Overlooked Inequalities: Employment, Parenting, and Partnering for Men in Families

Kevin Roy

A look at popular literature on work and family life presents a bracing reflection of the stressors that drive contemporary families. The dysfunction between work and home, and the deleterious consequences for women's health, is traced in *Maxed Out: American Moms on the Brink*, (Alcorn, 2013). In *Overwhelmed: Work, Love and Play When No One Has the Time*, Brigid Schulte (2014) turns to counting hours and minutes to find that women have precious little time for quality engagement in what matters most in their lives. And the strange conflicts inherent in parenting are portrayed by Jennifer Senior (2014) in *All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenthood*.

These volumes reflect the popular vision of expansionist theory in women's lives, 20 years after its origins. But what about men? Are they also overwhelmed, maxed out, and having all joy but no fun? Does expansionist theory address men's experiences in work and family life in recent decades?

In this chapter, I argue that men's experiences as partners and parents have increasingly become bifurcated, as inequalities in income, health, and a range of measures have emerged since the early 1980s. Although men across class and race/ethnicity experience the stress of mismatch between work and family life, they experience it differently—and with distinct implications for their potential as partners and parents.

K. Roy (✉)
Family Science Department, University of Maryland, 1204K Marie Mount Hall, College Park, MD 20742, USA
e-mail: kroy@umd.edu

S. M. McHale et al. (eds.), *Gender and Couple Relationships,*
National Symposium on Family Issues 6, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-21635-5_6

Wanting and (usually) Getting it All: Fathers in Middle-class Families

As Hyde argues in "Women, Men, Work, and Family: Expansionist Theory Updated" and in earlier statements of expansionist theory (Barnett & Hyde, 2001), the existence of multiple roles has not been problematized for men in the same way as for women. Responsibilities across parenting and partnering roles in particular are often quite different for men, and stressors and negative outcomes related to an overburdening are likely more limited for men. If expansionist theory reflected a sense that women "want it all," the assumption has been that men may not. If men can pick and choose which roles benefit them more, then why would they "want it all?"

Recent polls reflect the notions that many men have redefined "good" fathering to include hands-on care of children, and that they aspire "to be accepted, both at home and in the workplace, as whole persons" (Harrington, Van Deusen, & Humberd, 2011; Harrington, Van Deusen, & Ladge, 2010). Although this may seem to be a dramatic shift, it has been unfolding for decades. Middle and upper middle class fathers in the Bay area indicated that the package deal of being a father, a husband, a worker, and a homeowner was a commonly-sought and highly-prized goal (Townsend, 2002). In a package deal, men's roles cluster together, in large part guaranteed by social status. It is possible to be an involved father within a residential family, with a married partner and a full-time job with good wages.

As Hyde (See "Women, Men, Work, and Family: Expansionist Theory Updated") suggests, however, role quality is more important than number of roles in expansionist theory. If men's roles cluster together easily, it does not mean that they fulfill each of these roles successfully. The shift in cultural expectations for men's provision and caregiving has not necessarily been reflected in men's choices and behavior, as their increase in time spent as caregivers has only grown slightly since the 1970s (Pleck, 2010). Interestingly, social opinion polls show that adults believe that fathers are doing a worse job as parents, compared with 20–30 years ago—while at the same time acknowledging that it is more difficult to be a father in 2015 (Livingston & Parker, 2011).

For middle and upper middle class men, the most recent and dramatic threat is insecurity introduced by recent shifts in global and local economies. Volatility in jobs and wages means that even middle-class families live under a cloud of uncertainty. Instead of cutting back and saving money, Cooper (2014) suggests that these families attempt to upscale, increasing work hours and stockpiling resources to make it through insecure months. She also argues that women bear the burden of managing this anxiety and planning insecurity strategies for the entire family, as husbands focus on their own personal part of the puzzle. However, middle-class men's efforts as both parents and workers are not encouraged by many. The lack of supportive work/family policies for men, such as the extensive paternal leave policies utilized outside the USA, might provide incentive for a larger set of responsibilities for men (Marsiglio & Roy, 2012). These policies set in motion effects that

change family dynamics over time (e.g., Early paternal involvement due to leave polices leads to more paternal involvement as children grow and age in families).

Undoubtedly, economic insecurity shapes the marriages and intimate relationships of middle-class families. As the cluster of masculine expectations would suggest, however, men with resources remain primarily wedded to the promise and demands of the package deal. Perhaps, the most significant shift for these men is sharing responsibility as the provider with female partners who may, in 2015, be earning more. Although a partner's wages may pose a threat to perceptions of power and control in couples, men also benefit from additional resources in the household.

Men's involvement with children may undergo substantial shifts when mothers are also primary financial contributors to the household. Today, many men in middle-class families take part in dynamic polygamy, participating in multiple families with multiple partners over time. With higher rates of relationship formation and dissolution, middle-class men (and women) may watch the fragmentation of intimacies that once seemed guaranteed in the package deal of American middle-class families (Conley, 2009).

A critical result of changes and instability are adverse health conditions for these men. Only about one third of men felt conflict and stress due to the lack of fit between work demands and family life in the 1980s, but by the turn of the century, over half (60%) of men—especially those in dual income middle-class and above families—felt the impact of conflict and stress (Aumann, Galinksy, & Matos, 2011). Depression rates have typically been higher for women than for men. However, if we explore a broader definition of depression that includes anger, aggression, and risk taking that men more likely express, rates of depression appear to be comparable for men and women (Martin, Neighbors, & Griffith, 2013). What has caused some of the greatest alarm has been the significant uptick in suicide rates. In tandem with changes in unemployment due to the Great Recession, displaced mid-life men, between the ages of 45 and 64, have seen suicide rates climb from 21 to 29%.

Intersectionality, Power, and Diversity

Thus far, the discussion of expansionist theory has been applied only to a limited group of US men who are middle-class, employed, and married. How does expansionist theory apply to fathers who are not employed, and who may not be married or residing with children? Since the late 1970s, men's experiences as fathers have diversified alongside growing income inequality. In fact, one of the fastest growing segments of the US population is that of low-income men, who now encompass 28% of the population (McDaniel, Simms, Fortuny, & Monson, 2013). The emergence of intersectionality as an important development in our understanding of expansionist theory is briefly mentioned by Hyde (See "Women, Men, Work, and Family: Expansionist Theory Updated"). This paradigm shift is critical in moving us beyond a simple focus on middle-class men who are providers and caregivers.

Intersectionality encourages us to examine a full range of diversity. Shifting family arrangements tell us an important story about men in families. Gender has been reconfigured and couple relationships are diversified in family units in recent decades. Only 34 % of the children now live in married, dual-income families (Cohen, 2014). Further, 43 % of the adults live in married couple households, but 40 % live in lone individual or single-parent households. To relegate expansionist theory or the study of work and family dynamics, to a shrinking segment of married, dual-income couples is to misunderstand the very real impact of economic and social changes. It is still the case that the work/family field of research is "haunted by the lives it excludes" (MacDermid, Roy, & Zvoncovic, 2014).

I argue for extending the analysis of expansionist theory to view intersectionality as a reflection of power and inequality, not just diversity. How are gender and couple relationships shaped by emerging inequality and social institutions? For example, the establishment of a national child support system has had varied impacts on men in different family arrangements. For men with resources in the middle and upper classes, nonresidential fathers pay child support which is received by mothers and children. In contrast, low-income nonresidential fathers whose children receive welfare assistance also pay child support, likely lower amounts, but it is not necessarily received by mothers and children. In half of the states, their payments go directly to the state agency to recoup cash assistance. The remaining states have arranged for a small percentage of the payment to pass through to poor families, with only five states passing through the entire child support award.

These fathers face very different incentives to contribute financially to their children's well-being. In my own research, low-income fathers are unable to secure a package deal and unable to take on multiple role expectations in part due to intervention of policy systems that shape fatherhood in new and complicated ways (Roy, 2014). Cory was a young 25-year-old wrestler with two preschool age sons from a former girlfriend. He completed paternity establishment and was immediately served with a child support order. He and his ex-partner had different perspectives on how he was identified to pay child support, and Cory felt disrespected despite his motivation to provide for his sons.

> When I was going for child support, I had second thoughts. I was kind of mad, because I thought she put them on me. And I didn't have no job at the time, but she said that public aid did it. People try to tell her what to do and she do it. It's "he said, she said," because some say the system made her do it, or that she wanted to do it. I really couldn't tell. I was gonna take care of my kids, even with no money. I was going to be there no matter what (Marsiglio & Roy, 2012, p. 118).

Wanting it All but Receiving Very Little: Fathers in Economically Disadvantaged Families

The story of how men across the income spectrum have grown more and more apart is reflected in how their income status has become more and more synonymous with their marital status. An analysis of Current Population Survey data by Bruce

Western and Tracey Shollenberger shows that in the late 1960s, a large majority of households in all income groups included married parents. This was true even in poor households, where almost three quarters of couples were married. By 2010, only 37% of the bottom income quartile of households included married parents, and only 61% of the households near middle-class status included married parents (DeParle, 2012). The pathway of economically disadvantaged women is toward single parenthood; the pathway for economically disadvantaged men is away from marriage as well as away from coresidence.

To borrow the framework of expansionist theory, with lost opportunities for marriage and fatherhood, having multiple roles has been problematic for economically disadvantaged men in recent decades. These are dramatic shifts for couple relationships in families below middle-class status, and for men in particular, usually meaning that not only are men unmarried, but also that they are isolated from their children. Fathers are not a part of their children's daily routines and are often engaged in tense negotiations with mothers of their children. If the package deal does not hold for these men, can their other roles buffer them? Becoming a father still prompts economically disadvantaged men to get a job—these expectations are deeply embedded in expectations for "good" fathers. However, failure as a provider also shapes a man's parenting. Economically disadvantaged men are set up to fail if their lack of good employment further jeopardizes their tenuous hold on parenting.

After the Great Recession, it is a new (old) world of work for economically disadvantaged men. The "mancession" with disproportionate loss of jobs in sectors that primarily employ men faded by 2012, but the transformed economic landscape presents further insecurity for men without resources. For young men in particular, the employment population ratio hit the lowest point in over six decades (Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2011). In 1967, young men earned 74% of the weekly earnings of older men, but only 52% by 2009. Educational attainment has become a very clear indicator of the potential of men as providers and family men: By the end of the Great Recession, men with masters degrees or more saw a 21% gain in annual earnings, whereas men with high school diplomas lost 27% in annual earnings (Fig. 1).

An emphasis on intersectionality would highlight incarceration as another social process that has dramatically reshaped the lives and family relationships of economically disadvantaged men, in tandem with growing inequality and economic disparities. Lifetime chances of incarceration have doubled for African American men (to 32% between 1974 and 2001) and tripled for Latino men (to 17% during the same period; Raphael, 2011). Interaction with police, the courts, and the correctional system are game changers for men, as they inhibit men's participation in school, in jobs, and with family members.

As with men in middle-class families, economically disadvantaged men increasingly find themselves involved in multiple households with multiple partners. Research on "multiple partner fertility"—a term seldom used for middle-class men and women in multiple family configurations—echoes the negative outcomes for children and reflect the difficulty of extending limited resources across multiple households. Despite men's limitations as providers and partners, mothers may de-

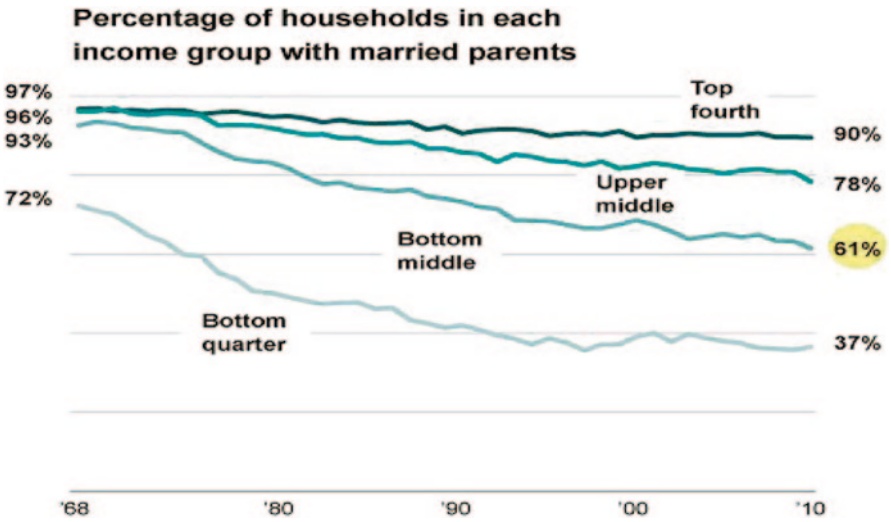

Fig. 1 Percentage of households in each income group with married parents

velop trust in them as parents (Burton, Cherlin, Winn, Estacion, & Holder-Taylor, 2009), which was often overlooked in decades of prior research on low-income couples. Trust is not simply an interpersonal behavior in dyadic relationships; it is situated in and shaped by family networks and social systems, including policies that may threaten relationships (such as incarceration, child support, domestic violence court, or welfare; Levine, 2013). In response, men in these strained contexts may establish suspended relationships, when they are "together but not *together*" with the mothers of their children (Roy, Buckmiller, & McDowell, 2008). Leon, a 37-year-old father of three boys on Chicago's South Side, described the balancing act that he worked in his fluid relationship with the mother of his children.

> I always say she's my wife. We've been together since seventh grade, and there's nothing stopping us from getting married. We just ain't really right. I'm not working, but she's working. When I was working, she wasn't working. When we go to the zoo, who's gonna buy the food? Who's gonna pay for gas? I want to take them to a show—who's gonna pay for the show? Do I feel left out? Yeah. But I'm going to be with my kids, hoping that me and her will get married.

We find that mothers may not close out nonresidential fathers from their children's lives, but instead recruit them through a process of kinscription, assessing their contributions, efforts, and trustworthiness (Roy & Burton, 2007). As mothers strive to gain men's accountability as parents, they confront interventions from policy systems that may jeopardize the limited control that both men and women have over their family lives (Roy & Hart, 2014).

Finally, changing local economies and relationships impact the health of economically disadvantaged men. Adverse mental health outcomes emerge over the life course. As they move into adulthood, young men face the consequences of being adultified as "men of the house" in single mother households (Roy, Messina,

Smith, & Waters, 2014). The consequences of homicide survivorship and exposure to violence create the potential for trauma and depression (Smith, 2015). More broadly, recent studies show how health disparities impost a huge cost on men of color, especially those who are economically disadvantaged. The direct costs of medical expenditures for African American men top out at $ 100 billion per year, with the indirect costs to health due to loss of productivity and premature death at $ 100–300 billion per year (Thorpe, Richard, Bowie, Laveist, & Gaskin, 2014).

Challenges to Research and Policy on Men, Work, and Families

As we consider Hyde's expansionist model for men in families, there are clear challenges for research and policy. We have moved beyond a "one model fits all" approach for conceptualizing men in work and family life. The rapidly growing diversity of men's experiences as workers, parents, and partners pushes us to recognize inequality as a driver for diversity in families. The men who aspire to and attain a package deal as successful providers, fathers, and marital partners stand in stark contrast to men who are challenged to find part-time work, to visit their nonresidential children, and to nurture long-term intimate relationships.

Even if we can recognize increasing diversity and disparities in men's experiences in work and family, as policymakers and researchers, we lag far behind in our conceptualization and measurement of these experiences. Policies and data sets built on decades-out-of date assumptions about marriage and provide-and-reside fatherhood can do harm to the efforts of men who move on the margins of these worlds.

What is clear is that policies have been established for men who lack the resources to become marital partners and fathers, but often these policies are punitive and designed simply to promote employment and marriage. There are few policy models that move beyond material expectations for fathers, toward transformative relational expectations of nurturance that would apply to men regardless of their income status or social class standing (Marsiglio & Roy, 2012).

In the wake of economic downturn and perceived insecurity, there are few options that promote education and employment for men in families. Men's wages have been flat and falling since the late 1970s, and without access to education, there are few pathways for men to achieve access to good jobs. If provider status remains the lynchpin for men's entrée into family life, the lack of innovative employment options may only feed the trends toward growing disparities in men's experiences in coming decades.

References

Alcorn, K. (2013). *Maxed out: American moms on the brink*. New York: Seal Press.

Aumann, K., Galinsky, E., & Matos, K. (2011). *The new male mystique*. New York: Families and Work Institute.

Barnett, R. C., & Hyde, J. S. (2001). Women, men, work, and family: An expansionist theory. *American Psychologist, 56,* 781–796.

Burton, L., Cherlin, A., Winn, D., Estacion, A., & Holder-Taylor, C. (2009). The role of trust in low-income mothers' intimate unions. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 71,* 1107–1124.

Cohen, P. (2014, September). *Family diversity is the new normal for America's children*. Council on Contemporary Families Brief Report. https://contemporaryfamilies.org/the-new-normal/.

Conley, D. (2009). *Elsewhere, U.S.A*. New York: Pantheon.

Cooper, M. (2014). *Cut adrift: families in insecure times*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

DeParle, J. (2012). Economic inequality and the changing family. *New York Times*, July 14. http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/14/economic-inequality-and-the-changing-family/.

Harrington, B., Van Deusen, F., & Ladge, J. (2010). *The new dad: exploring fatherhood within a career context*. Boston: Boston College Center for Work and Family.

Harrington, B., Van Deusen, F., & Humberd, B. (2011). *The new dad: caring, committed, and conflicted*. Boston: Boston College Center for Work and Family.

Levine, J. (2013). *Ain't no trust: How bosses, boyfriends, and bureaucrats fail low-income mothers and why it matters*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Livingston, G., & Parker, K. (2011). *A tale of two fathers: More are active, but more are absent. Pew Research Center Social and Demographic Trends*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center. http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/06/15/a-tale-of-two-fathers/.

MacDermid, S., Roy, K., & Zvonkovic, A. (2004). Don't stop at the borders: theorizing beyond "work/family". In V. Bengtson, A. Acock, K. Allen, P. Dilworth-Anderson, & D. Klein (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theories and methods: An interactive approach* (2nd ed., pp. 493–507). New York: Plenum.

Marsiglio, W., & Roy, K. (2012). *Nurturing dads: Social initiatives for contemporary fatherhood. ASA Rose Series*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Martin, L. A., Neighbors, H. W., & Griffith, D. M. (2013). The experience of symptoms of depression in men vs women. Analysis of the National Comorbidity Survey Replication. *JAMA Psychiatry, 70*(10), 1100–1106.

McDaniel, M., Simms, M., Fortuny, K., & Monson, W. (2013). *A demographic snapshot of disconnected low-income men. Race, place and poverty (Issue Brief No. 1)*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute. http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/13/LowIncomeMen/Demographic/rpt_DemographicSnapshot.pdf.

Pleck, J. (2010). Paternal involvement: Revised conceptualization and theoretical linkages with child outcomes. In M. Lamb (Ed.), *The role of the father in child development* (5th ed., pp. 59–93). New York: Wiley.

Raphael, S. (2011). Incarceration and prisoner reentry in the United States. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences, 635,* 192–215.

Roy, K. (2014). Fathers and fatherhood. In J. Treas, J. Scott, & M. Richards (Eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell companion to the sociology of families* (pp. 424–443). New York: Wiley-Blackwell.

Roy, K., & Burton, L. (2007). Mothering through recruitment: kinscription of non-residential fathers and father figures in low-income families. *Family Relations, 56,* 24–39.

Roy, K., & Hart, J. (2014, November). *From small talk to talk shows: Maternal advocacy for non-residential father involvement*. Paper presented at the annual conference of National Council on Family Relations, Baltimore, MD.

Roy, K., Buckmiller, N., & McDowell, A. (2008). Together but not "together": Trajectories of relationship suspension for low-income unmarried parents. *Family Relations, 57,* 197–209.

Roy, K., Messina, L., Smith, J., & Waters, D. (2014). Growing up as "man of the house": Adultification and transition into adulthood for young men in economically disadvantaged families. In

K. Roy & N. Jones (Eds.), *Pathways to adulthood for disconnected young men in low-income communities. New Directions in Child and Adolescent Development, Number143* (pp. 55–72). Hoboken: Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Schulte, B. (2014). *Overwhelmed: Work, love and play when no one has the time*. New York: Sarah Crichton Books.

Senior, J. (2014). *All joy and no fun: The paradox of modern parenthood*. New York: Ecco.

Smith, J. R. (2015). Unequal burdens of loss: Examining the frequency and timing of homicide deaths experienced by young black men across the life course. *American Journal of Public Health, 105,* 483–490.

Sum, A., Khatiwada, I., McLaughlin, J., & Palma, S. (2011). No country for young men: Deteriorating labor market prospects for low-skilled men in the United States. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 635,* 24–55.

Thorpe, R., Richard, P., Bowie, J., Laveist, T., & Gaskin, D. (2014). Economic burden of men's health disparities in the United States. *International Journal of Men's Health, 12,* 195–212.

Townsend, N. (2002). *The package deal: Marriage, work, and fatherhood in men's lives*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.