Approximately 3.5 million people in the United States experience homelessness in a given year (The Urban Institute, 2000). Although homelessness has often been visualized as an individual adult issue, 36% of the homeless population is made up of families with children, and the percentage continues to rise (The U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2002). However, the research community is just beginning to study this vulnerable population. One area that has been especially underrepresented in the literature on homelessness and families is that of homeless fathers. While single mothers are still the primary parents in the majority of homeless families, the Urban Institute (1999) reported that 16% of homeless families include a father. Focusing on this population of men is especially pertinent in relation to concerns about responsible fathering. Recent research on responsible fathering has highlighted the need to examine contextual influences on parenting (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erikson, 1998). Fathers at the margins, such as homeless fathers, may experience unique constraints to responsible parenting. Therefore, the present study aimed to provide insight into the lives of these men, with a focus on parenting practices and the constraints that homelessness may place on fathering. This topic is particularly salient in light of Day and Lamb's (2004) call for researchers to "examine the roles played by men in special circumstances" (p. 14).

In this vein, we employed in-depth qualitative methods to explore and uncover homeless fathers' experiences from both their own perspectives and perspectives of professionals who provide services to homeless fathers. In particular, we sought to uncover the processes, contexts, and meanings associated with homeless fathers' descriptions of homeless family life, providing insight into how men parent their children in challenging and constricting environments.

**Influences on responsible fathering: A theoretical framework**

The term "responsible fathering" emphasizes the importance of men's active involvement in children's lives, including financial support and physical and emotional care (Doherty et al., 1998). A substantial portion of men, particularly poor men, are not consistently involved in these areas of parenting (Coley, 2001). Hence, there is a need to better understand the forces that influence fathers' responsible parenting. The responsible parenting framework also emphasizes how fathering is embedded in a larger social context. While mothering is surely influenced by contextual factors as well, Doherty et al. (1998) argued that fathers are especially vulnerable to contextual influences. Homeless fathers in particular face several contextual factors that may shape their parenting. Unemployment and financial crises are particularly detrimental to fathering since society's perceived success of fathers is often inextricably linked to men's monetary contributions (Doherty et al., 1998). Homeless fathers may also experience loss of support and discriminating institutional practices. Research suggests that fathers who are poor or near poor are less likely to receive public assistance than mothers (Garasky & Meyer, 1996). Additionally, fathers may have negative experiences applying for aid if workers are not supportive of custodial fathers (Hamer & Marchioro, 2002). Since these contextual factors influence parenting and other life choices, a responsible fathering framework is useful in conceptualizing the lives of homeless fathers.
**Gender role strain**

Part of considering the contextual influences on homeless fathering is looking deeper into how gender and societal expectations interact and shape men's identities. Several conceptualizations of gender role strain have been used to depict how social constructions of masculinity affect men's lives, one of which Pleck (1995) termed "gender role discrepancy." Inherent in masculine gender roles are standard criteria by which many men measure themselves. When there is a mismatch between a man's sense of standard masculine roles versus his own characteristics and behaviors, he may experience gender role discrepancy, resulting in psychological distress. Silverstein, Auerbach, and Levant (2002) linked this concept of gender role strain directly to fathers, noting that traditional fathering roles, such as providing material resources, are often in conflict with roles in contemporary families. Homelessness, as a marker of parents' financial instability, provides an extreme example of a mismatch between gender expectations and fathers' roles. As research on poor fathers has found, high financial expectations placed on fathers conflict with the limited financial resources of poor men to create substantial stress (Nelson, Clampet-Lundquist, & Edin, 2002). A second potential area of gender role discrepancy lies at the intersection of caregiving and providing. For example, qualitative studies have suggested that single fathers have difficulties playing the role of both provider and nurturer (Emmers-Sommer, Rhea, Triplett, & O'Neil, 2003; Greif, 1995). Similarly, in a unique study of low-income, African American fathers, Hamer and Marchioro (2002) reported that fathers transitioning into full-time parenting after gaining custody of their children felt trapped in their new roles. They also had difficulties adjusting to the demands placed on them by taking on full-time parenting, even though they prided themselves in caring for their children.

Pleck (1995) argued that "discrepancy-strain may be not a static outcome but a process" (p. 14). When facing gender role discrepancy, individuals may manage by adjusting their perspectives or behaviors regarding gender roles. O'Neil, Good, and Holmes (1995) termed this a gender role transition, a point at which one's beliefs, assumptions, and perceptions of masculine and feminine roles are altered. Working through these transitions can facilitate a redefinition of one's own ideals and behaviors. Gender role strain theory suggests that the mismatch between homelessness and expectations of providing and caregiving may affect fathers' ideas of parenting and masculinity. Thus, studying fathers who are experiencing family homelessness provides both an opportunity to examine gender roles at a time of heightened saliency and transformation and a chance to consider this transformation as a potential opportunity for intervention.

**Homeless parenting**

Although no extant research has explicitly focused on homeless fathers' parenting, we drew from literature on homeless mothers and parenting. This work has noted that homeless mothers experience substantial stresses and express significant concerns over their children's experiences. Many homeless mothers experience depression, self-blame, and frustration with shelter life (Choi & Snyder, 1999; Menke & Wagner, 1997). Moreover, mothers feel that the contexts and experiences of homelessness and shelter life
are detrimental for their children. Mothers experience sadness for their children and concern over children's well-being, health, and safety (Choi & Snyder, 1999; Morris & Butt, 2003). Many are wary of leaving their children with other homeless families due to different family values (Hodnicki & Horner, 1993).

Research has also suggested that homeless mothers in shelters feel that their context affects their own parenting behaviors. Mothers feel that the rules of shelters interfere with their parental autonomy and their ability to make choices regarding caretaking tasks such as preparing meals, setting bedtimes, and washing children's clothes. They report feeling removed from the maternal role in light of staff members implementing rules for the family (Thrasher & Mowbray, 1995). In spite of these stresses, the resilience of many mothers is notable. They often actively seek out solutions, including better education for themselves, as mechanisms to move their families out of homelessness and into more stable living situations (Hodnicki & Horner, 1993; Menke & Wagner, 1997). Whether they are worrying about their children or focusing on solutions, mothers residing in shelters consider parenting and the needs of their children as central to their lives.

In short, research on homeless parenting suggests that homelessness appears to make mothers' parenting and parental autonomy more challenging, and that many mothers react with increased emotional concern regarding parenting and their children. An essential goal of the present research was to examine explicitly fathers' experiences of homelessness and shelter life. Given the increasing number of homeless fathers living with their children and concern over responsible fathering, it is important to examine how experiences of homelessness are related to men's conceptions of parenting and parenting behaviors.

Methods

In this research, in-depth interviewing techniques and qualitative content analysis (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Sandelowski, 1999) were used to gather and analyze data on homeless fathers. In-depth qualitative data allow respondents to share their views and experiences. In an emerging population such as this, exploratory methods are centrally important avenues through which to uncover primary themes and experiences of a particular group.

Participants

Data were collected at three homeless family shelters in a northeastern urban area. A total of nine single or married biological fathers who were residing with at least one child younger than 18 years of age at the time of the study participated. Nonbiological fathers (e.g., stepfathers) were not included because the shelter system only allowed biological fathers to reside in the shelters with children. Four fathers (45%) were Hispanic, three (33%) were non-Hispanic White, and two (22%) were non-Hispanic Black. Two of the fathers spoke Spanish as their primary language and were therefore interviewed in
Spanish. With regard to education level, five fathers had less than a high school education, one had completed high school, and three had more than a high school education. The ages of the fathers ranged from 22 to 55 years, with a mean of 38 years. This sample of fathers had an average of 1.5 residential children whose ages ranged from 6 months to 16 years \( (M = 6 \text{ years}) \). Four of the fathers were single parents, and five were living in the shelter with a partner (four biological mothers, one stepmother). As for employment status, none of the single fathers were employed. Two of the five partnered fathers were working, and two others had employed partners. Only two fathers had lived in shelters before.

Interviews with one shelter director from each shelter \((n = 3)\) were also conducted to triangulate data and obtain additional information about homeless fathers and the particular rules, requirements, and inner workings of the shelters. All three shelter directors were women. Two were in their 20s, while the third was in her 50s. Two were non-Hispanic White, and one was non-Hispanic Black. One of the women went to work at the shelter after completing a master's degree in social work and had worked at the shelter for 10 months when she was interviewed. Another director had previously been homeless and had worked in several other occupations before deciding that she wanted to help other people experiencing homelessness. She had been at the shelter for 24 months. The third staff member had not had any experience in human services before working at the shelter but had been working there for 18 months.

**Data collection**

After Institutional Review Board approval was obtained, fathers were recruited through three local homeless family shelters with the cooperation of a volunteer organization that works with the shelters. Each shelter was recruited through a telephone conversation and face-to-face contact, and directors \((N = 3)\) furnished permission to participate in the study. Within each participating family shelter, all fathers in residence \((n = 11)\) met the inclusion criteria of the study (e.g., resident, biological fathers in homeless shelters) and were informed about the study by the shelter directors. This approach to recruiting participants, defined as criterion sampling \((\text{Patton, 2002})\), was used to capture the maximum amount of potential data from a specific population. All fathers agreed to participate and were subsequently contacted by the researchers; however, two fathers left the shelters before interviews were completed, resulting in a final sample of nine participating fathers. Each participant provided informed consent and was paid $25 in cash as compensation for their participation in the study. Compensation of $25 was also paid to participating staff members, all of whom chose to donate the money to their respective shelters. Eleven of the 12 interviews took place in a private room in the shelter; the remaining interview took place at an outdoor park.

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews lasting from 45 to 90 min. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Both father and shelter director interviews followed a semistructured format using an interview guide, in which a number of sensitizing concepts were designated a priori for discussion, but the tempo and order of the conversation flowed from the respondent's lead \((\text{Patton, 2002; van den Hoonoard,})\).
This method of data collection provides an initial framework for interviews and can be particularly useful when previous work is used to inform a current study (van den Hoonnaard, 1997). Sensitizing concepts were derived from literature on responsible fathering and homeless families, as well as from the researchers' previous experiences volunteering in a shelter. The questions were open ended in order to allow the respondents to introduce new constructs. The line of questioning was organized into three sections: preshelter life, shelter life, and parenting. The sensitizing concepts in preshelter life included how fathers became homeless and the process of getting into a family shelter. The next line of questioning included the sensitizing concepts of rules, services, and staff members within the shelter. Finally, the parenting section included questions regarding parental duties, concerns for children, and definitions of fathering. While gender role transitions were not originally included in the line of questioning, fathers often discussed these transitions in relation to descriptions of parenting and becoming homeless. Within each topic, the researchers explored or asked additional probes to clarify information about the predetermined topics. This approach aimed to make each interview somewhat systematic while also allowing for obvious gaps in responses to be closed. Postinterview field notes were used to document details about interview settings and rapport. Following each interview, suggestions were noted and incorporated into future interviews. Field notes were also helpful in data analysis because they provided a sense of context (Patton, 2002).

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, a method of coding and analyzing qualitative data in which the primary goal is to interpret information through a coding system using little inference. Specifically, audiotaped interviews were transcribed into text documents, and a codebook was developed through open coding. Open coding refers to the process of breaking down the data into distinct concepts. As the data were analyzed, new statements were compared to statements that had already been coded into concepts. If the statements did not seem to fit with an established concept, a new concept was developed (La Rossa, 2005). The process continued until the coding scheme could be used to code the entire set of interviews. Once the interviews were coded, concepts were grouped into categories through an integration process (Patton, 2002). The categories represent the larger themes evident in the data and are presented as headings in the results section. Concepts, or subthemes, represent more detailed descriptions of a larger category. The goal of this type of analysis is to form a small number of descriptive categories that encompass the various intricate patterns from the original interviews. As an example, the first theme presented in the results section is "the constraints of shelter life." The three concepts that make up this category are "rules," "restricted space," and "psychological distress." Additional categories resulting from the content analysis are "shelters as transition points: the meaning of fatherhood"; "challenges of fathering in a shelter"; and "future goals." It should be noted that while sensitizing concepts were not forced into codes, some codes, such as "rules," were naturally related to a priori concepts. While sensitizing concepts guided the interview, the resulting data ultimately revealed important patterns and thick descriptions of the sensitizing concepts as well as additional concepts not originally introduced by the interview guide. It should also be mentioned
that data from single fathers and partnered fathers were examined both together and separately. Very few differences emerged in common themes; therefore, unless otherwise noted, results presented here are derived from the data of the entire sample of fathers.

**Rigor**

Establishing rapport can be an essential part of qualitative work. For this work, the first author had an existing connection with the community under study. She spent a year volunteering at one of the homeless shelters. For this volunteer work, she was trained by a larger organization that places volunteers in shelters throughout the state. Only three of the fathers from the study resided at the shelter where the researcher volunteered; however, the volunteer organization placed volunteers in all the participating shelters, providing a connection between the researchers and the fathers at all the included shelters. This connection with the community gave the researchers insight into the lives of these families and helped establish rapport with the participants.

Triangulation of sources is another methodological criterion often used to establish trustworthiness in qualitative work (Johnson, 1997; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As previously mentioned, both fathers and staff members were interviewed. Fathers' interviews were the principal source of information since the primary interest was fathers' own views of their experiences. Staff interviews were largely used to elaborate on categories that were grounded in the fathers' interviews.

Finally, it should be noted that all the interviewers were women from middle-class backgrounds (two White, one Hispanic). While it is difficult to know for certain how these characteristics affected the interviews, the authors hypothesize that gender may have been particularly salient in discussions of parenting roles and children. Fathers' comfortableness in discussing family relationships may have been heightened by the interviewers' gender and the presumption that women would relate to these topics.

**Results**

Broadly, results from this study found that homelessness and residence in a family shelter presented a substantial confluence of environmental influences on fathers. All but two of the fathers in the sample were new to homelessness. Nearly all of them previously had stable homes and relatively consistent employment. These fathers saw themselves as having had "pretty much just the average life." However, at some point, each father faced circumstances that led him to seek out residence in a family shelter. In the present study, fathers' time in the shelters is viewed as a central transition period. Results focus on fathers' experiences and identity as homeless parents, informing broader reconceptualizations of themselves as individuals, as men, and as parents. Results are organized into the categories and patterns resulting from the content analysis. In particular, results describe (a) constraints of the shelter environment, (b) shifts in roles
due to loss of employment and gaining of parenting roles, (c) challenges of fathering in shelters, and (d) future goals and desires for a life outside of homelessness.

The constraints of shelter life

Once fathers entered the shelters, they were met with rules, restricted space, and the stigmatization that comes with being homeless. Although all fathers realized the centrality of the resources they were accessing through the shelters, a majority also discussed at length their struggles with everyday life in the environment. Fathers relayed in great detail how these new contexts affected their psychological well-being and family interactions.

In contrast to independent living or to living with relatives, shelters have more regulations and restrictions that are overseen by staff members. Rules included curfews, childcare guidelines, and daily chores. Additional rules concerned housing applications, visiting hours, and restrictions against substance use (including alcohol). The implementation of rules in combination with the social structure maintained by staff affected fathers’ impressions of shelter life. Five of the fathers had begun living independently from their parents at an early age and for this reason found the rules to be particularly frustrating. Raymond, a 22-year-old father of three children, had dropped out of school after ninth grade to help support his parents. He had worked with the same company for 6 years until he was laid off. Raymond was working to reconcile his family's previous independence with their present living situation in the shelter:

I've raised three children. I've been on my own since I was 15 years old and now all of a sudden I'm being treated like an infant. I have to go by their guidelines and if I don't do what they tell me to do then they put me on punishment. You know, I worked hard for 6, 7, years to get myself to where I was at, and then all of a sudden it fell apart on me and now I'm like back at my mom's house when I was 13, 14 years old.

Staff members agreed that fathers in particular had a difficult time with strict guidelines. Amy, one of the staff, said

I think in the beginning for fathers, I think it's really hard, more hard, for them to be here than a woman. I think it's really, pride is an issue. And even just to follow the rules is sometimes an issue because they've never been in this type of situation where they've had to be kind of subservient, I guess; I don't know a better word, but it's really hard for them.

There was a flip side to the lack of freedom for some fathers, however. Two of the fathers, those who described themselves retrospectively as less disciplined, appreciated having some structure. Matthew, a 29-year-old married father, had briefly been homeless during his lifetime and had stayed in a shelter prior to having children. By comparison, he felt that the family shelter was "great" and acknowledged the structure of the shelter rules as a factor in his changed lifestyle. Matthew, when speaking about his previous residence, said
There wasn't enough structure ... if I wanted to go out and drink, I could. If I wanted to
go downtown and hit one of the clubs, I could. Well guess what? You can't drink here. So
it helps me, now I'm not drinking, now I'm more focused on my work and doin' the
family thing.

In addition to restrictions placed upon fathers' actions by rules and regulations, shelters
placed restrictions on fathers and their children through a lack of physical space. In all the
shelters, living areas and bathrooms were shared among several families, and play spaces
for children were limited. Fathers discussed how this influenced how they were able to
interact with their children. They often felt they were "looking at four walls and a door
with nowhere to go." Fathers with young children were especially mindful of how space
affected the ways they could parent their children. Jamar, a married father with two
children, said, "They're not totally free, free to run around and be like kids. I mean, you
have to respect other people in the house so your kids can't make a lot of noise. You
know, you can't let your kids be kids I guess."

In conjunction with stress from shelter restrictions, fathers experienced psychological
stress from their perceptions of others' views of them. Respect was discussed by nearly
all (n = 7) of the fathers, and a difficult part of moving into a shelter was that they no
longer felt respected by shelter staff, family members, or the general public. Roy, a 55-
year-old single father, felt that staff disrespected residents since they were homeless:

I believe that you're supposed to treat people, regardless of their situation, with a lot of
respect ... I am the type of individual that if you give me respect, I will give you respect.
You have a few staff here who, sorry to say, do not do that. It's like a put down and they
feel that they're better than you are.

Luis, a 43-year-old single father, suggested that the loss of respect was exacerbated since
he was not only homeless but a homeless male:

I think they look down on the father, on the male. They see healthy men in a particular
place like this, you get thoughts. You think "This guy is lazy, does he have no sense of
responsibility?" And those thoughts go through people, you could almost think
sometimes you read it in their minds.

**Shelters as transition points: The meaning of fatherhood**

In addition to issues concerning their physical environment, fathers also grappled with
their sense of identity. This struggle with identity typically began with the loss of
employment. Luis exemplified what many of the fathers experienced in their route to
unemployment and homelessness. Luis had been working with an engineering project for
2 years when his hours first got cut. Like the other fathers in the study, Luis eventually
lost his job altogether since "the project fell apart and there wasn't enough work to keep
(him) busy in other areas." When Luis was interviewed, he had been living at the shelter
for 5 months and reflected, "My last three years I went from living in a nice beautiful
place with my own deck, making a thousand dollars a week, to a shelter with no income
Like Luis, many fathers ($n = 7$) had moved from employment to unemployment, and in doing so, their role in the family had also often changed. Nearly all the fathers still felt their primary responsibility was to provide for their children and their families and experienced emotional turmoil as a result of unemployment, low-wage jobs, and homelessness. Fathers struggled with "not being able to give [their children] all the stuff that you're supposed to be giving them." Their inability to provide was complicated by gender roles and their beliefs about what a man is expected to do. Jamar said

[Becoming homeless] felt really bad. And I know it did because I'm a man and I'm supposed to take care of my wife and my kids. And it was like I was in a helpless situation. I couldn't provide. I couldn't do anything to better myself or my family. And, being in a homeless shelter they give you help, but you still have that feeling inside of worthlessness.

Nicole, one of the staff, agreed:

I think there's still that stereotypical male "I'm supposed to be the provider of the family" type thing, and I think it is significantly harder for [fathers] to come in and admit that they don't have the money to take care of their family or have to move into a shelter.

Both employed and unemployed fathers wanted to fulfill this crucial part of their identity. As Filipe, an unemployed single father, suggested, fathers were striving to "work hard so that [they] could provide a good life to [their children]." While the barriers faced in meeting their expectations of providing led to feelings of "worthlessness," many fathers also used the opportunity to broaden their definition of fathering.

In the absence of an ability to provide financially, many of the men sought out new ways to define fathering. Although they were unable to give their children material gifts, fathers discovered that they were able to provide their children with time and care. While a majority of the fathers discussed parenting transitions, these transitions were most salient for the two single fathers who were new to being residential parents (Roy and Joseph) and for the two fathers who were unemployed but had employed partners (Raymond and Jamar). Raymond described how homelessness was acting as a transition point in how he defined fathering:

Once you're here, your kids have nobody else but you. And once you realize that, it makes you try even harder to be a better father. And they'll realize that. They'll notice that you're making the extra effort and you're going the extra mile [when] every other day you're trying a little bit harder and spending a little bit more time and reading one or two more books. I think this place will either make you or break you. It will either make you a better father or completely tear you apart mentally and emotionally. I think for me, it's making me better.

Other fathers also expressed how important spending time with their children had become since moving into the shelter. Fathers talked about taking their children to the movies, watching Fourth of July Fireworks, or playing at the park. Some fathers also described
the importance of "being there." They felt that just having a father as part of the family was rare, and they were proud to be men who were staying with their children. When Armando, a 47-year-old single father, was asked what he thought made someone a good father, he answered, "What I am doing now, being there always for [my daughters] and helping them, like I am doing now."

When queried about their parental duties, fathers detailed their everyday caretaking experiences. Jamar, for example, described taking his children to doctor appointments, helping them with chores, and preparing "snack time." Raymond also took pride in his seemingly endless list of daily activities with his three children: "I give them their baths, I dress them, I change them. I do their diapers, I do the boo-boos. I do the laundry, their food, their hair, anything you can think of. Everything." In striving to complete these daily tasks, however, fathers faced some challenges.

**Challenges of fathering in a shelter**

With the exception of the two fathers who were employed full time while living in the shelter, the homeless fathers in this study were taking on a more primary role in their children's lives than ever before. Two single fathers had become residential fathers just prior to moving into the shelter. The remaining fathers had previously worked full time, and their children were either at home with their mothers during the day or at day care. However, when the fathers lost their jobs, they took on more parenting responsibilities, and in the two-parent households, two of the mothers went to work. Thus, it is easy to see why a majority of the fathers felt inexperienced when it came to completing daily caregiving activities. Matthew acknowledged, "There ain't no book. There's no book out there that can help you. It's experience that teaches." He said that he was learning to plan ahead because he was constantly running out of pampers and formula. After Raymond lost his job and his partner gained employment, he found himself at home with three children younger than 6 years of age. He understood for the first time how challenging it could be to tend to the children all day: "All my time is spent with them. I have no outside life ... It's stressful. It's really stressful, and it's an ongoing battle." Luis discussed the challenges of completing particular parenting tasks, such as feeding his daughter: "Sometimes she doesn't want to eat the proper things, the right things. She wants to eat what other people are eating and that's hard." Staff members reiterated that many fathers they see find themselves in new parenting situations in the shelters. For example, Amy, one shelter staffer said

I think a lot of [fathers] are new to having responsibility for the children in general. We get a lot of families that the family split up when they lost the house, and the mom went to go here and the dad has the kids now, where he was never the sole person in the house to begin with.

In light of parenting challenges, fathers desired more emotional and material support. Fathers suggested that most of the services in this area were designed for mothers, and in some ways, their circumstances were different. Roy described his view of available services: "Speaking from a man's point of view, there isn't much out there for men with
children … Everything is geared toward women. They need to do something for these single parent men who are out in the cold." According to Jamar, emotional support was particularly important:

Fathers that are here really have a lot on their shoulders and a lot on their mind … Sometimes a lot of fathers just get into a slump and say "I can't provide right now and I feel really down and I'm hurtin' and there's no one to talk to."

In addition to seeking emotional support, fathers also expressed the need for more material support. Although every father was searching for employment or a higher paying job, it was a common belief among the fathers that employment was not enough. A combination of both employment and funding, such as Section 8 housing assistance, was needed to get out of the shelter. Fathers felt that no matter what they did, one would "be in a shelter until you receive housing or Section 8." Staff members agreed that for many people in the shelters, this was a reality. Nonetheless, shelter rules required fathers to spend time each week meeting with a housing advocate and filling out applications. All the fathers found this process frustrating because few people ever qualified for housing, even with a job. Joseph had been in his shelter longer than others who lived there and had seen people come and go. He found the housing search especially stressful, saying, "It's like even when you fill out applications, you wait [a long time], and you don't get nothing."

**Future goals**

In spite of the barriers and frustrations that were part of shelter life for the fathers, they maintained some hope for the future. Fathers were especially determined to obtain stable employment. Nicole, a staff member, felt that "every father would work if it was possible, they would work in a second." Unemployed fathers wanted to find employment, and employed fathers wanted to find higher paying jobs that would provide them enough salary to get out of the shelter. All the fathers spent many hours a week filling out applications. Roy, who was becoming frustrated with the job search, said, "I'm actually stuck here for awhile, until I can actually find a job that's gonna pay me enough money for paying rent every month, and that's the only way that I'm getting outta this shelter. And that's the honest to God's truth."

The men's determination to seek out employment, though, could sometimes hinder them in the long run. The staff members noted that fathers were so pressured to be the breadwinners that they often could not look past the short-term goal of finding immediate work. Staff suggested that many more women used the time in the shelter to obtain further education in hopes of improving their situations in the future.

Still, fathers were able to imagine a life outside of homelessness. They had humble desires for "a nice home, a dependable vehicle, and a meaningful career." The few fathers who could see past basic necessities had passions of owning their own business or having enough money to "travel to different states." Regardless of the variability in hopes and expectations, nearly all of the future plans that fathers discussed were part of a master plan to better the lives of their children. When Luis was asked about his future, he said:
I need to be a good example for my daughter so I need to get out of here as soon as I can, so I can get back to providing for her and her future life. It's like with our parents, we all want to leave our children with a little more than what they left us and teach them to be the same with their children.

Most of all, fathers did not want their children to face the same problems they had faced. Fathers hoped for economic stability to improve the lives of their children. Raymond summed up the feelings of many of the fathers regarding getting out of homelessness in order to provide a better life for their children:

I want them to have good jobs and a good education. I want them to get married to great people and have healthy kids and shiny houses and nice vehicles, and good opportunities. And it's hard to think that they will with the position that I'm in because, you know, how good of an opportunity could they get coming from this type of background? That's why I want to get outta here as soon as possible.

All in all, a father's time in the shelter was related to both positive and negative experiences. Even though the men struggled with the constraints of the shelters, shelter life often propelled them to make changes that they considered positive, such as increasing time and involvement in their children's lives. In spite of the struggles they sometimes faced in making these transitions, they ultimately aimed to get out of homelessness and obtain financial independence for their families.

Discussion

When this study began, it was rooted in the knowledge that fathers existed in the family shelter system, but that little was known about this population. The original goal was to explore the lives of these men and to assess how they make meaning of their experiences as fathers living in family homeless shelters. From these in-depth analyses, we found that (a) homelessness sits at an intersection of several contextual factors influencing men's experiences, (b) fathers struggle with a loss of autonomy and the inability to provide while residing in shelters, and (c) fathers may experience gender role transitions through which they redefine the meaning of fatherhood.

Doherty et al. (1998) illuminated that fathers are particularly vulnerable to contextual factors such as institutional practices, employment opportunities, economic factors, cultural expectations, and social support, factors that can cause psychological distress affecting their parenting (see also, Marsiglio, Roy, & Fox, 2005). The individual contextual factors shaping the fathers in our sample are not exclusive to homeless fathers. Yet, homelessness presents a deep confluence of such experiences and environments and hence helps to shed light on the manner in which fathering is embedded within and influenced by context. These contextual insights, in turn, can be extended to other populations. Seven out of nine fathers in this study were experiencing unemployment, and all were struggling with their ability to provide financially for their families. Perhaps,
even more resounding in fathers’ descriptions of homelessness were the constraints brought on by confined spaces, shelter rules, and their minority status as men within the shelter system. In particular, the institutional and cultural conditions of the shelter influenced fathers’ identity development and parenting options. According to the theory of situated fathering, men's parenting is situated within the physical and social spaces of their surroundings (Marsiglio et al., 2005). Given the centrality of context and the confluence of stressors for homeless fathers, our results suggest that homeless fathering serves as a substantial impetus for men's reevaluation of themselves as men and as parents. Hence, family shelters may present an ideal juncture for interventions with homeless fathers. Such interventions could seek to address contextual factors as well as parenting processes that affect fathering.

The contextual stressors faced by homeless fathers appear to converge with pressures from social constructs of masculinity and cultural expectations of fathering. While men often struggle with multiple masculinities, fathers in this study seemed especially concerned with the dual roles of providing and nurturing. Previous research has suggested that fathers experiencing low wages or unemployment may have difficulty sustaining positive masculine identities since images of masculinity are often intertwined with providing (Marsiglio & Pleck, 2005). While previous knowledge on homeless parents has emphasized that the adjustments women face upon entering the shelter system revolve primarily around safety concerns and freedom to parent (Choi & Snyder, 1999; Hodnicki & Horner, 1993; Thrasher & Mowbray, 1995), men in our sample struggled primarily with how to maintain a sense of masculinity while living in a place where they were no longer in charge, no longer providing, and no longer in contact with other men. Fathers felt that they were no longer respected as men since they could not provide and simultaneously felt that their autonomy, which was previously a central part of their identity, had been taken away from them by the numerous rules and restrictions. Fathers who are unemployed or are part of dual-earner households have reported similar feelings regarding an inability to fulfill the role of provider (Roy, 2004), and even fathers who choose to stay at home with their children face both social scrutiny and a desire to find alternative ways to express their masculinity (Doucet, 2004). Fathers experiencing homelessness with their families have the added weight of being under the rules of someone else and receiving public assistance, both of which are notably difficult for men. Importantly, these challenges particular to men appear to be met with limited service responses. Fathers in homeless shelters reside with mostly women, experience a loss of independence, and perceive substantial barriers to accessing support services.

In response to these multiple pressures, fathers in the study appeared to be renegotiating their role in the family and seeking out new definitions of fathering. Similar negotiations have been reported by more advantageous fathers transitioning into a new parental role after gaining custody of their children (Greif, 1995). After gaining custody, men must learn how to be both providers and nurturers. In the case of homeless families, however, fathers are typically shifting from one extreme to the other rather than learning to balance two roles. The transition into full-time parenting is strained further by the lack of financial resources and the constraints of group living. Becoming homeless seems to function as an "interruption" in the development of a father's identity, similar to fathers
who experience incarceration (Dyer, 2005, p. 9). Dyer discussed the identity crises men in prison face when they are unable to provide and suggested that fathers may redefine their role or abandon the fathering identity altogether. Fathers experiencing homelessness are facing a similar crossroads. In contrast to the men in prison, however, the homeless parents in this study appear to be meeting this crisis with a reinvigorated commitment to their fathering identity that includes substantially enhanced appreciation for the nurturing and daily caretaking activities involved in parenting. As they increase their parental duties, fathers also appear to gain both greater satisfaction and greater daily stressors from the myriad demands of caring for young children. As this study did not compare fathers living with their children and those not living with their children, it is not possible to know what distinguishes these men from fathers who are less involved with parenting. This question remains important for continued research.

The present study presents the opportunity to better understand changing conceptions of fatherhood, in particular, changing roles within the family. Studying transitions within fathering provides insight into how fathers’ views of gender norms develop in reaction to an event such as homelessness. Specifically, fathers in this study seemed to be facing gender role strain. In response, many appeared to adapt their perceptions of what a father should be with increased appreciation for nurturance, consistency, and the challenges of caring for children. Gender role norms can serve dysfunctional or inhibitive functions (Pleck, 1995); hence, adaptations such as those seen here in men’s conceptions of fathering and masculinity may have positive repercussions for both men and their children. However, men may need guidance in working through such a gender role transition (Silverstein et al., 2002). Inevitably, all parents are constantly shaping and restructuring their identities; however, certain settings that confine fathers’ ability to make choices (such as shelters or prisons) may actually heighten men’s responsibility or opportunity to change. Unemployed homeless fathers who are single or have employed partners may be forced to take on more responsibility for parenting tasks, whether or not they desire to do so. On the other hand, some fathers may have valued involvement in parenting tasks prior to homelessness but may not have previously been presented with the opportunity to act on their desires since financial providing was a priority. In summary, while the social roles and spaces of shelter life may contribute to fathers’ gender role strain, shelters also have the ability to implement practices that can help fathers through such a transition.

**Implications**

These theoretical bases taken together with the findings from our study suggest the need for shelters to implement changes directed toward the needs of fathers. In particular, results from the present study suggest the importance of intervention services directed at fathers’ needs for autonomy in decision making, assistance in gender role transitions, and support with parenting tasks.
Fathers living in the shelters experienced physical and psychological constraints, including coping with shelter rules and confined spaces. These constraints limited the men's ability to make decisions as both a father and a man of the household. Consequently, they desired more independence, freedom, and space to use for daily activities. It is important to note that although men in this study desired more freedom from rules, we were unable to examine how the rules were ultimately affecting the rest of the family unit, including children. The rules of the shelter were likely designed to maintain order and protect children; therefore, we must be conservative in our recommendations to alter rules implemented in family shelters. At the very least, shelters might consider negotiating decision making with parents in the shelter system, allowing fathers to take on a more proactive role as they progress toward exiting the shelter. Given that limited space in the shelters inhibited parenting choices for fathers, shelters may also place more of a priority on creating child-friendly environments and expanding playrooms.

In addition to feeling constrained by shelter life, many fathers in our sample were undergoing gender role transitions. As such, they felt that most of the shelter services available to homeless or disadvantaged parents were geared toward women and left the men in the shelters feeling isolated. Father support groups would give a forum for these fathers both to express their own struggles and to gain advice from other men in similar circumstances. Social support has been shown to be important for fathers (Doherty et al., 1998), and support groups for men during a time when they are reconstructing the meaning of fatherhood have been suggested by others (Silverstein et al., 2002). Parents' Fair Share, a program designed to assist noncustodial fathers in child support and parenting roles, found that peer support groups were one of the most beneficial components of the program. The groups assisted fathers in identifying underlying issues in their lives and formulating goals to move them forward (Johnson, Levine, & Doolittle, 1999).

Given the struggles that fathers faced transitioning into a larger caretaking role, father-specific parenting classes are another important option. Fathers in our sample experienced a need for basic childcare information and for a venue to ask questions about caring for their children. Parenting classes for fathers should aim to teach these parenting skills and discuss the meaning of these tasks for fathers. In other words, parenting classes targeting men in the shelter systems should work to reaffirm the fathering role and guide men through the reconstruction of male gender norms while providing support for the transitions they are facing. Men in other disadvantaged circumstances, such as low-income, unemployed fathers outside of shelters and those in correction facilities, might face the need for similar support in regard to identity formation and parenting. For example, researchers examining incarcerated fathering have also suggested the need for fathers in prison to take part in identity reconstruction (Arditti, Smock, & Parkman, 2005).

As more fathers are entering the shelter system and there is an increased focus on responsible fathering, additional services should be tailored to the needs of men. Based
on results from this study, we recommend a holistic approach to intervention that aims to improve fathers’ psychological well-being and parenting.

References


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