of the same sex? What is unknown, then, is what it means for two parents of the same sex to be fatherly, or motherly, together. That is, gender role theory cannot help us know whether two men raising a baby are always acting "fatherly" by virtue of being males who parent. Furthermore, what about transgender parents who may transition across the status of man and woman—how do we begin to conceptualize transgender parenthood? My intention is not just to suggest that we must include all family forms for inclusion's sake. Rather, I want to draw attention to nonheterosexual family forms because they can say something important about all family life, advancing our field beyond gender role and gender socialization approaches.

The above questions are difficult to answer when viewed through a gender role paradigm. Another prevailing gender theory—gender relations theory—enhances our ability to tackle these questions. Rather than a gender role frame which posits that men and women are two distinct categories, a gender relations approach views gender as a system of stratification that simultaneously signifies power and structures interactions between and among men and women (Connell, 2005; West & Zimmerman, 1987). This approach suggests that notions of masculinity and femininity—and therefore fatherhood and motherhood—exist within "structures of practice" that produce and reproduce gender inequalities (e.g., unequal childcare hours) (Connell, 2005, 2012). Interwoven institutional forces such as marriage and the workplace, as well as ideological forces such as the idea that men and women are "complementary or opposites" (i.e., women are more loving and men more playful), constrain gendered expectations and behaviors (Ferree, 2010; Martin, 2004). A gender relations approach posits that the statistical differences in men's and women's parenting behavior persist as social practices that constitute a gender order (Connell, 2005; Schofield, Connell, Walker, Wood, & Butland, 2000). In this way, a gender relations approach allows us to think outside the box of the gender binary toward a view of gender as an interactional, relational construct that is ever-changing, with varying meaning in different family contexts. By existing outside the gender binary, we can disentangle what we mean by fatherhood and motherhood as constructs that are not necessarily tied to males and females, but rather as constructs that can apply to either parent. I provide an illustration of the usefulness of the gender relations framework with discussion of the case of same-sex parenthood, below.

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How then can a gender relations framework help us re-envision the research question of "do fathers matter?" A gender relations approach suggests that the gender of one parent cannot be taken out of context of other family members. So, when Mincy et al. (Chapter "Effect of Father Engagement on Child Behaviors") (and others) found that men primarily enact parenthood via playfulness and physical activity, this may be unique to the context of heterosexual men parenting with heterosexual women. Yet, the context of *two* men as parents in a household opens an entirely different set of questions not based on contrasting fatherhood to motherhood, but rather one that asks how variation among fathers and the context in which fatherhood takes place influence child well-being. Thus, we may ask: How do different ways of parenting matter in relation to varying gender or sex compositions of parents in a household—man–man, woman–woman, transgender man with a cisgender man.

We have some insight into the answer to this question. In a gender relations framework, gay men may enact alternative masculinities in relation to other gay men that may be more in line with what we consider as "feminine" or "mothering," in ways that straight men—who may be compelled to enact more strictly hegemonic ideals in a heterosexual relationship—do not (Courtenay, 2000). Thus, two men fathering together may enact being fathers in revolutionary ways that blow to pieces our notions of what fatherhood *is*. Two women may enact alternative notions of femininity through being more active with children than heterosexual women typically are, or enact femininity in ways similar to straight mothers. This is unknown, but can be explored with more data on gender, sex composition of parents in a household, and parenting practices. My recent qualitative research on gay and lesbian intimate relationships has shown that the enactment of gender is complicated by sexuality, wherein alternative masculinities and femininities circulate more freely across male and female bodies (Reczek, 2012; Reczek & Umberson, 2012). As soon as we start queering the traditional notion of one man and one women raising a child, we can recognize the fault in our logic of trying to study fathers as an independent force without clear context in which parenting take place. Thus, when we are looking for predictors of child well-being in families that are not heterosexual, does the question of "are fathers uniquely influencing child well-being" become moot? What does it mean for a father to have an independent effect in a household with two fathers? Instead of "are fathers and mothers unique" we might ask: "Are children raised in households of heterosexual configurations worse, or better, off than children raised in other sex configurations?"

Same-sex couples are an obvious example of why asking the question "do fathers uniquely contribute to child health" needs to be reevaluated. I have focused on same-sex couples in this chapter, but there are a range of family differences that can help us refine our questions and better understand all families. Union status and father residence are two examples. Mincy et al. limit their sample to children in married and cohabiting households in order to understand what father engagement

means; the authors leave out fathers who do not live with their children. They write, "by virtue of their physical separation from their children, nonresident fathers are engaged in activities with their children at much lower levels than their resident counterparts" (Chapter "Effect of Father Engagement on Child Behaviors", p.). However, I question whether looking only at residential married and cohabiting fathers obscures a variation in the context of fatherhood that would provide insight into exactly what fathers do, how they do it, and whether their influence is independent of women's?

Extending the Long Arm of Parenthood

In my concluding thoughts, I draw on life course theory, a strong tradition in family scholarship, to call for a second intervention in family studies. Mincy et al. (Chapter "Effect of Father Engagement on Child Behaviors") chose to focus on parenting early in the life course of the child, and rightfully so, as this is a critical time for child development. In fact, much effort is made by Mincy et al. to point out how even short periods of time in early life have very big effects later on in the life course—a concept known as the "long arm of childhood" (Hayward & Gorman, 2004). Yet, the effects of parenting early in the life course of a child do not extend only to children, but to parents also. This happens in two ways. First, mothers and fathers continue to parent as children age into adulthood. The relationship between parents and adult children has often been the subject of research on aging—in particular, a great deal of attention is paid to how adult children care for aging parents, a reversal of the early years of parenthood. Parenting early in the life course and parenting later in the life course are separate literatures with different driving assumptions and paradigms. I urge scholars to consider what happens in the years of parenting between early childhood and adulthood, and how we can better articulate the connections between parenting young children and parenting adult children. Given the advancing age of society and the changing needs of both parents and children across the life course, this area is germane.

Second, greater attention should be paid to what I call the "long arm of parenthood," wherein the experience of parenting early in the child's life course has cumulative consequences for parenting dynamics in the child's later life, impacting the well-being of both generations. For example, by merging the long arm of parenthood with an emphasis on a gender relations framework, I question how the "distinctness" of motherhood and fatherhood in a child's early life create gendered parenting when a child is a young adult. How would this differ for gay, lesbian, or heterosexual parents? Many more questions can be explored in this vein, and I believe expanding our framework beyond the gender binary and extending our focus on the accumulating dimensions of parenthood provide opportunities of growth for this field. I encourage us to continue to think through our assumptions as a field about the nature and consequence of gender as a variable and the longevity of

gendered parent–child relationships, moving our research forward toward the next frontier.

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