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My Wife Can Tell Me Who I Know: Methodological and Conceptual Problems in Studying Fathers

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Using in-depth interviews with white and black families with children in third and fourth grade, as well as intensive home observations of twelve families, this study found fathers were not useful sources of information for the routines of family life. They did not know much; most of what they knew came from their wives. Reports by fathers of high levels of involvement were not confirmed by detailed interviews or observation. Yet, fathers were an important source of entertainment, a center of conversation, and teachers of certain life skills. The results suggest researchers need to focus more on what fathers actually do *in family life, particularly setting the tone in the fluid interactional character of family dynamics.*

KEY WORDS: fatherhood; gender; division of labor; family.

Social scientists repeatedly have stressed the importance of interviewing fathers in studies that examine family life. This is seen as particularly important in efforts to understand work-family conflicts, a topic that has gained more attention in recent decades (Hays 1996; Hochschild 1997; Hoffman and Youngblade 1999). Yet, many studies of families target only mothers (but see Coltrane 1995; Hood 1993; Marsiglio 1995). In addition, a large number of studies have suggested that many fathers continue to have a limited, "helper," role in important aspects of family life, including childrearing (Hochschild 1989; Hood 1993; Press and Townsley 1998; Walzer 1996). Our study used in-depth interviews and intensive observations to examine the roles fathers and mothers played in their children's daily lives. We focused on white and black families with children in third and/or fourth grade.

Our findings address two related points. First, in terms of research methodology, the study raises important questions about the usefulness of fathers as sources

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for some types of information and about the validity of the answers they provide. We found that most fathers did not know very much about the details of their children's lives because, relative to mothers, they did not provide very much day-to-day care. This lack of involvement in daily family affairs did not make fathers unimportant, however. The children in our study appeared to be strongly connected to their fathers.[1] They seemed to value their fathers highly as a source of entertainment, a center of conversation, and teachers of certain life skills. But, for social scientists seeking a source of useful information about children's behavior, fathers proved inadequate. The answers they supplied during interviews frequently were vague; and, when pressed for specifics, fathers tended to retreat into generalities.

Significantly, neither vagueness nor the use of generalities was typical of the fathers we interviewed when talking about their work or about topics of personal interest, such as their leisure activities. Clearly, our interviewees were not reticent by temperament. Had we been seeking information about fishing or basketball, for example, interviewing fathers would have been a richly rewarding undertaking. Unlike questions about children's activities, queries on these topics would have netted us many long, detail-laden quotes. If relying on fathers as a source of insight into children's daily lives carried no greater risk than that of reducing the quantity of usable data, pursuing fathers might, arguably, be worth the effort involved. However, more than the quantity of data is at stake. Many (although not all) fathers appeared to believe that they *should be* active in their children's lives. Their adherence to this belief affected their responses to the questions we posed in the interviews. At best, embracing an ideology of involvement complicated fathers' answers; at worst, it seriously compromised their validity. Fathers often reported they were drawing on what their wives had told them; they did not see a clear distinction between what they had learned from their own interactions and what they had learned from their wives. Moreover, fathers who seemed unfamiliar with the details of their children's daily lives nevertheless suggested that they were intensively involved in the children's lives; some even suggested an egalitarian division of labor. Finally, few fathers seemed comfortable offering a "don't know" response, even when such a response would have been the most truthful. Vague generalities appeared to be preferable to absolute accuracy. To be sure, fathers were a very valuable source for understanding the ideology of parenthood. It was our examination of behavior, which is a very common focus in social science research, which proved so problematic.

If interviews exposed fathers as a poor source of information about children's daily lives, observations showed them as a focal point of family life. Thus, in addition to a methodological concern, this paper has a second, more conceptual goal. We believe that the way family life is studied should be revised. In our study, what

[1] Most of the children who participated in the study lived in families where fathers were present in the home. Those children whose fathers did not live with them also appeared to have strong attachments, provided that they saw their fathers very regularly (i.e., weekly). Because we limited the interviews to fathers who had a regular presence in their children's lives, our analysis does not address children's relationships with fathers they saw rarely or never.

fathers did do emerged as being as important as what they did not do. The fathers we observed were a powerful presence in the household. They provided affection, humor, and advice to their children. These important contributions of fathers often have been downplayed by sociologists. Instead, there has been a preoccupation in the literature with the (unequal) division of labor in households (Hochschild 1989). Studies of family life have not sufficiently stressed the contributions of fathers (e.g., creating laughter, promoting athletic development and masculinity, or providing a "gravitational center" for conversations) (but see Coltrane 1995; Townsend 1999). These patterns suggest fathers hold a position of power and privilege in the family as they dominate family life. Still, this domination appears to have a different, and subtler, form than in earlier decades.

METHODOLOGY

Our study of the contours of childhood focused on third- and fourth-graders and their families. The purpose of the study was to understand the ways in which parents manage their children's lives outside as well as inside the home. In particular, we were interested in detailing variations in how much work it was for parents to get children through their daily lives and we wanted to examine the ways in which parents managed competing pressures, for example, between children's organized activities and work.[2] Most of the data collection took place in a Northeastern metropolis;[3] we met with families who lived in a white suburban community and with urban-based families living in two neighborhoods, one mainly white and working-class and the other (nearby) mainly black and poor. We conducted separate interviews of the mothers and fathers of a total of eighty-eight children. The author, with the assistance of research assistants, carried out separate two-hour interviews of all of the mothers and most of the fathers (or the guardians, when appropriate).[4] To protect the confidentiality of participants, all names used in this article are pseudonyms.

The study compares boys and girls in middle-class, working-class, and poor families (see Table I). We recruited study participants from public school classrooms.[5] One-half of the children are white and one-half are black. In some

[2]Following Pierre Bourdieu's lead, we were also interested in the advantages parents and children gained by using particular strategies for interacting with educators, medical personnel, and other adults in children's lives (Lareau 2000).

[3]Additional interviews were carried out in a small Midwestern community.

[4]Multisite research projects often rely primarily on research assistants. As principal investigator, I chose to be heavily involved in all phases of data collection. Overall, I did most of the classroom observations, about one-half of the in-depth interviews, and an average of one-quarter of the direct observation of family life (this proportion varied across families), including three overnight visits. One consequence of this pattern was that while a number of the families we observed had one male researcher, all of the interviewers were women.

[5]I carried out classroom observations for about two months in each of the public school classrooms from which I drew the students. After observing in classrooms, I sent a letter requesting interviews with parents (specifying my interest in interviewing mothers and fathers separately).

Table I. Distribution of Children in the Study by Social Class and Race[a]

Social class	White	African American	Total
Middle class[b]	18	18	36
Working class[c]	13	12	25
Families in poverty[d]	13	14	27
Total	44	44	88

[a] For the intensive study, we followed one black boy, one white boy, one black girl, and one white girl from each of the three social class categories, for a total of 12 children.
[b] Middle-class children are those whose households have at least one parent who is employed in a position with a significant amount of occupational autonomy, usually in a professional or managerial position, and who has a college degree.
[c] Working-class children are those whose households have at least one parent who is employed in a position with limited occupational autonomy, usually in a skilled or semi-skilled position. Parents' educational level may be high school drop-out or high school graduate, or may include some college courses, often at a community college. This category includes lower-level white-collar workers.
[d] Poor children are those whose households have parents who are on public assistance and do not have steady participation in the labor force. Most of these parents are high school drop-outs or high school graduates.

instances, especially for black middle-class families and white poor families, the classrooms did not provide a sufficient number of students. To help fill out the sample, we recruited additional students from other classrooms in the school and from informal social networks.[6]

Mirroring national trends, in this study, middle-class families, both black and white, are much more likely to be two-parent households than are poor families. Working-class families lie in between. In general, the fathers we interviewed were regularly present in the home, but we did interview some divorced fathers and mothers who shared custody. We also interviewed some fathers who did not live in their children's homes, but who were nevertheless active in their children's lives. Still, among families below the poverty level, both black and white, the lack of daily, co-residential, paternal involvement was striking (but see Steir and Tienda 1993 for a discussion of informal and sporadic involvement). As a result, almost all of the evidence here comes from the working-class and middle-class rather than the poor families. We interviewed a total of fifty-one men.[7]

We sought to go beyond parents' descriptions of family patterns by conducting repeated observations of family behavior. After completing the interviews, we followed twelve children and their families more intensively. Nine of the twelve children came from the pool of families drawn from the public school classrooms; three families, including both middle-class black families, were recruited from other networks. Usually, we visited daily, for a total of about twenty times in each family's home, often in the space of one month. In most cases the families were

[6] Seven families declined to be in the intensive study, including one white, poor family, two black, poor families, one white, working-class family, and three middle-class, black families. Thus, the response rate was 63% (i.e., 12/19). Among the sample of eighty-eight children, only a few mothers refused to be interviewed. Nine fathers refused—or agreed but then were never available for interviewing.
[7] This figure includes single fathers, stepfathers, one live-in boyfriend, and one grandfather.

paid $350 for their participation in the study. The observations were not limited to activities inside the home; we also followed children and parents as they took part in school and church activities, organized play, kin visits, and medical appointments.

The composition of the observation teams varied according to the race of the family. Two white graduate students and I (a middle-aged white woman) observed the white families. One white graduate student, one black graduate student, and I observed the black families. A white male fieldworker observed the boy in the white family who was poor; all of the other white fieldworkers were female. All of the black families with boys had a black male fieldworker as part of the research team. Each field visit was written up in detailed field notes. We often carried tape recorders with us (especially after the family adjusted to us) and then used our recordings for assistance in writing up field notes.

Unquestionably, our presence altered family dynamics, especially at first. Over time, however, we saw signs of adjustment (e.g., yelling and cursing increased on the third day of observation and again on the tenth). It was difficult for family members to sustain dramatic changes in their behavior for prolonged periods of time. In addition, the ways in which families sought to impress fieldworkers differed. For example, the mother in one of the poor families sprayed roach spray everywhere the day of an overnight visit; a middle-class mother engaged in elaborate conversations, even when she was tired. The working-class and the poor black boys clearly were more comfortable with the black male fieldworkers than with the white female fieldworkers, especially at first. In general, however, children and other family members did not appear to alter their behavior from one fieldworker to the next. Overall, children seemed to find participating in the project particularly enjoyable. They expressed pleasure when the fieldworker arrived and asked her/him to stay longer and not to leave.

FEELING INVOLVED BUT KNOWING LITTLE

We encountered methodological and conceptual problems in our effort to interview fathers to understand the behavior of children and adults in routine areas of family life. Fathers *felt* they were involved in their children's lives. As a result, they reported high levels of activity. When pressed for details, however, it became clear that often these men were relying on their wives as a source of information. Fathers also discussed children's activities in much more general terms than their wives did. Yet, during the same interviews, fathers were able to provide details about other subjects such as work or leisure activities. Although not as central to the objectives of the study, the study of beliefs was easier. Here, fathers were often clearer. They often (but not always) expressed a vision of fatherhood as being active in their children's lives. We concluded that this ideological commitment appeared to shape interview responses (a pattern noted, using quantitative data, by Press and Townsley 1998). Put differently, fathers' objective lack of knowledge about children's behavior was not, at least in our interviews, accompanied

by an honest statement of ignorance. Rather, in keeping with a view of themselves as heavily engaged in their children's lives, fathers appeared to exaggerate their involvement. Intensive probing, however, revealed that fathers had limited knowledge. For example, it was common for fathers to describe a pattern of "fifty-fifty" involvement in many aspects of their children's lives. Mr. Johnson, a white man who was a dentist and an Army reservist, considered himself an involved father. He attended the spring parent-teacher conference (held during a weekday afternoon, in his son's third-grade classroom). He reported reminding the children fifty percent of the time to practice piano; and he indicated that he took his son to Cub Scout meetings. From Mr. Johnson's perspective, these actions qualified as heavy involvement in child care.

Our interview data and field observations, on the other hand, show that fathers such as Mr. Johnson, who saw themselves as heavily involved, had far less knowledge about their children's daily lives than their wives did. These men's wives knew the names of their children's good friends, for example, and they had detailed information about their children's lives outside the home. Mr. Johnson's wife Harriet, a former school teacher who is now a homemaker, is a good example. She provided very detailed information about her son's friendship patterns, likes and dislikes, school situation, and troubles with piano. The intense nature of her involvement is clear in the following excerpt from an interview during which Mrs. Johnson described, with great agitation, how several years earlier, when her son was a kindergartner in a private Christian school, the teacher had recommended that the child repeat the grade. The parents refused. Instead, Mrs. Johnson switched the boy to a public school and surreptitiously initiated a tutoring program:

> I truthfully lied to the child. I told him we were going to a reading and math "fun class." No one ever told him he was being tutored. I took the standard work to [the tutor]. She went through it . . . They had a little party when his class was done. They went to the pool to swim and I had something [for them] to eat.

Her concern and direct involvement are reflected in her description of this period of time as "the worst summer I had ever had in my life." Her distress made it difficult for her to sleep at night. Fortunately, her son's academic problems were not long-lasting; now a third-grader, he was near the top of his class. Mrs. Johnson continued to follow her son's schooling very closely, however, visiting the school regularly to collect additional information.

Mr. Johnson was much more general and distant. Nevertheless, he perceived himself to be intimately involved. Consider Mr. Johnson's response to the interviewer's questions concerning the strengths and weaknesses of his son's teachers. Not only did he focus his answer on the general problem of overcrowding in the classroom, but also—even at that level of abstraction—Mr. Johnson cites his wife as the source of his insights:

> Now I talked to his mother and they were all concerned about so many in the class. Teachers can't do a whole lot . . . You can't teach the five troublemakers. They get left out. And we always emphasize teaching the bright ones, but you don't have to teach the bright ones—they

> teach themselves. It's the five troublemakers that aren't getting attention, except negative attention.

He does not know details about the composition of his son's third-grade class:

> Interviewer: Do you know who those troublemakers are in Joey's class?
>
> Mr. Johnson: I couldn't name them. He tells us stuff, but I don't know, and I've never observed.

Providing Mr. Johnson with a list of the names of the children in the classroom did not help him summon any further details:

> Interviewer: I'm going to show you this list again of the children in his class. Can you tell me any of the parents that you would recognize if you ran into them in the grocery store, [or] if they came into your office?
>
> Mr. Johnson: Well, I'm not sure. Some of the names sound familiar, but I can't place them. [Respondent appears to feel bad that he doesn't know the names.]

It was common for the men we interviewed to speak in generalities, even to pontificate about the nature of children's lives, but then to be unable to provide concrete details. This tendency resulted in many uncomfortable moments in interviews as fathers, when pressed for details by the interviewer, visibly struggled to supply answers.

> Interviewer: That's OK. I'm just wondering if anyone pops into your head.
>
> Mr. Johnson: Hank, because I know his dad. I'm not sure. Harriet could tell me the ones I know.

There was not the slightest trace of irony in Mr. Johnson's voice when he explained to the interviewer that his wife could tell him "the ones I know." He viewed himself as "knowing" these other families, but he saw his knowledge as interdependent with his wife's knowledge.

Similarly heavy interdependence also surfaced in other interviews, including in many families where both the mothers and the fathers worked full-time. Mr. Imes is a white middle-class banker; his wife is employed full-time as a paralegal. Both work about forty to forty-five hours per week. When asked how often would "you" meet parents of other children in his daughter's class, he asked for clarification of what was meant by "you":

> Interviewer: And on average how often would you run into them in the grocery store or you would run into one of them?
>
> Mr. Imes: Me, personally, or Susan [his wife]?
>
> Interviewer: You.
>
> Mr. Imes: Not that much.

A moment later, he referred the interviewer to his wife:

> Interviewer: We're just trying to get an idea about how much parents share information.
>
> Mr. Imes: Susan does more of that than I do, with the mother of one of Joanne's friends.

> They talk about school stuff all of the time. She's also involved with the Girl Scouts with Joanne.

In his last comment, Mr. Imes glossed over his relative lack of participation. By phrasing his reply that his wife "does more of that than I do," he implied that he did talk to other parents about his daughter's activities; he simply did this less than his wife. This was a different claim than his earlier, more direct statement, that he did not do "that much."

In addition to relying on their wives, fathers were much more general in their interviews than mothers. One mark of a good interview is the production of detailed, vivid quotes. Yet, as a group, fathers' answers were distinctly less detailed than the answers their wives provided. A white working-class father, Mr. Faringer, for example, when asked about his son Joseph's music lessons, was more general in his comments than was his wife:

> Interviewer: And when did he start taking guitar lessons?
>
> Mr. Faringer: Oh, about two months ago.
>
> Interviewer: And how did that happen?
>
> Mr. Faringer: Just from watching TV, I think. He just wanted to start to play. We signed him up and got a guitar. He always wants to play. We'll see how it goes.

Mrs. Faringer's answers covered the same material but in a more specific and informative fashion, both in terms of when her son's lessons started and why he was interested, and regarding problems that were developing over the issue of practicing:

> Interviewer: I wanted to ask you a little bit about Joseph's activities. You said he plays the guitar. When did he start playing the guitar?
>
> Mrs. Faringer: In May.
>
> Interviewer: And did he ask you to play the guitar?
>
> Mrs. Faringer: Well, it was MTV. He saw one of them on there, the guitar players. My husband would occasionally sit down, and they'd say which guitar this was. And then he decided he wanted to play. But when he was little, we had those little ones with the strings, the regular acoustic guitar for a child. He would play with that. It was funny because Roy Orbison was on [TV]. There was an hour show of him. He'd stand there in front of the TV and we taped it, the Roy Orbison special. He would play his guitar like he was him. It was funny. But, I know he said he wants to play. He's not practicing as much as he should. And I told him that once that goes, the practicing, then he's not gonna be able to play. Because, to me, it would be a waste—unless he takes a break and starts up when he's a little bit older.

We found a similar pattern among the Connors, a white working-class family. The interviewer began with the prompt ". . . these are just some things that kids do, and if you could tell me if Debbie's ever done any of these."

> Interviewer: What about music lessons?
>
> Mrs. Connor: No. She wanted to take the violin last year really bad and we said no.
>
> Interviewer: Did she press for that? Was that something she really wanted to do?

> Mrs. Connor: Yeah. She begged. And, uh, she's not responsible. The flyer came home from school, and it said that if anything happened to the violin it was two hundred dollars. Well, [the dog] loves chewing wood . . . And she doesn't put anything away, and she's not old enough to be responsible for something that big. Now if it was something I had to buy myself, or something he couldn't eat, I may have had second thoughts. But no way would a violin that's gonna cost two hundred dollars if she doesn't put it away, and he's gonna chew it up.

Mr. Connor's response was short and completely nonverbal:

> Interviewer: Music lessons or piano lessons?
>
> Mr. Connor: [Shakes his head, no.]

Fathers also often started with the term "we," as in "we signed him up," but then, when probed for more information, reduced their own role. For instance, in the black middle-class Murray family, where both parents worked full-time, Mr. Murray said:

> Interviewer: How did he get involved in those [soccer, bowling, karate]?
>
> Mr. Murray: We signed him up for it, and if he didn't like it, we wouldn't have continued it. But he seemed to like everything he was doing, so he kept going.
>
> Interviewer: Who signed him up?
>
> Mr. Murray: Umm, his mother. [Both laugh.]

Some might suggest, following the research on gendered speech patterns (Tanner 1990), that the lower levels of verbal participation by fathers in interviews is part of a general pattern of fathers talking less than mothers in private spheres. Yet, we found that fathers' patterns of speech were *uneven*. Fathers discussed items of interest to them, such as fishing and work, with vivid details and often at length. The following quote from a white working-class father, Lester Jennings, demonstrates this pattern. For example, Mr. Jennings and his wife have three children: a twenty-month-old son, a four-year-old daughter, and a nine-year-old daughter, Holly, a third-grader who participated in our study. Mr. Jennings is a plumber. Mrs. Jennings runs a small, in-home child care business. In the quotes below, Mr. Jennings is recounting regular fishing trips he takes with his brother and the children from both families. Note the details he provided:

> Interviewer: Do the kids have their own fishing poles?
>
> Mr. Jennings: Well, I have them. Usually what we do is, we'll throw all the poles out. We'll bait them and throw them out and then when the fish hits, we'll set the hook and they will take turns landing them. They can't cast them up and all that. If they did all that, that would get somebody hurt. So it's a lot safer to just let them reel them in and take them off and throw them back in.

Taking small children fishing was not without frustration; again Mr. Jennings painted a vivid picture:

> Interviewer: They don't scare the fish?
>
> Mr. Jennings: Well, that's what you get for taking them. I come back every time I go and then I ask myself—I don't know why I take them out there? They'll fish for a minute and

> then they'll want to throw rocks and chase each other around. [Shakes head, with a slight, wry smile.] But I still think it's important to take them. But it's real easy to take the kids and do something and then give up on them because they don't pay attention. But I think they'll eventually like it.

At other points in the interview when discussing items of interest to him (e.g., camping), Mr. Jennings's description was also similarly detailed.

In contrast, this father's responses to questions about his daughter's regular weekly activities were decidedly more general. Below, he is discussing Holly's involvement in Brownies:

> Interviewer: Have you had any complaints about it—even little things that bugged you a little bit?
>
> Mr. Jennings: Not really. Not with the Girl Scouts. Like I say, I've gone and picked her up some, and all the ladies seemed real nice. And I don't have any problem with it at all, really.

Mr. Jennings's broad-stroked answer not only contrasted with the detail he offered when discussing fishing, it also differed markedly from his wife's response:

> Interviewer: When she goes to Brownies, has there been anything that you've felt uncomfortable about, even little things that sort of bothered you?
>
> Mrs. Jennings: Oh, there was a little problem that was with the leader this year. The leader [was] having a little problem communicating whatever. It wasn't her fault, she just was diagnosed with MS a couple years ago, and so she legally couldn't . . . she was legally blind and she couldn't drive. But she was just great with the kids. And then that . . . there was a communication problem between her and the other leader, because of her not being able to write certain notes and things to the kids. Then the other leader started her student teaching this semester. So they just started this problem about not having one leader. But they asked for volunteers and so they had one [or] another parent or adult at each meeting like from that March on. I could go . . . So, as long as we all filled in they could keep the troop, otherwise they were gonna have to disband it, because they didn't have the required supervisor. But, no—I've been real happy, you know. Other than just normal . . . miscommunication.

While stressing how happy she was with Holly's Brownie membership, Mrs. Jennings also highlighted formidable problems (none of which Mr. Jennings noted or seemed aware of). This pattern of Mr. Jennings speaking in generalities and Mrs. Jennings providing vivid details also appeared in other activities, including homework and softball (where Mr. Jennings was a coach). Mr. Jennings, even in the details he provided about the children and fishing, seemed preoccupied with *his* point of view (i.e., how the children are disrupting the fishing). He seems less engaged with the kind of experience his children were having and *their* perceptions of the experience. We found this pattern with other fathers. It was easy to have them talk at length about their beliefs about childrearing as well as work and leisure experiences in their lives. The interviews were less fruitful, however, when focused on the daily behavior and labor involved in shepherding children through the day.

Family observations confirmed the pattern that fathers were far less involved than mothers in the organization of children's daily lives although, as we show below, there were other important contributions fathers made to the collective good of family life. As many other studies have suggested, fathers were helpers

of mothers, recruited, directed, and monitored by mothers. Although the topic of mothers' "invisible labor" (Hochschild 1989; Hays 1996; DeVault 1991; Walzer 1996) is beyond the scope of this paper, we note that the fathers' role in the planning and coordination that inevitably accompany household labor is so small as to be nonexistent. This lack of participation on the fathers' part was particularly prominent in areas that involved family members' activities in settings outside the home (e.g., children's leisure activities) (Berhau and Lareau 2000; Smith and Griffith 1990). Even when fathers were coaches or had other prominent roles in organizations, we found that mothers provided "hidden" assistance (e.g., calling team members to reschedule rained-out practices), a pattern that was not generally reciprocated when women had leadership roles.

Still, from observations, it was clear that fathers did play a powerful symbolic role in the family, although they were not engaged in the details of their children's lives. For example, among the Williams's, a black middle-class family with only one child, Aaron Williams, a trial lawyer, played a very important role. He set the tone for the household and stressed the importance of homework. In a car ride home from school, he discussed homework with his son Alexander. The following field note describes the exchange:

> Mr. Williams: Alexander, did you bring your spelling words home today?
> [Either Alexander did not hear him, or he was ignoring his father. I could not tell which was the case. Aaron glanced at me and repeated the question, verbatim, in a louder voice. Alexander responded this time.]
>
> Alexander: Yeah, they are in my book bag in my spelling folder. The test is not until Friday. I did well on the last one; I do well on all of them. I never get below a ninety-three.

In addition, the father directed his son to begin the homework as soon as they got home:

> As we pull into the driveway, Aaron tells his son, "As soon as you get into the house, I want you to start your homework." [Alexander does not turn around but he does respond.] "Okay." As we walk into the house, Clara [Alexander's mother] tells her son, "I want you to go to your desk and start your homework. I'll be up there to help you in a minute. I have to get dinner started."

Despite the father's important public role, it was Alexander's mother, who also worked full-time (as a very high-level manager in a major corporation), who actually closely supervised the process of getting homework completed that afternoon. She checked in on Alexander regularly (while she made dinner) and gave him specific directions including the sequence he should follow in completing the tasks. At one point Alexander came and directly asked his father for help with homework:

> After working for about fifteen minutes and finishing his math, Alexander needs to work on riddles. He doesn't know what to write. He says to me, "My dad is good with riddles." He goes and asks his father for help. Alexander walks out of the room to his father's bedroom. Aaron is lying on the bed, reading the paper. His shoes are off and both feet are on the bed. Alexander leans on the bed beside him. "Dad, are you good with riddles? I have to write a

> riddle on joints." Aaron does not take his attention off the paper for very long. He glances at Alex. Responding in a distracted/disinterested tone of voice, he says, "Go ask your mother. She is good with riddles."

Thus, Mr. Williams had a powerful, active presence in all of Alexander's sporting events and in promoting the importance of schoolwork. In terms of the (considerable) labor of organizing and running the activities of daily life, however, Mrs. Williams was in charge.

There was tension between Mr. and Mrs. Williams about their relative contribution to Alexander's care and to household labor. They differed in their assessment of their contributions. Mr. Williams reported it as fifty-fifty; Mrs. Williams reported it as sixty (her)-forty (him).[8] In separate interviews, each alluded to this tension. Mrs. Williams asserted that she "needed more time for myself," that her load was "too much." Mr. Williams felt his wife did not sufficiently appreciate his many contributions:

> My thought is that, I want to . . . do as much of that kind of thing for him as humanly possible . . . His uniform is just miraculously clean and ready to get, and . . . neither she nor he thought about the fact that that had get washed . . . I'm sure she doesn't remember that [laughter]. I know my wife.

He saw his schedule as being very different when he had a trial and when he didn't:

> Keep in mind that when I'm on trial I can't do the things that I would love to do through the day. But on Saturdays I still transport him . . . I take him to the tennis center religiously on Saturdays. I take him to all of his sporting events religiously on the weekend, and when I can through the week. Typically, he has had at least one or two weeknights that he's played something.

Two weeks of almost every month, Mr. Williams was engaged in a trial, often working from 5:30 in the morning until midnight. But, as we have shown, there were also important gender differences in the amount of direct engagement with Alexander even when Mr. Williams's professional obligations were less burdensome.

Thus, one major methodological problem with including fathers in interviews about household, childcare, and other routine aspects of family life is that many fathers simply do not know very much about the details of family routines (but see Deutsch 1999 for portraits of equally sharing fathers and mothers). The lack of information supplied by fathers did not appear to be tied to gendered differences in speech patterns, since there were variations in the level of detail within a single interview. Nor, as we will show, do the differences suggest that fathers were simply uninvolved in family life. Fathers were indeed part of family life, but especially compared to mothers, they were uninformed about the details of their children's

[8] Our own assessment of the division of labor in the Williams household differed from both figures. We rated the division as closer to seventy–thirty, with Clara doing the greater share. Part of the problem of assessment, of course, centers on whether one focuses on general statements ("As soon as we get in the house, I want you to do your homework") or on direct engagement ("What do we need to do here?"). See Hochschild (1989), however, for a discussion of family myths.

daily activities. Thus, in terms of collecting the best possible data for answering our research questions, we found that conducting interviews with mothers was significantly more useful than conducting interviews with fathers.[9]

BELIEFS AND BEHAVIOR

While it was hard to extract detailed information from fathers on the behavior of family members, it was easier for fathers to talk about their beliefs. Fathers were especially likely to have clear beliefs about their importance in their children's lives. Here, for example, Mr. Williams, the black trial lawyer, states his commitment to take a meaningful part in his son's life:

> I know that I want for Alexander to have the advantage of a father. A meaningful father in his life was something I didn't have. I didn't have a relationship with my stepfather either. I certainly think that a child is substantially better off if he has sort of the advantage of two parents in his household. And I am convinced that Alexander is a better person because he has a mother and a father. That doesn't mean that people who don't have that advantage will not live rich lives. I certainly was not going to father a child and not be a part of his life. That's very important to me. I feel, I have very strong views about that. I have exceptionally strong views about that.

In other interviews, fathers' beliefs about the importance of children having proper guidance from adults also readily surfaced. As a result, our research difficulties appeared to be tied to our focus on fathers' behavior in routine daily family activities. Our methodology would have had a better fit with the research question if we sought to measure their beliefs rather than their behavior. Yet this finding is not simply methodological. It has an important conceptual dimension since many fathers appear to be ideologically committed to the *idea* that they should play an active role in their children's lives. In other words, fathers embraced the vision that they were engaged parents. They did not, for example, casually dismiss our questions with the statements "I don't know" or "I'm not involved in that." Instead, they stressed what they did do (as with Mr. Williams doing the laundry), appropriated their wives' knowledge as their own (as with Mr. Johnson and the list of children in the classroom), and amplified their involvement (as when Mr. Murray stated that "we" signed him up). They followed in the path of Mr. Imes, who said his wife "does more of that than I do" rather than admit outright that he does not take an active role. This "fudging" of data appears to be linked to a powerful shift in dominant ideology of the ideal role of fathers in family life (Marsiglio 1995). Fathers are no longer simply the good "provider" but are expected to play, at least at the symbolic level, a more active role in children's lives than in earlier decades (Bernard 1991). Yet this very commitment to beliefs confounds data collection. Without field observations inside families, it is difficult to know how much fathers' (and mothers') answers in interviews are ideologically driven and how much their

[9] Single-father households or divorced fathers with regular overnight custodial care were an important exception. These fathers' grasp of the details of their children's daily lives was very similar to that of the typical mother in a dual-parent household.

answers reflect actual practices. Fathers are, however, an excellent and possibly indispensable source of information about the *ideology* of parenthood. This is an important area of research. There is danger, however, when the ideology of fathers overwhelms their reports of behavior, particularly without the researcher being aware of the shift.[10]

VARIATIONS

By exploiting a relatively small, purposeful sample, our study seeks to help illuminate broader methodological and conceptual issues in the literature (Burawoy 1992). We now discuss social class and race differences we observed in what fathers did do. In terms of fathers' ignorance of details or tendency to obscure their lack of knowledge, however, we found no striking patterns by social class and/or race, with one prominent exception. Fathers who were single parents, and especially the two fathers whose wives had died in recent years, provided quite explicit answers about their children's lives. For example, Mr. Tyson, a black middle-class lawyer whose wife had died of a sudden illness, gave many details of the rhythm of his son's life. He described running back and forth between various activities (e.g., taking his son to Cub Scouts while his younger daughter got her hair braided by their next-door neighbor), and he provided many details regarding his children's schooling. He looked back on his former role in the family with new realizations:

> I usually cooked on Sunday when [my wife] was living. But I didn't have to cook the whole meal. I mean, I realize that now [laughs]. I always felt like I was cooking on Sunday . . . You know, the stuff that went with the meat—I didn't have to make those things. I made meat. Those other little things I never had to deal with. So now I have to make the whole thing. It's more of a production.

Similarly, Mr. Tyson also laughed at how he had naively counseled his wife to "relax" about homework:

> [My wife] always did the homework with them. And she would call me at work sometimes. I would give her a really hard time. I'd say, "Relax!" . . . you know, "It's first grade. How hard can this be?" [laughs] . . . until I started doing it.

Fathers were not the only ones whose claims of pervasive involvement in their children's lives emerged as questionable. One white mother, who was on public assistance, was not generally present in her daughter's life. Her mother (the child's grandmother) cared for her daughter. The grandmother provided clear details in response to the interviewer's questions; the girl's mother provided very general

[10]Of course, all interviews (and field observations) are constructions. We do not mean to imply here that other interviews or observations are not subject to the same processes. The problem, however, is one of degree. In our interviews fathers simply could not support a number of the claims they made moments earlier. We did not find this pattern with single fathers or mothers.

answers that were at times inconsistent, particularly regarding her (the mother's) involvement in the child's homework. Thus, it was not a matter of the respondent's gender per se, but rather the effect of the twin factors of the respondent feeling as if he or she *should be* involved in a child's life and the limited actual contact that appeared to offer the greatest opportunities for distortion of data.[11] This pattern raises profound questions about the validity of data in studies of fathers who believe that they should have a relatively egalitarian role in childrearing. Fathers (and absent mothers) did not appear able to support their claims with detailed information. Yet this detailed information is one important sign of data quality and veracity.

In sum, fathers' tendency to stress their contributions, limited though they were, rather than openly admit a minor role, may reflect their internalization of new social expectations linked to fatherhood. In a carefully done study comparing time-diary data and reports from nationally representative surveys, Press and Townsley (1998) conclude that "widespread changes in social expectations about husbands' domestic roles are affecting how husbands report their housework behavior" (p. 214). They find husbands "overreport" household labor much more than wives do (i.e., 149 percent compared to 68 percent).[12] This pattern of exaggeration takes a different shape by gender, with egalitarian beliefs for husbands linked to higher levels of overreporting. Most importantly, they conclude that this overreporting bias could account for the claims that men's housework has increased in recent years.[13] Our study provides further support for Press and Townsley's conclusion that fathers may be exaggerating their involvement in children's lives.

Because of the inequality in the amount of respondents' knowledge, the possible distortion linked to the provenance of that knowledge, and the potential for social expectations to shape perceptions of involvement, we find it to be a reasonable strategy to interview mothers only if the research question focuses on details of routine family life. At the very least, researchers need to identify and much more clearly distinguish among gender differences in symbolic roles, parenting roles involving direct contact, and the invisible labor of planning for these roles.

[11] Clearly, men and women have been socialized to have very different relationships to parenting and are judged differentially as well. These gender factors also are heavily intertwined with the relationships to family life. Our point here, however, is that both mothers and fathers did engage in dramatic claims that did not seem to be supported by detailed probes.

[12] For comparability, the authors compared only four housework tasks traditionally defined as female: cooking, doing dishes, cleaning, and laundry. Thus, strictly speaking, it is not a study of child care and fathers' involvement in children's lives. The point here is conceptual, however, rather than empirical.

[13] Mothers probably exaggerate their involvement in children's lives as well, claiming symbolic motherhood particularly when full-time work conflicts with other motherhood obligations (see Garey 1999). But when pressed for details, we found mothers could supply them on children's activities, with the exception of mothers who were not living in the home in a sustained fashion. Moreover, important parts of children's labor are difficult to avoid, even with the effort to "out-source" or commodify aspects of family life (Hochschild 1997). For children who are nine and ten, the labor demands are considerable.

THE ROLE OF FATHERS IN FAMILIES

In addition to the methodological concerns discussed above, our findings lead us to reconsider some important conceptual issues. A large number of studies have detailed the relatively limited contribution of fathers to household and child care labor. As a result, social scientists have become preoccupied with what fathers do not do. We need to change, and broaden, our research questions to examine what fathers *do* contribute.

The third- and fourth-grade children in our study displayed warmth and pleasure towards their fathers; they looked forward to seeing them. As we will show fathers made many important contributions to families, particularly in initiating laughter, shaping the flow of conversation, and imparting life skills to their children. In *these* daily routines of family life, fathers were important.[14] Put differently, we found that fathers did dominate family life. This domination was not in the earlier cultural form that stressed overt authority, discipline, and men's role as economic provider. Instead, through teasing, the creation of a powerful presence, and a transfer of responsibilities to their wives, fathers had privileged status in family life.

LAUGHTER, FUN, AND AFFECTION

Although fathers talked to children less than mothers did and provided less daily custodial care of children, their presence was important. Fathers added color, fun, informality, and "accent" to family life. Mothers were likely to worry, chastise, and punish. Fathers were playful. In our family observations we were repeatedly struck by the ways in which the fathers who participated in our study enlivened and lightened the tone of family life. Fathers often made other members of the family laugh. On the day described in the excerpt below, the black middle-class Marshall family had driven out of state to see an exhibition of art by a close friend. Mr. Marshall (Tommy) first creates laughter over a purchase his wife was planning and then gently teases his daughter Sarah:

> Tommy came over to join us. He said, "Mom says she likes Number 22." We found the painting [a nice, abstract pastel] and the price. Tommy said, matter-of-factly, "Well, hot dogs and beans next week." We all laughed at that. Sarah said, with her mouth partially full, "That's two hundred ninety dollars!" Tommy said, "Oh, that's no problem, Sarah—we'll just sell some of your stuff!" Sarah said, "What do I have? All I have is clothes." Her father said, "That's all you have, huh, Sarah? No television, no Walkman, no tape recorders?" She giggled—"Well, you're the one who paid for all that."

Much of the laughter introduced by fathers was light playfulness interwoven with the humdrum of family routines. Mothers also had fun with children, listening to jokes, hitting a tennis ball around, baking cookies, or watching television. But

[14]Our point here is not to weigh the relative contributions of fathers. Rather we simply highlight areas that have received insufficient attention.

in the families we observed, a larger proportion of interactional time between children and fathers was spent in play or leisure activities compared to interactions between mothers and children. In the latter cases, there was more stress on duties (e.g., taking a shower, doing homework, getting ready for bed).

There are methodological issues in studying, for example through interview data, the role of fathers or others in initiating laughter. Laughter often passes quickly. It is also heavily embedded in interactional patterns in family life. Children also often prompted interludes of laughter. Regardless of who initiated it, however, when family members came together and laughed over a child's actions, the moment was short-lived. For example the Irwins are an interracial family comprised of a black father (who worked as a lower-level technician), a white mother (who baby-sat children in the home part-time), and their two daughters. In this example, in early evening the family is getting ready to go out for dinner. Constance, a fourth-grader, has a case of "pink eye" that requires having drops put in her eye. In the space of just a few minutes, a tussle breaks out between the sisters, which in turn prompts a disciplinary action during which Mrs. Irwin raises her voice and loudly scolds Constance, which is then followed by a show of irritation by Mr. Irwin. The episode ends with a flash of family laughter:

> Everyone [continues to] watch Constance get her drops. Victoria comes over to the sofa but is instructed not to stand so close by Mrs. Irwin: "Please don't stand right here, honey." Everyone laughs during the eye drop event, enjoying Constance's performance, who makes a cute face—when a drop doesn't make it into her eye [and instead goes down the side of her face].

These interactional moments were hard to elicit in interviews. Yet, one of the most prominent roles of fathers in families was to promote laughter in the family. Compared to mothers, they spent less time with children but still, in a limited but nonetheless powerful way, had an important impact on family life.

In addition, the children in our observations often displayed high levels of adoration for their fathers. Fathers had special ways of interacting. Mr. Williams often called his son "Handsome," in a gentle, affectionate fashion. Mr. Talinger queried Garrett in the car on the way back from a soccer game, asking him, "Who was the ball hog?" Mr. Yanelli called his son "Pook," and rubbed the top of the boy's head for a few seconds, in a clearly affectionate manner. Mr. Handlon, recently home from work, let his daughter Melanie, age ten, playfully punch his large belly as she stood on the stairs talking with him about her day. Thus, as other studies have shown, fathers are often specialists in play and laughter with their children (LaRossa and LaRossa 1981).

FATHERS AS A GRAVITATIONAL CENTER

Fathers often dominated the conversational space in families. Among the white middle-class Handlons, for instance, interaction rituals shifted when

Mr. Handlon came home from work. Mrs. Handlon worked thirty hours per week as a church secretary, but she finished work by the time school let out each day. Thus, mother and children typically were together in the afternoon, after school. Mr. Handlon was a credit manager in a large business, and he generally did not get home until after six in the evening. Soon after arriving home, Mr. Handlon frequently became the gravitational center of conversation. On Christmas Eve, for example, he dominated the family dinner hour by recounting his annual practice of playing golf on Christmas Eve day, no matter what kind of Northeast winter weather prevailed.

Allowing fathers to be the center of attention, however, did not necessarily mean they were always treated with respect. For example, as the family sat around eating pizza, Mr. Handlon and the two older boys (Keith, fourteen and Robby, twelve) discussed baseball players. Mrs. Handlon and Melanie listened quietly, as these field notes show:

> There is a discussion of who else might be traded. Robby is confused and asks again about [a catcher] being traded. His dad (quietly and calmly—but authoritatively) lectures him about trading and says [the catcher] won't be [traded]. He then says, "[A famous pitcher] was traded." Both boys react to this statement as if even an idiot would know this piece of information. They both say, "Duhhhhhh." [They are mocking their dad's effort to inform them.]

Similarly, in the black middle-class Marshall family, it was Mr. Marshall who often controlled topics of conversation. He had a special interest in sports and in the current standing of many sports teams, information of less intrinsic interest to his wife.

When fathers did not want to talk, the conversational space would often simply close and silence would prevail, as when the Williams family was riding home one early evening. Mr. Williams was reading papers in the backseat while Mrs. Williams drove. Alexander asked questions from time to time, but his father's desire for a lack of conversation appeared to set the tone, making for a mostly quiet ride home. This relative silence differed from other occasions when the family rode in the car together and Mr. Williams was talkative.

Fathers also showed their central position by having others in the household walk over to them, rather than the fathers going to speak to the others. For example, Mr. Irwin showed his power in many nonverbal ways, including his preoccupation with his choir work and with playing computer games while Mrs. Irwin prepared dinner and minded the girls. In this example, it was late afternoon on a warm spring day. Mr. Irwin was playing a computer game; Mrs. Irwin was making dinner. The girls were watching a Fox cartoon movie. Constance was simultaneously reading a *Humpty Dumpty* magazine, especially during the commercials:

> The apartment is warm. At one point, when the windows are steamed up, Mr. Irwin decides to open a window. He calls to his wife in the kitchen, "I am going to open a window." Despite the small size of the apartment, she can't hear him clearly. She says, "What?" He repeats his statement. She comes out of the kitchen saying, "I can't hear you." [He doesn't move but stands with his hand on the bottom of the window.] He says, "I am going to open a window." She says, "Fine."

There were times, of course, when fathers did get up and did go to others. But as an overall pattern, fathers were more likely to stand or sit and have mothers and children come to them. We saw this pattern as a sign of fathers' privilege.

Fathers' presence was felt even when they were not physically present. For example, in the white working-class Fallon family, Mr. Fallon, the children's stepfather, worked every other weekend. Mrs. Fallon did not drive. The routine of all family members changed radically, depending on Mr. Fallon's work schedule. The family went out shopping together at the local mall on the weekends Mr. Fallon was free; they stayed home on weekends he worked—even though the family lived within walking distance of a large shopping area and close to major bus routes. Mealtimes, too, were designed around Mr. Fallon's work schedule. In other families where fathers traveled for work, dinners were more elaborate when fathers were home than when they were on the road (DeVault 1991).

Similarly, fathers were protected from interruptions in a way mothers were not. Events one Saturday morning in the Handlon family are illustrative. By 9:00 a.m., the household is filled with activity. Mrs Handlon is up and dressed. She has already prepared pancakes for Keith, Robby, and Melanie. She supervises the children as they squeeze fresh orange juice, and she repeatedly prods them to get ready to go to church for a pageant rehearsal. Her efforts to get the children through the morning explicitly excluded Mr. Handlon's involvement. The fieldworker summarized the last segment of the morning's events this way:

> Mrs. Handlon then quickly said, "You need to get your stuff together. We need to get going." Robby puts down his glass and leaves the room. Mrs. Handlon stands up and heads to the counter/sink area. Seconds later, someone begins to adeptly play a quick melody on the piano and she sighs, "Gee, on the one day when Mark gets to sleep in. All he needs is to hear that." She rushes into the dining room area and I hear her say, "Robby-stop that because your father is sleeping." She returns to the kitchen and says, "Yes, Mark is not a morning person and he likes to sleep in on Saturdays."

Some fathers did take an active role in sharing responsibilities for childrearing, or took an active role in specific tasks such as children's athletic activities. In general, however, the responsibility for the labor of childrearing had been transferred to mothers. Many studies of family life have shown a labor gap in the time mothers and fathers spend on childcare and household labor (Hoschchild 1989). Our data, however, make a somewhat different point. In addition to the shift in labor away from fathers to mothers, mothers had the additional labor of getting children to protect fathers' time and space. Thus Mrs. Handlon stopped what she was doing to hurry in to hush her son. Fathers' tranquility was protected in a way we did not observe for mothers.

LIFE SKILLS

Fathers, along with mothers, taught children important life skills. This key role of fathers, including middle-class fathers, in stressing physical prowess has not been sufficiently emphasized in studies of what fathers do. Observational

data suggests that, particularly with boys, fathers stressed masculinity, especially physical prowess, and that mothers typically did not. For example, white working-class Mrs. Yanelli described her "no-no-my-baby" reaction when her husband and his brother taught nine-year-old Billy how to fight expressly so that he could take on a classmate who had been bothering him. Mrs. Yanelli proudly reported that her son went to school and "got the job done." Fighting, as the Yanellis knew, is in direct violation of school rules. Their son was suspended, but the suspension appeared to be an acceptable cost, given the importance of the boy's being able to successfully defend himself on the playground. In the white working-class Fallon family, the twelve-year-old boy often wrestled with his stepfather on the living room floor in the evening. His mother, nine-year-old sister, and baby sister watched. The wrestling, in which each bout lasted a few minutes, was usually done in silence (except for grunts). It was a routine family event.

Mothers and fathers sometimes held different opinions regarding life skills. Mr. Murray, a black, college-educated father, described the situation in his household in regard to what he taught his nine-year-old stepson:

> My wife doesn't really want him involved in extremely physical activities-being a mother, I guess, not wanting to see [laughing] her baby hurt. But me being a male, I realize that's just a part of, I mean, that's a part of growing up. It's gonna happen. You know, he's gonna knock his head against something, he's gonna come home bloody one day. It's just a part of life. So I don't shy away from the physical sports, basketball, football, soccer . . . even boxing . . . organized, not street fights [they laugh]. Not a street fight. But organized, organized boxing.

He and his wife disagreed. She wanted tennis; he wanted football:

> She loves tennis because there's no physical contact there. The most he can do is, like, twist his ankle or something. But me, I like football. It's very physical, but, you know, I don't think it's anything that he can't handle. I mean they're not, no one's gonna kill him. He may get bruised up, but he won't be dead. So those are our biggest disagreements—discipline and maybe physical aspects of any activity that he's involved in.

At that point, the mother had "won" the argument. The boy was playing tennis. His stepfather was hopeful, however, that changes would occur in the future. Generally, of all the aspects of children's lives in third and fourth grade, including school, homework, physical care, food, friendship networks, and other elements, we found fathers particularly interested and active in children's athletic development. If fathers were active in coaching, it was likely to be a softball team rather than Brownies. Even with girls, fathers took an interest in formally and informally cultivating involvement in basketball, softball, soccer, and other athletic activities.

In addition to lessons about physical strength and fighting, fathers also taught children, especially boys, life skills about fixing objects. One Saturday afternoon, for example, white working-class Mr. Fallon taught his twelve-year-old stepson how to fix a bicycle by having the boy hold his younger sister's bike while Mr. Fallon demonstrated how to put the chain back on the spokes. The younger

sister was in the kitchen at the time, but in a gendered lesson of life skill, all instruction went to her brother, not to her.

There were variations among the parents in the types of life skills they sought to teach children. In addition to differences in how and what they taught boys and girls, black parents were sensitive to the special dilemmas of raising black boys in American society. Mothers, but especially fathers, spoke of these issues in interviews. Such concerns also surfaced in observations. Black middle-class fathers reported experiencing racial insults in daily life (e.g., watching white women clutch their purses to their chests and look fearful as they walked down the street at night, concerns about racial discrimination in housing purchases, difficulties in employment). There were variations among parents as to when children should be taught about the looming racial problems that they would likely face in their lives. Some parents reported in interviews that they felt they needed to wait until their children were older than in fourth grade to talk to them about these issues. For example, Mr. Tyson, a lawyer and a single father, had introduced the ideas generally but was deliberately waiting until his son was older before providing him with information about other realities that the father believed his son would inevitably have to confront:

> When he was younger, we've had conversations about different races and getting along with all different types of people. You know, there're good and bad people morally, you know race isn't so important . . . I'm starting to [pause] try to explain to him, you know, different historical type things. I mean, we've read books on slavery and things like that. [But there are] a lot of the hard lessons that he's gonna learn in life about, you know, discrimination. I haven't presented [them] to him as blatantly yet.

Black fathers and mothers also monitored children's schooling carefully for signs of racial inequity (Lareau and Horvat 1999). As in studies by others (Hochschild 1995), we found concerns about discrimination especially prevalent among the middle-class black families in our sample. The white families we studied lived in predominantly white worlds. Compared to the black families, the white families did not report, and we did not observe, the transmission of special life skills designed to help children negotiate race relations, either as children or as adults.

Overall, across race and class, fathers played an important role in the transmission of life skills, especially in the areas of physical prowess and masculinity. Moreover, fathers shaped the conversational space in families and introduced humor and playfulness on a regular basis. Thus, we believe it essential that social science research redirect attention from a focus on fathers' deficiencies (e.g., their failure to do much housework or child care) to isolating and analyzing the contributions fathers do make.

DISCUSSION

This article has identified important methodological and conceptual difficulties in the study of fathers and their roles in family life. In conducting our study

of aspects of family life, we invested extensive resources to interview fathers about children's daily routines. We asked very detailed questions about children's participation in sports, including who enrolled the child, who wrote the check, when the activity began, when it ended, who provided the transportation of the child to and from the activity site, who prepared the refreshments, what the parent hoped the child would get out of the activity, and what complaints the parent had about the activity. Most fathers did not know the answers to most of these questions. They were best at discussing their beliefs, such as answering general questions about broader life goals for children. They excelled at discussions of their own work experiences, their leisure activities, and masculinity. We found it extremely uncomfortable (and discouraging) to spend so much time pressing fathers for answers they could not provide. We did sometimes gain interesting insights from these interviews, but, overall, we question whether, for our purposes, the considerable energy and resources devoted to interviews with fathers were worth it. We found that despite its large volume, the data from our interviews with fathers, once transcribed and analyzed, yielded overly general findings and lacked vivid quotes.

It is entirely possible, of course, that more skilled interviewers, particularly male interviewers, might have elicited richer answers from the fathers in our sample. But the fact that most of the interviews with fathers *did* have rich moments—just not ones that addressed topics of interest to us—undermines this explanation. In addition, many other studies have noted the lack of fathers' involvement in children's lives, particularly fathers' limited participation in childrearing (Deutsch 1999; Hood 1993; Lareau 1989; Marsiglio 1995; Townsend 1999; Walzer 1996). There is even less contact between fathers and children after divorce; the majority of children in divorced families do not see their fathers on a weekly basis (Arendell 1986; Maccoby and Mnookin 1992).

Obviously, fathers' degree of involvement depends on the aspect of family life under investigation. We were interested in the detailed, day-to-day labor of parents in getting children through the day. Before we started the study, it had seemed important to allocate almost one-half of our resources to interviewing fathers. As it turned out, our focus on this kind of behavior (e.g., who does what) was a key problem since, at least in our families, most fathers did not do that much (but see Deutsch 1999). If our research question had been different, interviewing fathers would have yielded more useful data. It would be a serious mistake, for instance, to omit fathers in a study of the transmission of masculinity. Similarly, if our primary focus had been on the ideologies of motherhood and fatherhood, it also would have been crucial to conduct interviews with both parents equally.

Based on our experience with mothers and fathers as unequally viable sources of information on family life, we conclude that researchers who are interested in family behavior and who have limited resources should focus on plumbing the *best* source(s) of information for answering their particular research question, even when that means excluding one parent.

FAMILIES AS INTERACTIONAL GROUPS

Emile Durkheim (1933), in his discussion of social collectives, made an important point often overlooked in studies of family life. He argued that the collectives have a reality in and of themselves (i.e., *sui generis*) or, put differently, that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. This insight is crucial in the construction of more sophisticated models of family life. Families are groups with members interacting in a fluid and dynamic fashion. Recall the Irwin family's experiences with eye drops. In the space of a few minutes, they moved through the girls tussling, the mother yelling at the older daughter, a reconciliation, the father admonishing the same daughter, and then a moment of social connection as the entire family came together to laugh at Constance's deliberately funny facial contortions when an errant drop trickled down her cheek. We found this kind of dynamic common: Moments of social connection tended to be brief, even fleeting. Highlighting the nature of social connections in family life, recognizing them as fluid and ever-changing, is crucial to a more elaborate notion of the elements of family life. Analyses of families must necessarily, then, incorporate the different vantage points and experiences of various members of the group. Such analyses also must be attuned to interactional processes, embedded in a broader context, rather than discrete actions studied in isolation.

Of course, a focus on the dynamic nature of social interaction *and* the importance of various vantage points means that researchers need to attend to the input of all group members. Interviews, especially interviews of only one parent, are insufficient to capture group dynamics. In our own case, it was repeated field observations inside families that brought to our attention the many positive contributions fathers make. Without the observational part of our study, we might have added to the number of studies portraying fathers as deficient in key areas of family life. Family observations are extremely difficult to carry out. It is difficult to gain access. The visits are intrusive. One needs repeated observations so the family can regain a routine. The visits also are extremely labor intensive and, we found, emotionally exhausting. Still, we discovered the field observations were crucial to capturing dynamic relationships of family life. In the case of fathers, at least, researchers are likely to miss a significant part of their role in the family unless studies are designed to capture fluid and fleeting exchanges in the routines of daily life.

However, partly because of the formidable barriers to drawing such a complex interactional portrait, family sociologists often look only at the parts, and then imply a vision of the whole. We have countless studies of work hours, wage gaps, hours spent in child care, time spent in various household chores, and other easily quantifiable aspects of home life and work-family relationships. The proliferation of such studies has shaped the field, suggesting that household labor is deservedly the key to understanding family life. Yet, as we have shown, focusing on household and child care labor tends to obscure other important aspects of family life, notably

"hanging out" together, laughter, transmission of life skills, and conversational rhythms.

Other factors also contribute to a misunderstanding of the roles family members play. Fathers sometimes take on prominent roles as, for example, Mr. Williams did when he instructed his son to do his homework. But these symbolic and public roles need to be distinguished from the more "hands-on" character of tasks that involve actually directing a child in the details of a given activity, such as completing a homework assignment. It is simply inaccurate to say that fathers such as Mr. Williams do not have a role in homework. But current measures of the time spent helping children with homework, or self-reports of the level of involvement, do not sufficiently capture the real-life dynamic. Thus, when fathers report a role in homework, talking with children about school, or talking to other parents, they are indeed telling the truth; they see themselves—and others see them—as being involved fathers. The difficulty, at least in analytical terms, is that the quality of that involvement differs significantly by gender. Studies of household division of labor, child care, and other family routines do not allow us to capture sufficiently the unequal differences in the power and sense of responsibility that mothers and fathers have in the enactment of family events.[15]

This data is suggestive of both a pattern of continuity and change in the fathers' role in families over time. In terms of continuity, there are signs that fathers remain a powerful, indeed dominant, force in family life. As we have shown, in observations we saw fathers claim the conversational floor, set the tone for a talkative or quiet family life in a given moment, and transmit socially desirable life skills, especially to their sons. Yet the forms of domination we observed contrast with a more traditional role of men as "good providers," with a stress on fathers' more overt authority in the home or fathers' as the threatened source of discipline if children misbehave (Bernard 1991). As Naomi Gerstel suggests, the focus on fathers' presence, their role in teasing family members, and the transfer of household responsibilities to their wives is a "modernized form of domination" which, nonetheless, generates privilege.[16]

Moreover, in studying family life, sociologists have not been random in their approach. Instead, they are particularly likely to take up the (considerable) difficulties of women's roles in juggling the competing and complex demands of home, childrearing, and work life (but see Farrell 1999 and Skolnick 1991 for broader overviews of family studies). However, this stress on the perspective of *mothers* privileges one set of family members over others, notably fathers and children

[15]One possibility is to diversify the sample of fathers, dramatically increasing the number of fathers who typically possess detailed information, particularly divorced fathers who have regular, overnight visitation with children, and single fathers. The problem, however, is that these men are rare. They are difficult to pick up in many samples. In addition, there is a pressing need to diversify samples to include variation by racial and ethnic background, family structure, and social class. Another possibility is to use a nested design, with 90-minute face-to-face interviews with mothers and shorter (e.g., 20-minute) telephone interviews with fathers.

[16]Naomi Gerstel, personal communication, June 1, 2000.

(but see Galinsky 1999 and Thorne 1987, 1992). Our study found that children were not particularly aware of the amount of labor mothers provided; from the children's perspective, food simply appeared, clothes became clean, and parents automatically supplied transportation. The background labor involved was not a central concern in their lives.[17] Of course, mothers (as we have shown) are core family members. Where limited resources constrain a study to only one family member, mothers are a good choice. Ideally, however, there should be an effort to expand the boundaries of sociological research to include the perspectives of others as well, notably fathers. If we seek out and measure fathers according to their contributions to household labor, we are likely to find them wanting. The task is to reframe our questions to take seriously how fathers see themselves. Here, we stress that fathers are important members of families, but their importance centers on their *presence* and on the meaning that they have for children (and wives).[18] The social role of fathers in teasing, talking to, and teaching children needs to be carefully assessed. Studies of divorce, in particular, might profit from a more systematic investigation of the loss of these elements when fathers are no longer present in the home.

Thus, in addition to methodological concerns, we see important conceptual concerns of imbalance, especially in the study of fathers. We find the study of family life to be disproportionately skewed to selected, usually easily quantifiable, topics and to privilege the views of mothers. Merely calling social scientists' attention to these overlooked areas is not likely to result in any significant change in the field, however. Interactional family dynamics are less easy to quantify than hours spent in household labor. They require more time to observe, more time to analyze, and more time to shape into publishable articles. Creating more sophisticated models of family life will require a concomitant change in priorities among researchers, the institutions that employ and promote them, and the agencies that fund them. We hope that a greater recognition of the importance of broadening and deepening the focus of family research will help bring about these necessary, sweeping changes.

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[17] Also, as Deutsch (1999) has shown, children's attachment to parents is not strikingly sensitive to parents' contributions to child care and household labor.

[18] There are signs of this from other studies. Studies of divorce also suggest great distress, at least in the short term, from the dissolution of the family unit (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991). There is considerable evidence of economic decline (Kurz 1996) as well as a decline in contact between children and fathers (Maccoby and Mnookin 1992). However, since we lack a great deal of data on what fathers do in families aside from their economic contributions, it is hard to understand (aside from the economic drop) why family members are distressed by the absence of fathers.

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