


INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE ON FATHERHOOD

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At a late point in putting together this special issue of the *Journal of Family History*, it appeared that one of the articles might have to be dropped. After talking with the editor of the journal, Rod Phillips, we decided that the best thing to do would be to put out an emergency call for an additional article, one that was more or less ready to go. In the event we lost the article in question, we would, by adding another, still have a fine collection for the special issue; if we were able to retain the original article, we would simply add an additional study to the mix. Imagine my surprise, then, when more than a dozen essays showed up in my mailbox within two weeks of issuing the call on H-Net: essays exploring North American, Latin American, Asian, and European fatherhood. Having myself done the first book-length treatment of the history of American fatherhood several years ago, it was gratifying to learn that the history of fatherhood has become something of a cross-cultural growth industry.¹ Ultimately, in fact, we kept the one we feared we might lose and added two more.

And there are good reasons for this growth. Throughout human history, most men have been fathers, and all fathers have been sons, and thus, comprehending men's experiences as fathers and how fatherhood has been culturally constructed over time is fundamental to understanding human experience. It is an elemental bond and an almost universal human experience for men. To understand fatherhood historically, or at least to begin to grasp its multiple, changing meanings, is to explore a major part of what it means to be a man, to define a key part of masculine identity, to uncover the shifting boundaries between manhood and womanhood. To become a father is a biological act but also a cultural enactment; it both ensures the survival of one's genes and requires cultural knowledge of what it means to be a father. Men respond to these biological and cultural demands differently, and while most historians, not surprisingly, feel more comfortable exploring the latter, surely there is much to be learned from those who write from a bioevolutionary perspective.² Just to take one matter of crucial but neglected importance: so far as I know, no one has explored in any depth fathers'

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perspectives on the great decline in fertility in America over the course of the nineteenth century. One does not have to be a biological determinist to ponder the meaning of this decline for men, to ask what it meant to men to have the number of their progeny cut by half in a century. If one's ability to beget children is associated with virility and potency, then is it not fair to ask what happens to male identity when men and women dramatically turn away from such a demographic regime?

Understandably, and wisely, too, historians spend far more time examining the historical and cultural side of fatherhood than they do the biological. Biology and bioevolutionary perspectives make historians nervous: analyses based on a genetic imperative to send one's DNA forward are not appealing to most historians, given as they are to deep suspicions about essentialism in any guise. What they want to examine, as the following articles make clear, is the social construction of fatherhood, how it changed over time, and what significance these changing social constructions had for male identity, children's lives, the experience of women, and the relative power between the sexes. These articles confirm what earlier work has suggested: fatherhood is, indeed, a social construction as well as a biological state, and it is a construction that changes over time in response to economic, political, cultural, and social change.³ Large-scale changes can alter fatherhood—for example, what made sense for men in a rural society may be dysfunctional in the urban setting—but so, too, can more immediate changes: one of our authors explores how Mexico's revolution reshaped attitudes about fatherhood, another examines the connection between fascism and fatherhood in France, while two others look at how the baby boom altered men's experiences as fathers. The point is as important as it is obvious: fatherhood is not a stable cultural ideal over time.

Nor is its meaning stable in another sense. Fatherhood may mean breadwinning and it may mean companionship and it may mean power and it may mean responsibility and it may mean all of these simultaneously. The relative importance of each may change over time, and each may change in importance over the life course of an individual. To take just the first two of these as examples: as I have argued elsewhere, breadwinning may have been crucial to male identity over a long period of time, but its meaning historically has been in constant flux. Supporting one's family in 1850 was not the same as earning bread in 1900, 1950, or 1990. Not only were standards of living vastly different but so too were the household dynamics of the family economy. To cite the obvious: breadwinning meant something different to the agrarian with his farm wife than it did to the industrial worker whose spouse took in piecework; different, too, to the middle-class office worker whose wife was a "homemaker" than to the busy executive today whose wife is a dentist. True, each earned bread, but each did so in a context that gave dramatically different meanings to that labor.

The same goes for companionship: at some level, men have always spent time with their children. Surely, the stereotype of the distant, uninvolved father of an ill-defined past can be laid to rest forever. Wherever historians have looked, they have found men concerned about their children, eager to establish connections with them, and frequent commentators on their motor and intellectual development. On closer inspection, the allegedly flinty, sin-obsessed patriarchs of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century New England, as the first article in this collection reveals, entered into their children's lives in myriad ways and cared deeply about their well-being. So, too, with the Victorian spiritualist of the second article, whose own strange life played out all the paternal contradictions of the last century, the tensions between equality and deference, companionship and control, partnership and patriarchy. Baby boom fathers, as two of the arti-

cles reveal, also answered the call for companionship, sometimes grudgingly because of their wives' insistence and sometimes willingly as a chance to enter the new, post-World War II era of conspicuous, family-based consumption. The family vacation was about togetherness, but it was also about affluence, particularly if one could take the vacation to faraway places and, even better, tow a boat for good measure. Thus, at one level, companionship between fathers and children seems to be a historical constant, an unchanging desideratum, a primal bond between men and their offspring. Such is not the case. Fatherly play in seventeenth-century New England bore some similarities to romper-room antics of the 1950s, but it was not the same. Play inspired by religious impulses differs from that provoked by therapeutic inclinations, and while the event itself may look quite similar, the cultural meaning is altogether different. The historian's task is to understand and account for that difference.

If fatherhood has a history, so does each father. As a man passes through the different stages of his life, what it means to be a father changes significantly. Breadwinning for a young father, for a father with teenage children, and for a man with adult sons and daughters clearly entails different demands and is a responsibility viewed differently by all within the family. These breadwinning duties, in turn, become entangled with men's ability to become companions to their children. A young father trying to get a toehold in business may have little time to establish intimate bonds with his children, and when he is finally able to do so—when his status is secure as a breadwinner—his now older children may not desire his company. Nor is the nature of companionship itself static over time. The types of companionship fathers offer to infants and to children in their twenties have little relationship to each other, and yet both require men to perform their fatherly obligations and to create meaningful bonds with their progeny. Men may well be successful at one stage and utter failures at another, but only a life-course perspective on the history of fatherhood enables us to judge the difference.

At any point in time, it may be more wise to talk about *fatherhoods* than fatherhood. The articles in this issue suggest that fatherhood has multiple meanings and that these meanings are often contested. What it means to be a father is often a marker of class, as the article on Australian fatherhood and the two articles on the baby boom—one from Canada, one from the United States—make so clear. Men judged other men as fathers, sometimes formally and in court, sometimes informally and in private correspondence. Such judgments are often based on class distinctions. Is a man cruel to his children? Does he exploit them economically? Does he ignore them? Is he oblivious to their education? At one level, these judgments look like simple behavioral observations. But they may also be about social class, about how “good” fathers behave toward their children. Is the father who spans his child a lout, or is the critic of such behavior simply staking out new moral terrain that also delineates class boundaries? Is the middle-class father who attends a parenting class really a more sensitive, New Age guy, or is he simply demonstrating that he has the time, inclination, education, and money to indulge in such self-education? Fatherhood is also, of course, about race, and I must confess that no article in this collection explores in any detail this important matter. In America, the ideology of race superiority incorporates into its fold all possible fodder, and fatherhood is no exception. Perhaps a new generation of historians will begin to explore in depth fatherhood among men of color in various societies.

Finally, of course, fatherhood is about power. It can be personal—witness one man's odyssey to gain some sense of self-control in a rapidly changing world (see the article on John Shoebridge Williams)—and it can be collective, as in the case of the

Australian courts and their dealings with one neglectful father. It can take us into the private struggles between men and women to define proper fatherhood (witness the article on fathers and the American baby boom), and it can make us rethink something as large and public as the revolution in Mexico or the rise of fascism in France. Historically, men have exerted power over women and children, and we call this power *patriarchy*. It is a complex term, and well beyond the scope of this brief introduction to treat at any length, but I would suggest that the study of fatherhood cannot be divorced from the study of power. As the articles that follow suggest, it is not a simple story of unchanging male domination, although some form of male domination is always present, nor is it a story only of victimized women and children, although many have, indeed, been victimized. But the study of fatherhood does take us into the realm of men's power at both the personal and social levels. It is a perfect place to explore gender in all its complexity—its relational nature as men and women, together and in opposition, work out what it means to be a parent; its multiple demands as men struggle with the power that comes to fathers and the cultural call to be friends and companions to their offspring; and its changing meaning, as the power of patriarchy has been reshaped and rethought over the decades.

At one level, the historical neglect of fatherhood is perfectly understandable. Its study came only in the wake of brilliant work in women's history done by so many able practitioners. Until gender became a crucial category of analysis, fatherhood remained a universal experience universally ignored by historians. But it remains somewhat astonishing that a range of human experience so central to human life has had so few historians until so recently: it is my hope that these articles can play a vital role in furthering our understanding of that experience.

NOTES

1. Robert L. Griswold, *Fatherhood in America: A History* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

2. On the bioevolutionary perspective, see David Popenoe, *Life without Father: Compelling New Evidence that Fatherhood and Marriage Are Indispensable for the Good of Children and Society* (New York: Free Press, 1996). For a recent collection of essays on the question of "fatherlessness" in American society, see Cynthia R. Daniels, ed., *Lost Fathers: The Politics of Fatherlessness in America* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998).

3. Three book-length treatments of the history of American fatherhood are Griswold, *Fatherhood*; Stephen M. Frank, *Life with Father: Parenthood and Masculinity in the Nineteenth-Century American North* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); and Ralph LaRossa, *The Modernization of Fatherhood: A Social and Political History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).