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The Means to and Meaning of “Being There” in Responsible Fatherhood Programming with Low-Income Fathers

Objective: To understand how low-income men’s views of paternal responsibility shape their engagement with fatherhood program messages and services.

Background: Research on the situated contexts of fathering has found that the social and symbolic dimensions of fathering spaces influence how men construct and enact fatherhood scripts. Qualitative studies of fatherhood programs have mostly investigated parenting education and job assistance programs, revealing how fathering interventions allow disadvantaged men to shape positive paternal identities.

Method: In-depth interviews and focus groups were conducted with a nonrandom sample of 64 primarily Black and Latino low-income fathers who participated in a federally funded responsible fatherhood program. An inductive coding technique was used to identify reasons men enrolled, the alignment of program messages with fathers’ views, and how the program allowed fathers to negotiate obstacles to sustained involvement.

Results: Fathers overwhelmingly found the program valuable because it offered the social and economic means they needed to enact varied meanings of paternal responsibility—or “being

there.” Most fathers reported that the program allowed them to realize their involvement goals, thereby enabling them to better align their paternal identities and behaviors.

Conclusion: Fatherhood programming that promotes a broader idea of paternal provision to include money and care aligns with how disadvantaged fathers tailor their understandings of paternal involvement to account for socioeconomic constraints, including poverty and racism.

Implications: Fatherhood interventions can influence disadvantaged men’s abilities to claim and enact responsible parent identities, but programs must address the importance of resources and opportunities, including and especially access to well-paid work, for shaping paternal involvement.

The federal government defines responsible fathering as establishing legal paternity, coparenting, and financially and emotionally supporting children (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998) and has funded numerous programs to shape men’s paternal identities in line with this definition (Curran & Abrams, 2000). The application of identity theory to fathering has generated insight into how paternal identity is context specific (Hawkins & Palkovitz, 1999), especially with regard to how contextual factors encourage men to value certain dimensions of fathering more than others (Adamsons & Pasley, 2016). This suggests that fatherhood programs

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could promote positive paternal involvement by increasing the salience of fathering in men's lives and by highlighting specific components of involvement, such as caregiving.

Responsible fatherhood programs thus present a unique empirical opportunity to investigate what Marsiglio, Roy, and Fox (2005) called a *situated* understanding of fatherhood, which highlights how the physical, social, and symbolic dimensions of parenting settings shape fatherhood scripts and how men construct and enact them. This highlights how socioeconomic and organizational contexts shape access to ideas and opportunities that influence men's paternal identities and behaviors. The present study was designed to investigate how the situated context of a responsible fatherhood program allowed disadvantaged men to claim identities as responsible fathers and construct a fatherhood script that accounted for their socioeconomic constraints.

BACKGROUND

Congress first authorized government funding for "responsible fatherhood" programs through the 1996 federal welfare reform law. In 2012, the U.S. Administration for Children and Families funded 59 programs through the Pathways to Responsible Fatherhood Grants. As of 2019, federal funding has continued via the New Pathways for Fathers and Families Grants, which currently support 39 fatherhood programs in 18 states. Despite their prevalence, research on how these programs relate to fathers' understandings of their abilities to be effective parents is still limited (Anderson, Kohler, & Letiecq, 2002; Holcomb et al., 2015; Roy & Dyson, 2010).

Deficit perspectives of fathering assume that low paternal involvement results from men's lack of motivation to identify as fathers and meet parental obligations (Blankenhorn, 1996; Popenoe, 2009). This suggests that fatherhood programs are necessary to modify men's parental identities and supervise their behaviors in line with dominant social expectations of paternal responsibility. Related to this perspective is the trope of the so-called "deadbeat dad," a pejorative label for noncustodial fathers who deliberately evade parenting. Curran and Abrams (2000) critiqued responsible fatherhood policy for assuming a deficit perspective "that understands poverty's consequences as lifestyle choices and does not acknowledge the rigidity

of the social and economic barriers that the men face" (p. 674). By attempting to "mold both the behavior and inner psychologies of men," they claimed, fatherhood programs do little to address larger race and class inequalities that undermine paternal involvement (pp. 670–671).

Other assessments of fatherhood programs reveal how they do account for poor fathers' actual intentions and circumstances. Roy and Dyson (2010) found that fatherhood programs were rare spaces where low-income men could access resources and shape positive paternal identities in the context of "unpredictable and risky local communities and long-standing social stigmas due to race and class" (p. 153). By facilitating a network of mentors and peers who help participants avoid isolation and stigmatization, some fatherhood programs explicitly challenge an individualized discourse of paternal irresponsibility that construes low or no involvement as a personal lifestyle choice. These interventions focus on improving fathers' socioeconomic opportunities and reflect ecological theories highlighting how systemic factors shape men's parental motivations, identities, and abilities (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett, & Wong, 2009). Men's parental self-efficacy is especially influenced by education and employment (Mincy, Jethwani, & Klempin, 2015; Ryan, Kalil, & Ziol-Guest, 2008). Programs informed by the ecological model avoid underlying assumptions of deficiency by structuring services to reflect that most low-income fathers are already motivated to be involved but lack the necessary means and support (Anderson et al., 2002). They also acknowledge that economically vulnerable fathers emphasize nonfinancial aspects of involvement, including emotional availability and caregiving (Edin & Nelson, 2013; Mincy et al., 2015).

Programs focused on improving fathers' earnings (Johnson, Levine, & Doolittle, 1999) and coparenting relationships (Cowan et al., 2009) increase paternal involvement. The Parents and Children Together study of federally funded grantees found that men voluntarily enrolled because they wanted to become better fathers and providers (Holcomb et al., 2015). Participants positively appraised the programs for allowing them to develop parenting skills, access resources, and create supportive social networks (Valdovinos D'Angelo, Knas, Holcomb, & Edin, 2016). This indicates that

an aspirational involved paternal identity is a strong predictor of enrollment in fatherhood programs, which help men realize their involvement goals.

Nevertheless, it is difficult for any single intervention to address the socioeconomic trends that have corresponded with a reduction in paternal involvement among low-income families in recent decades. These trends include increasing family instability and complexity, deteriorating labor market conditions, and high rates of incarceration (Knox, Cowan, Cowan, & Bildner, 2011; Smeeding, Garfinkel, & Mincy, 2011; Tach & Edin, 2011). Participants face substantial obstacles to sustained involvement, including strained coparenting relationships, low wages, and the stigma of criminality (Holcomb et al., 2015; Martinson, Trutko, Nightingale, Holcomb, & Barnow, 2007). Given their short duration and that they target hard-to-employ populations, fatherhood programs rarely advance fathers’ long-term job opportunities (Roy & Dyson, 2010).

Disadvantaged men assert multifaceted paternal identities, highlighting their abilities to protect, role model, and care for children amid these challenges (Edin & Nelson, 2013; Jarret, Roy, & Burton, 2002; Marsiglio & Roy, 2012; Summers, Boller, Schiffman, & Raikes, 2006). Many reference “being there” to describe their commitments to be reliable sources of support for children in the context of disadvantage (Edin & Nelson, 2013; Forste, Bartowski, & Jackson, 2009; Holcomb et al., 2015; Roy, 2004; Summers et al., 2006; Waller, 2002). Emphasizing relational components of involvement and the provision of emotional support and time allows marginalized men who struggle as breadwinners to construct more flexible and attainable definitions of the “good-provider role” (Bernard, 1981).

Qualitative research has been especially useful for understanding how fatherhood programs operate as situated spaces where marginalized men can develop positive paternal identities (Anderson et al., 2002; Holcomb et al. 2015; Roy & Dyson, 2010). Although this research has analyzed fathers’ experiences in programs that provided some combination of parenting workshops, relationship and life skills training, education (specifically, completion of high school equivalency education), and job readiness and placement assistance, these prior studies did not examine fathers’ experiences

in a comprehensive program that provided all of these services, including paid vocational training. Given findings that economic vulnerability, especially unemployment, negatively shapes fathers’ parental identities and self-efficacy (Clary, Holcomb, Dion, & Edin, 2017), the present study uniquely contributes to understandings of how programming components shape the definition and expression of responsible fathering among low-income men. It illustrates how fathers draw on diverse understandings of paternal responsibility and provisioning to make sense of their participation in a comprehensive fatherhood program.

METHOD

This analysis draws on in-depth interviews and focus groups with 64 primarily Black and Latino low-income fathers who participated in a federally funded fatherhood program in the United States pseudonymously called “DADS” and coordinated by the “Workforce and Education Program” (WEP). The WEP received a federal Pathways to Responsible Fatherhood Grant to fund eligible fathers’ participation in one or more of the following services: (a) a charter high school where participants could earn diplomas; (b) job search assistance and paid vocational training in janitorial, landscaping, and recycling services; and (c) parenting and relationship classes. Parenting classes used *24/7 Dad*, a curriculum commonly taught by recipients of federal grants focused on programming for responsible father involvement (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019). The grant also funded *24/7 Dad* classes at three additional sites for men not involved through the WEP: a former gang member assistance program, a homeless shelter, and a residential addiction treatment facility. Across the sites, the same three WEP-affiliated instructors taught classes emphasizing the curriculum’s sessions on family history, manhood, feelings, communication, the father’s role, discipline, paternal involvement, and coparenting.

I contacted program staff as an external researcher interested in studying men’s experiences with responsible fatherhood programming. I was not involved in the formal evaluation of the program, nor did I receive any compensation for the research. Nevertheless, I was a stakeholder in the program who stood to benefit from its success given my research focus

on policies and programs that facilitate fathering in low-income communities.

Participants

The primary inclusion criterion for the study was that respondents were currently enrolled in DADS through one of the four program sites; there were no exclusion criteria. Respondents were recruited through staff at the WEP and partner organizations using recruitment flyers and through participant word of mouth. Fathers who were recruited through the WEP were eligible for a 2-year term in the program; those recruited through other program sites typically completed six weekly parenting classes.

Fifty fathers participated in individual, face-to-face, in-depth interviews, and 21 total fathers participated in four focus groups; seven focus group participants were prior interviewees. Most interviewees ($n = 35$) and all 21 focus group participants were recruited via the WEP, for a total of 49 (77%) WEP-affiliated respondents. Of these, 44 (69%) attended the high school, 38 (59%) participated in the vocational program, and 36 (56%) attended fathering or relationship classes. At the time of the research, they had been enrolled from 1 to 24 months ($M = 6$ months). Six interviewees (9%) participated through the vocational program for former gang members, five (8%) through the addiction treatment facility, and four (6%) at the homeless shelter. Fathers enrolled on a rolling basis, and approximately 100 participated in some program activity throughout the study period. Given the limited number of responsible fatherhood grantees and participants, pseudonyms are used for the program and fathers to protect respondent confidentiality.

Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 44 years ($M = 26$). Thirty-two (50%) self-identified as Black or African American; 23 (36%) as Hispanic, Latino, or Mexican; 8 (13%) as multiracial; and 1 (2%) as Native American. One respondent (2%) had an associate degree, 16 (25%) had graduated from high school, and 47 (74%) did not have a high school diploma. Forty-four (69%) were employed, and 20 (31%) were unemployed. Forty-four (69%) were pursuing a high school diploma at the WEP, 5 (8%) were attending community college or training programs outside DADS, and 15 (23%) were not enrolled in any formal education. Most

respondents had one ($n = 26$), two ($n = 19$), or three ($n = 10$) children. Seven had four or more children, and two were expecting their first child. Twenty-one (33%) lived at least part-time with all their children, and 12 (19%) lived with some of their children. Thirty-one (48%) did not reside with any of their children at the time of the research.

Data Collection

Although input was sought from staff about questions they had regarding fathers' experiences, my position enabled me to focus on complementary and broader issues of paternal identity, program context, and marginalized men's understandings of involvement and factors that constrain it. Informed by the fathering trajectories described by Marsiglio (2004), the interview guide was designed to elicit a rich understanding of men's self-reflections about their fathering experiences via participation in DADS. Questions focused on respondents' motivations for participation ("Why did you enroll? What services most interested you?"), perceived effects on behavior ("Do you think [DADS] has influenced what you do as a father/interactions with your child(ren)?"), and the opportunities and challenges fathers faced in pursuing greater involvement ("Are you the kind of father you want to be? What do you need to meet your fathering goals?").

The focus groups were conducted 7 months after completion of the interviews as a final opportunity to prompt dialogue and clarify viewpoints on key themes that had emerged in my analysis of the interview transcripts. Focus groups presented a complementary empirical opportunity to understand fathers' co-constructed understandings of paternal responsibility among low-income men who shared similar life experiences (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). Participants knew one another from the WEP work crews and classes and expressed greater candor in this familiar collective setting than in the one-on-one interviews, especially when discussing race and social relationships forged in the program. Men also talked more pointedly in focus groups about how they confronted racial stigma and stereotypes about so-called deadbeat fathers and how their empathic interactions with fellow participants encouraged them to be better fathers than the stereotypes.

Interviews and focus groups alike were 60 to 90 minutes in duration and took place in private rooms at DADS sites when staff members were not present. All interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded. Participants each received \$25 to recognize the value of their time and offset any costs—child care, lost wages, transportation—associated with participation. The seven participants who were both interviewees and focus group members received compensation for each given the double time commitment. Participants were informed that they could decline to answer any question or stop participating at any point and still receive the incentive. Participants were also informed in consent materials and during the preinterview period that I was a university-based researcher not employed by DADS and that I would not share their responses with staff except as part of aggregate data with personally identifying information redacted; they were also reminded during the postinterview debriefing process that their responses would not affect their program status.

Despite these precautions, fathers likely perceived me as allied with staff, which may have created a social desirability bias that led fathers to answer my questions more positively. Nonetheless, a range of responses, both complimentary and critical, were provided that aligned with previous research finding that participants generally report positive experiences coupled with critiques about the limitations of fatherhood program services and duration (Anderson et al., 2002; Holcomb et al., 2015; Roy & Dyson, 2010). As a White, middle-class woman studying low-income men with different racial identities and experiences, I was also mindful of how interviewer characteristics and social distance likely influenced the research. I was visibly pregnant with my first child during interviews and positioned participants as experts by highlighting my preparent status and their status as experienced parents.

The interviews and focus groups did not allow for prolonged observation of how men developed their perspectives, nor did they reveal how sensitizing concepts, such as “being there,” corresponded to fathers’ actual behaviors. However, I was interested less in the veracity of fathers’ accounts than their understandings of fathering (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). The focus was therefore on open-ended questions using neutral language prompting fathers to provide

their own words and explanations. Unless as part of a follow-up question where I deliberately used fathers’ own language to clarify their replies, I refrained from using any phrases or words—such as *being there*, *responsible*, or *provider*—that may have biased men’s responses and deterred them from expressing a range of answers. Rather than allowing for claims of causality or assessments of program impacts, these methods captured the interpretive aspects of fathering as they relate to fatherhood programming.

Data Analysis

All interviews and focus groups were transcribed using digital recordings. Grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was the primary epistemological approach that informed the analysis, which proceeded in three iterative stages. First, using grounded theory inductive coding techniques, a coding scheme was developed through initial open coding of all 54 interview and focus group transcripts. This revealed emergent themes, such as “being there” and experiences using program services. I combined these themes with sensitizing concepts derived from previous studies into a coding system with three general categories: (a) paternal identity (as an influence on assessments of program experiences; relationship to definitions of good fathering); (b) paternal involvement (definitions of “being there,” relationships with children); and (c) program elements (social support; financial resources; and positive/negative experiences). During this phase, data from both interviews and focus groups were combined for the seven respondents who participated in both to avoid analytically double counting their contributions while gauging the prevalence of thematic findings. Next, axial coding was used to compare fathers’ references to these topics across the 54 texts, which allowed the following major themes to be identified: differences and similarities in how fathers defined “being there” and similar phrases; to what extent fathers believed program messages aligned with their definitions of “being there” and responsible paternal involvement; and whether and how the program supported the ability of fathers to be available for their children. This process revealed how respondents experienced DADS as a situated space where they could realize their involvement goals. Cases were also revealed

where respondents' experiences did not align with the sample's overall positive appraisal of the program. Finally, analytic memos were written to document local and inclusive integration of emergent codes, categories, and concepts.

FINDINGS

Informed by initial theoretical perspectives of fathering as a situated process (Marsiglio et al., 2005) and the ecological theory of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)—which highlight how contextual factors shape family experiences and meanings—I examined how fathers made sense of their participation in the DADS program. Without prompting, 38 (76%) of the 50 fathers interviewed used “being there” to define responsible fatherhood. All others, including focus group participants, used similar phrases such as “being around” and “showing up.” This reflected messages fathers encountered in the program but also, many noted, their prior understandings of involvement.

DADS validated the varied meanings disadvantaged men attached to “being there” as a script of responsible fatherhood and provided the means they needed to realize their goals for involvement. To the extent that fathers were critical of the program, it was because they desired more and longer term opportunities to be involved. These findings enhance understandings of how low-income men engage with fatherhood program messages and services and how “responsible” fatherhood necessitates resources, opportunities, and parenting scripts that do not discount marginalized fathers. I first describe how fathers' desires to be there motivated them to enroll. Next, I show how the amorphous quality of “being there” allowed fathers' definitions of paternal responsibility to readily align with those promoted by the program. Third, I describe how men found DADS valuable because it offered social support and resources they believed were necessary to realize their varied definitions of involvement. Finally, I identify ongoing challenges fathers experienced during program participation.

Why Men Enrolled in DADS

Almost all respondents ($n = 61$; 95%) reported that they were good or moderately good fathers. Yet most also emphasized how social and economic challenges made it difficult to align their

aspirations for involvement with their actual behaviors. They enrolled in DADS to bridge the gap between their identities as good fathers and the levels and types of involvement they associated with paternal responsibility. Combining paid work with school was the biggest draw for fathers who participated through the WEP. Thirty-seven interviewees and all focus group participants identified this as the primary reason for enrollment. Many had tried to return to school before but found it prohibitively difficult to find and keep jobs that would accommodate academic and childcare schedules. Isaac, a 23-year-old Black nonresidential father of one, explained: “This is the first place I ever heard of that they actually let you, people my age, still get my high school diploma, and I was able to work at the same time.” With only an eighth-grade education, Isaac did not even qualify for many low-wage jobs. He wanted a high school diploma that would enable him to provide more money for his 2-year-old daughter, whom he had not seen in more than a year.

DADS provided access to some of the economic conditions that enable paternal involvement—most notably, safe and reliable employment. Numerous fathers indicated that legal jobs are necessary to provide money and time, and specifically that DADS allowed them to avoid illegal and dangerous activities. Harris, an 18-year-old Black nonresidential father of one, described why he enrolled: “I'm not out here doing nothing crazy, like gang banging. ... I wasn't locked up or in the grave. [DADS] is a great opportunity, a safe environment where you can work.” Like Harris, many other fathers noted that “being there” fundamentally entails staying alive and out of jail. Most respondents felt pressure to participate in underground economies and gangs, which risked cutting off paternal involvement if they were incarcerated or killed. The DADS vocational program allowed many who had sold drugs or been gang members to earn enough money—\$200 to \$600 per month—to justify ceasing these activities. Lester, a 40-year-old Black father of four living with two of his children, recalled how DADS saved his life and his ability to

be there to answer the kids' questions, discipline the kids, basically be in tune with the kids' feelings. With the program, I'll take \$200 every 2 weeks instead of \$2,000. With that \$200 every 2 weeks, you don't have to worry about going to jail,

looking over your back, or people breaking into your house. ... It's going to kill you in the long run, that \$2,000, but the \$200 keep you safe. It helps you get closer to your kids.

Like Lester, almost half ($n = 23$) of the fathers I interviewed had a criminal record that created substantial employment obstacles. DADS provided an alternative to life-threatening activities that jeopardized sustaining relationships with their children. Christopher, a 22-year-old Black nonresidential father of one, described why he enrolled after incarceration:

I'm not perfect, but at least my son will be able to say, "My dad was there." ... The thought [of selling drugs] again has crossed my mind, but I think about when I was sitting in jail. I had to talk to my son from across the glass. That broke my heart. ... I missed his last birthday. I refused to do that again. ... I want him to go to school and say, "My daddy does his job. He's not a hustler." I want my son to grow up in a better neighborhood than I grew up in. I don't want him to be a have-not.

Christopher echoed other fathers who believed that being there for children involved providing advantages necessary for upward mobility, which included money but also academic support, instruction in good values, and a father to keep them on the right economic path. Elias, a 21-year-old Latino expectant father, had been a third-generation gang member since he was 10 years old and was shot twice before dropping out of high school. He enrolled because he feared that getting incarcerated again or killed would prevent him from ensuring that his children could "get into a good school, have a good job, go to college, pursue a dream, ... not have to struggle like I did, not sit in this neighborhood and see that it's okay to be a gang member."

Those who reenrolled offered similar reasons. Frederico, a 23-year-old Latino expectant father, previously participated in a similar WEP work program. He joined DADS after learning that he was going to become a father: "I have to grow up now, and I want to be able to take care of my kid." Others who reenrolled described various reasons for leaving before, including incarceration, parole violations, childcare responsibilities, and better-paying jobs that did not last. They, too, were motivated by their fathering commitments. Dustin, a 22-year-old Black nonresidential father of one, left for a higher paying job the

first time, but it did not work out. He was "motivated to be in this program" because, as he put it, "I have to start thinking about her future now; it's not only me that I have to prepare for." Emmett, a 24-year-old Black father of one deceased child, was released from the program after his initial enrollment because of a "dirty drug test." He reenrolled after the required waiting period as a means to help him cope with the death of his daughter, who had died when she was a month old. Through tears, he described the intense guilt he felt for not giving her more time and resources during her brief life:

I'm coming back for [my daughter]. She's all I think about every day. ... I continue on the right path to better myself and live, or I go back to what didn't get me nowhere. Now I'm here to better myself and for my children in the future.

Like Frederico, Dustin, and Emmett, most respondents described alignment of their identities as good fathers with their current behaviors and future socioeconomic opportunities as primary motivation for enrollment in the DADS program.

Reconstructing the Provider Role

Fathers also valued the program because it validated their understandings of paternal involvement. Although a few men said the program changed their views of fatherhood, most described how it emphasized a broad script of responsible fathering consistent with their beliefs. Fathers' definitions of "being there" varied from occasional visits to being a primary parent. Some even described their participation in DADS as a way of being there, despite infrequent contact with children. Fathers explained that the program defined "being there" as doing whatever men could to support their children, even if their involvement opportunities were limited due to poverty, distance, or strained coparenting relationships. This flexible fatherhood script allowed men to account for how economic constraint shaped their involvement.

Fathers' views especially aligned with program themes in that both defined breadwinning as a necessary but insufficient part of being a good provider. Fathers redefined paternal provision to include money, opportunity, and goods such as diapers, but also time and care. They described how DADS staff and fathering classes reinforced that being there was as much about

physical presence and emotional engagement as financial support. Some fathers said they first encountered this breadwinning-plus script in DADS, and it broadened their views of paternal responsibility. Cayden, a 24-year-old Black residential father of two, recalled:

I used to feel like money made me a father and ... that being a good father is cashing your kid out, making sure they got the best clothes or the best shoes. I've learned from [DADS] that the love and time you spend with your kids is the best time for them, the talking to, the reading. ... Be there for them mentally and physically. If you can't afford something, you should still be there, listen to them.

Taylor, a 24-year-old Black nonresidential father of two, also learned to provide his time:

I buy him clothes, take him to school, pick him up, send him to doctor appointments, help with his homework, teach him how to play sports. The classes taught us to be there, not just financially, but physically. Spending time with your kids is most important. Money goes and comes, but time goes and don't come back.

Most respondents similarly described financial provisioning as an essential but singular aspect of being a responsible father who provides presence and time in addition to money and things.

Many fathers said that they believed this before enrolling, although the veracity of that claim could not be assessed with these data based on retrospective accounts. Nevertheless, they described how program messages corresponded with their views that being there involved various components of parenting that entailed a provision of the self along with money. Jonathan, a 23-year-old Latino residential father of two, cautioned: "If you just send them money and keep a roof over their head ... they have what they need, but they're missing out on you. How will they know right from wrong?" He acknowledged that financial provisioning gives children what they need to survive, but also believed that a guiding paternal presence gives children the moral compass they need to thrive. Indeed, most fathers used the language of provision to describe their commitments to meet not only children's financial and instrumental needs, but also broader needs for attention, instruction, and care. They participated in DADS so they could become financially and emotionally

equipped to fulfill this more broadly conceived provider role.

Fathers also described how DADS provided new and pertinent information that enhanced their paternal self-efficacy in matters of childcare, coparenting, discipline, and communication. As David, a 22-year-old Black nonresidential father of one, mentioned: "I mainly learned about disciplining kids and to make sure she sees her mom and I get along." David kept his workbook from the fathering classes as a reference for when he questioned his fathering abilities. This focus on providing a skillful, knowledgeable parent who understands children's needs was part of the reconceptualization of paternal provision both fathers and the program emphasized.

Challenging the Deadbeat Dad Label

Although fathers believed that money alone was inadequate, they emphasized how DADS made them better financial providers, specifically by offering the social support, resources, and opportunities they needed to be there in the various ways they defined it. Participation was grounds for challenging stereotypes that they were deadbeat dads who avoided parenting responsibilities. DADS gave them a reason to wake up, provided a reliable schedule, and channeled their energy toward being legitimate employees and hardworking role models for their children. Marcus, a 21-year-old Black nonresidential father of one, explained:

My son knows Dad goes to work, that he gets up every morning. That's the thing I want him to see. ... That's what makes me a good father. I try to be there like that. ... When I put on my hardhat and vest, and I'm out in public walking around, I feel good, that I'm part of something important and being a role model for my son.

The program also enabled men to provide other resources they believed good fathers should offer, including enrichment activities. Most described setting aside a portion of each paycheck for outings with children, such as going to restaurants and theme parks. DADS also provided free father-child activities, including visits to a local planetarium and holiday events. Randall, a 23-year-old Black residential father of two, explained how the program helped him be there by providing free and safe activities for families: "People that grew

up here can't afford [these activities]. It shows them something better than just the everyday stuff they see, the people using drugs. I'd rather take them and see stuff they can remember, something better than where we're at."

DADS defrayed other costs associated with involvement. To have children in their homes and make a case for shared custody, men needed safe housing and access to support services. Case managers connected fathers to low- or no-cost transitional housing, health care, and mental health services. They had access to WEP phones and computers to contact potential employers and do school homework and got a food box for assisting with the WEP food bank distribution. Fathers also received bread, baby formula, and vegetables from the on-site community garden they tended. Respondents described transportation as one of their biggest challenges for attending work and school, and nonresidential fathers noted it as a major obstacle to seeing children regularly. To address this, the program provided bus tokens and bicycles and partially paid for registration fees and car repairs. Curtis, an 18-year-old Latino nonresidential father of one, explained how his biweekly \$270 check did not stretch far, making the incentives he received crucial for involvement:

Whenever she runs out of diapers, she has to call me. The thing is, she has to drive over to my house. I can get a ride, but I have to pay for gas and give her money. You can't go to that many places and they'll give you stuff, a diploma, and a job all in one place.

Although traveling to multiple locations for school and work would have prevented him from doing both, through DADS Curtis was able to get a driver's license and save money for a car so he could drive across town to see his son and girlfriend more often.

Fathers also received necessary baby items not provided by means-tested programs, including diapers, wipes, and car seats. For fathers who relied on in-kind support to negotiate visitation with children's mothers, these incentives were essential for father-child contact; they allowed fathers to not show up empty-handed and to feel that they deserved to see their children. Peter, a 23-year-old Black nonresidential father of two, described how the money he earned working on the WEP recycling crew, combined with the diapers and formula DADS gave him, enabled him to be responsible despite infrequent contact with

his children. As one of only five fathers who reported having a formal child support order, he paid \$153 each month in support, which was more than half of his \$300 per month in earnings. Peter explained: "When I found out she didn't want me to see my kids, I had to get a job. When I gave diapers, it felt good because I did something responsible." Other nonresidential fathers reported giving portions of their checks and program incentives to children's mothers.

The program helped men manage these tensions between barriers to being consistent providers and their fathering aspirations and identities. Respondents especially appreciated the social support from case managers, teachers, and similarly disadvantaged men who valued their efforts to be good parents. As Darius, a 23-year-old Black residential father of one, said:

Here they don't see my [gang-related] tattoos. They care about me the person. ... All you have to do here is work. ... You're not judged for being Black or having a past on the streets. When I leave the gate, it's a whole different program.

DADS conferred respect and valorized men's fathering commitments, thereby challenging racist and classist stereotypes that they lacked motivation to be responsible parents. This differed from how their fathering was degraded and ridiculed in other social spaces where they lived. Outside the program, they were often condemned as deadbeat dads because they were not White, high-earning, residential, married fathers. Inside the program, others commended their presence and persistence as fathers trying to overcome severe social and economic disadvantages.

This was a main theme in the first focus group. Karl, a 22-year-old Black residential father of three, lamented:

Every time you turn on the TV or hear something on the radio or in the newspaper, you hear about a dad ain't doing this [or] the dad done this, but it's always something negative. You don't hardly hear anything good about a dad.

Douglas, a 23-year-old Black residential father of one, quickly added:

Especially with [racial and ethnic] minorities, you hear a lot of things like, "Oh, you Black or Mexican, you don't raise your kids." ... [DADS] is like a trophy. ... We're learning. We're becoming good

fathers. Can't nobody put us in the minor league right now.

Cayden, a 24-year-old Black residential father of two, agreed:

When I walk down the street, others are like, "Oh, [Cayden], you're still working up there?" ... You got to wonder how it feels to wake up in this skin every day. ... You already stereotyped. I might get shot in the neighborhood I'm walking through, but I'm still taking that risk to get to work, get my kid some diapers. ... The program let me get out of the game, get me a job, so that part of my life my son doesn't even know about. All I want him to see is me hanging my certificates I get from here on the wall.

In DADS, fathers were recognized foremost as parents, employees, and students. This was a sharp and meaningful contrast to the stigmatized statuses they encountered outside the program—gang member, ex-convict, dropout—that hindered their socioeconomic opportunities, paternal involvement, and ability to see themselves as responsible, hardworking family providers.

Ongoing Obstacles

Fathers' experiences also revealed program limitations given participants' deeply entrenched structural constraints. Some fathers expressed dissatisfaction because they felt DADS did not fulfill promises regarding work and school opportunities or because it was difficult to juggle work, school, and caregiving. Owen, a 20-year-old multiracial father of three who lived with one of his children, was ambivalent about DADS: "The program has done a lot for me, but I stay because this is the only place that will work around my school schedule. I just barely got my scholarship they promised." Darius, a 23-year-old Black residential father of one, described how the program's work rules often conflicted with his ability to care for his baby:

If you get there too late, you're not going to be able to work. ... If you're 2 minutes late, that's a write-up. ... I've been late because I wake up, and the baby is crying. Do I leave with my baby crying to make sure I get to work or school on time, or do I make sure that my baby's okay and then try to get there? That's a choice, but you take a chance on not getting to work and getting fired. Now if you lose your job, your baby's not okay.

Other fathers admitted that participation did not allow them to provide as much or see their children as often as they wanted and that low-wage employment made it difficult to be there in all the ways they aspired. Because the program was classified as vocational training, fathers could earn a paycheck without decreasing other benefits, such as food stamps. Yet many noted that their \$200 to \$600 monthly wages were insufficient to meet the needs of their families. Some devised strategies to compensate—getting second jobs, living with friends or relatives who could not accommodate children, or foregoing having a car—that limited involvement with their children. Christopher explained how he struggled both during and after his time in the program:

It's not like we finish the program and get an interview or start another program. Other guys went back to the street, just doing what they can to make a dollar. How far is \$200 going to go in 2 weeks when you've got to buy food and clothe yourself? ... We went from being on this block every day to making it to class every day. It became a priority for us. We're trying to better ourselves, but what are we supposed to do now?

Christopher was the only participant he knew who was employed, and it was in a minimum-wage job unrelated to his DADS training. Other fathers noted that the money they earned did not go far. Randall, a 23-year-old Black residential father of two, said "It's never enough to feed my family."

Despite its perceived shortcomings, these fathers overwhelmingly described the program as a success, especially given the lack of better paying options. After describing his frustration, Christopher added: "There's not many people who will even offer these programs and be willing to pay you to go. I can't be mad at that." Michael, a 24-year-old Latino residential father of two, similarly explained:

The money is making a difference. Is it enough? No, it's not, but how could you argue with an opportunity that's being given to you? You get help to raise your child. You get a job. You get to finish school. How could I complain? I'm just grateful for what I have.

Michael did not feel justified criticizing the program because the \$580 he earned each month was substantially more than what he had earned before the program. In general, fathers

focused less on the low pay and more on how DADS was better than their alternatives: lower paying and less desirable jobs, life-threatening and illegal moneymaking activities, homelessness, incarceration, or death. They reasoned that these options would have reduced their paternal involvement far more than low-wage work. Ricky, a 22-year-old Black nonresidential father of one, told me: “I’ll come here every day and work hard so that I might get hired [into a permanent position]. I pray. If I don’t get hired, I’ll pray for another job.” Harris, an 18-year-old Black nonresidential father of one, likewise stated:

It was an accomplishment that I’m not locked up or in the grave. This is a great opportunity because it’s a safe environment where you can work and get a free education. I don’t have a lot to offer, but I’m going to make sure I’m in my kid’s life. This is better than doing nothing, and I’m grateful. A lot of people want to be there in my shoes. They want the job. I’m going to use that privilege to my full advantage.

Men’s descriptions of the program as a privilege point to the broader context of inequality in which they struggled to claim positive paternal identities as marginalized fathers desperate for any income and validation. Although some stayed because they believed they had no other options, most felt lucky to have any opportunity to work and finish school, even if they were unsure how it would lead to stable, well-paid employment. Even if DADS came up short of drastically altering their life circumstances, the program was meaningful to these fathers because it still allowed them to claim identities as successful providers.

DISCUSSION

DADS—a comprehensive fatherhood program that included work, school, and parenting classes—operated as a unique situated context for the expression of a positive fathering identity focused on a breadwinning-plus script of “being there.” Previous research has analyzed how marginalized fathers use “being there” as a flexible fatherhood script to account for the effects of economic constraint on paternal involvement (Edin & Nelson, 2013; Forste et al., 2009; Roy, 2004; Summers et al., 2006). This analysis distinctly shows how fathers utilized this script to make sense of their participation in responsible

fatherhood programming, and specifically to claim identities as responsible parents actively trying to alter their lives and life chances for the well-being of their children. As in prior research (Edin & Nelson, 2013; Forste et al., 2009; Roy & Dyson, 2010), these fathers used the language of provision to describe meeting their children’s broader needs for attention and care. Focusing on how fathers described participation in DADS as enabling them to “be there” and “provide” for their children, these findings highlight how programming that responds to fathers’ socioeconomic circumstances can promote men’s abilities to enact dominant fatherhood scripts (Marsiglio et al., 2005). Fathering programs help men develop paternal identities with status and value by emphasizing time and care as central components of responsible involvement (Anderson et al., 2002; Holcomb et al., 2015; Roy & Dyson, 2010). However, previous research found that most fathers still struggle to procure and maintain legal employment that pays sufficient wages to support children financially and meet child support obligations (Clary et al., 2017). Analyzing men’s experiences in DADS uniquely illustrates how combining work, school, parenting education, and program incentives allowed marginalized fathers access to the financial, instrumental, and identity resources needed to realize broader definitions of provisioning for which responsible fatherhood programs advocate.

Implications

These findings have three major implications. First, they suggest that a strong commitment to fathering is a motivating factor for participation in responsible fatherhood programming, not an outcome. As predicted by ecological models of fathering (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Cowan et al., 2009), men’s parental involvement is shaped by socioeconomic context and not wholly dependent on motivation or knowledge. This challenges deficit models of fatherhood (Blankenhorn, 1996; Popenoe, 2009), which suggest that interventions are needed to teach men how to be responsible fathers. Programs need not focus on shaping poor fathers’ paternal identities in line with governmental definitions of responsibility focused on financial and emotional support. Rather, like DADS, programs should focus on creating an opportunity structure where fathers can more readily act on these definitions.

Second, these findings indicate that school and work opportunities are crucial parts of fatherhood programming. Despite a greater emphasis on fathers' caregiving, breadwinning is still central to men's and others' definitions of paternal responsibility. Job search assistance is insufficient in most cases to improve men's earning potential, and as these fathers described, wages earned through work are often necessary to help men cast off the deadbeat dad label so often applied to marginalized men. Educational and paid vocational programming helped men identify as students and workers, which became statuses central to their identities as responsible fathers. Despite the continuing obstacles these fathers noted, the DADS program model of rejecting a narrow definition of paternal provision that excludes men marginalized by race and class is worthy of replication. DADS services reflected how fathering and fathers' identity work depend on the social and economic conditions in which they occur. Per Curran and Abrams's (2000) critique, DADS was informed less by the logic that poverty is the result of lifestyle choices and more by the recognition that low-income Black and Latino men face deeply entrenched socioeconomic barriers. Similar programs should also create situated spaces that challenge the deficit-focused discourse of paternal "responsibility" and help fathers develop a broader conceptualization of good-provider characteristics.

Third, these findings point to how fatherhood programs alone are insufficient to address the inequalities that undermine sustained paternal involvement. Programs like DADS could be an important part of a broader set of fathering policies that advance marginalized men's parenting abilities and long-term, well-paid employment options. Yet, as these fathers' stories suggest, they also need equitable access to quality education, living wages, manageable child support options, and fair criminal justice focused on sustaining, rather than weakening, father-child relationships.

Limitations

These findings and implications should be understood in the context of a few key limitations of this study. Foremost among the limitations, each fatherhood program has unique features, and the nonrandom selection of participants from one program limits the

generalizability of these findings. They are, however, likely transferable to programs with comparable services for similar populations. Also, the research design—a cross-sectional, retrospective interview study—did not allow for assessment of the extent to which DADS directly influenced men's identities and views of fatherhood. Future research should therefore explore longitudinally how fathers' views change over time through program participation.

CONCLUSION

This study offers important insights into how a fathering intervention allowed marginalized men to engage in the active, rather than just aspirational, construction of a responsible fatherhood identity. By providing resources for financial and material support and caregiving, DADS worked less by reshaping fathers' commitment to parenting and more by providing a situated context in which men could more successfully enact dominant ideas of good fathering and responsible paternal involvement. Despite its low wages and uncertain long-term impacts, fathers enrolled in DADS experienced the program as an opportunity to develop a hard-worker status and prove their parenting commitments.

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