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# The Importance of Fatherhood to U.S. Married and Cohabiting Men

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## THE IMPORTANCE OF FATHERHOOD TO U.S. MARRIED AND COHABITING MEN

*Using a non-hierarchical approach to identity theory, we construct a scale to analyze the characteristics associated with the importance of fatherhood in a national sample of male partners (N = 932) of U.S. women of reproductive age, including fathers and non-fathers. OLS multiple regression shows that economic situation is not associated with importance of fatherhood, but valuing career success, higher education, higher religiosity and non-egalitarian gender attitudes (compared to egalitarian) are associated with higher importance of fatherhood scores. Leisure, age, fertility problems, and non-egalitarian gender attitudes are associated with importance of fatherhood scores differently for fathers and non-fathers. Although fathers place a higher value on fatherhood than do non-fathers, non-fathers, especially those who have experienced infertility, also have high importance of fatherhood scores.*

*Keywords:* fatherhood, fertility, identity, values, work-life

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How important is fatherhood to married and cohabiting men in the United States? There has been great interest in fathering behavior, especially providing for children and father involvement in the lives of their children, but less attention has been paid to how important fatherhood is to individual men, or to the factors associated with differences in importance of fatherhood among men.

Although not all men become fathers, most do, making fatherhood a normative part of adult men's experience. Both qualitative and national survey data demonstrate that most men expect to be fathers and that fatherhood is often viewed as inevitable or as

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the next logical step in one's life (Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Marsiglio, 1998). Dramatic changes in social and family life over the last several decades, however, present a challenge to gendered assumptions about masculinity and therefore have implications for the meanings and importance of fatherhood in men's lives (Gerson, 2009). Fatherhood for White middle and upper class men in the United States in the mid-twentieth century was constructed as being largely about providing. Definitions of what it means to be a "good" father, however, have been shifting, suggesting that providing may no longer be enough. Men are increasingly called upon to be "involved" with their children (Gerson 1993) because greater father involvement is associated with improved well-being and better outcomes for children (Cherlin, 2010). In short, the behavior of men appears to be changing and shifting expectations regarding work, family, and the balance between the two may have an impact on how men view fatherhood.

Not surprisingly, much recent research on fatherhood is framed by identity theory and has focused on the salience, centrality, and importance of the father identity in men's lives, especially as it may be linked to men's involvement with their children (DeGarmo, 2010; Habib & Lancaster, 2006; Nicholson, Howard, & Borkowski, 2008). The more central fatherhood is to men's identities, the greater their involvement in the mental and physical caregiving tasks of parenting (Nicholson et al., 2008). Typically, research on fatherhood constructs "father" as an identity that exists in a hierarchy of multiple identities available to men. The hierarchical approach to identity, however, does not allow men to report that fatherhood is *as* important as their "worker" identity, for example. In this article, we seek to build on a non-hierarchical approach to identity theory by asking men to rate the importance of fatherhood in their lives alongside other identities or interests that might compete with fatherhood (such as work and leisure) without forcing them to rank one in relation to the other. Most research on fatherhood and identity treats the salience and centrality of the fatherhood identity as independent variables, which are then used to account for levels of parental involvement or other fathering behaviors; variations in fatherhood identity are taken as given. Here we try to account for variations in the importance of fatherhood to men. Finally, most work on fatherhood and identity focus on men who are already fathers. Here, we expand the current work on fatherhood and identity by asking about the importance of fatherhood in the lives of non-fathers as well as fathers.

We describe the importance of fatherhood among the 932 men in married or cohabiting relationships with the women included in the National Survey of Fertility Barriers (NSFB), examine the differences in the importance of fatherhood among fathers and non-fathers, and explore the characteristics associated with placing more or less importance on fatherhood. Because the salience, centrality, and importance of fatherhood have been shown to exert a significant influence on fathers' involvement with their children (DeGarmo, 2010; Fox & Bruce, 2001; Pasley, Futris, & Skinner, 2002; Rane & McBride, 2000), a more complete understanding of the influences on the importance of fatherhood in men's lives should lead to policies and practices which will facilitate men's greater involvement in parenting.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

We draw on two bodies of work to guide our examination of the importance of fatherhood in men's lives. We build on identity theory and use research on voluntary childlessness (Bulcroft & Teachman, 2004) and the importance of motherhood in women's lives (McQuillan, Greil, Shreffler, & Tichenor, 2008) as guides for exploring the characteristics that shape the importance of fatherhood in men's lives. These characteristics include economic factors, especially the potential "costs" of fatherhood vis-à-vis work and leisure pursuits, influences related to culture and identity, and life course or situational factors in men's lives.

*Identity Theory*

Much research on fatherhood, including that framed by identity theory, has focused on fathers' involvement in parenting and/or support for their children (see, for example, DeGarmo, 2010; Nicholson et al., 2008; Shows & Gerstel, 2009; Shreffler, Meadows, & Davis, 2011). According to identity theory, the more salient and central the identity, the more likely individuals are to engage in behaviors associated with it, in this case parenting activities (Stryker, 1987; Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Saliency refers to the readiness to act out an identity in a particular situation, and is often measured by asking people the first thing they would tell a new acquaintance about themselves (Henley & Pasley, 2005; Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Centrality refers to the importance of an identity in relation to other identities. The centrality of the father identity is usually measured by asking men to rank the father identity in relation to others (worker, husband, son, brother, neighbor, friend, etc.), typically using a penny sort (Rane & McBride, 2000) or pie chart (Habib & Lancaster, 2006) methodology. Research on fathering has generally found that centrality is more important than saliency in explaining fathering behavior (Henley & Pasley, 2005; Rane & McBride, 2000).

Most measures of saliency and centrality assume that identities are organized hierarchically and force respondents to rank identities in relation to others. The resulting hierarchy reveals important information, but it presents respondents with a forced choice that may not best represent their lived experiences. For example, some men may wish to rank their identities as "husband" and "father" as equally important (i.e., some identities may be organized non-hierarchically), making the organization of roles and identities within the self an "empirical issue" (Marks & MacDermid, 1996), to be determined through observation rather than imposed upon respondents. Several researchers have used non-hierarchical measures of identity, measuring centrality by asking such questions as, how often men thought about what is best for their children (Pasley et al., 2002), or, "How important are ...people's opinions of you as a father" (DeGarmo, 2010). These formulations avoid hierarchical assumptions, but as worded, they apply only to fathers. We employ a methodology that avoids hierarchical assumptions and allows us to see how the importance of fatherhood is associated with importance of work and leisure in the lives of both fathers and non-fathers. We refer to the

“importance” of fatherhood, rather than to “salience” or “centrality,” in order to distance ourselves from the hierarchical assumptions implied by these terms.

### *Understanding the Importance of Fatherhood for Non-Fathers: Building on Infertility Research*

Research on non-fathers’ desires to be fathers comes largely from the study of infertility. Therefore it is useful to review relevant infertility research to frame our study of the importance of fatherhood in men’s lives. This literature suggests that infertility is stressful for men (Carmeli & Birenbaum-Carmeli, 1994; Peronace, Boivin, & Schmidt, 2007) and can often lead to grief about not producing offspring, a loss of a sense of masculinity, and a sense of personal inadequacy (Webb & Daniluk, 1999). Other work implies that men see the failure to achieve fatherhood as a threat to masculinity because of their inability to reproduce (Beutel et al., 1998; Greil, 1991; Hjelmstedt et al., 1999). Thus, research on men who are involuntarily childless suggests a high importance of fatherhood for men who encounter challenges to having children. Yet the question of the importance of fatherhood for non-fathers outside the context of infertility research has received less attention. We therefore address an important gap in fatherhood research.

Research on infertility and childlessness has also given us a way to examine characteristics that may shape the importance of fatherhood in all men’s lives (Bulcroft & Teachman, 2004) and has already been adapted to examine the importance of motherhood in women’s lives (McQuillan et al., 2008). We group these characteristics into three categories (described below): economic (occupational and leisure), culture and identity (race/ethnicity, religiosity, and gender ideology), and life course/situational (age, marital status, fatherhood status, and infertility) factors.

### *Economic Factors and Importance of Fatherhood*

There are costs and benefits associated with having children (Becker, 1991). The benefits of having children include love/affection, social approval, social capital, support in old age, and marital stability; potential costs include money, time, emotional investments and reduced occupational advancement. Individuals, or couples, weigh these costs and benefits before making fertility decisions (Friedman, Hechter, & Kanazawa, 1994; Morgan & King, 2001).

For men, it is difficult to separate occupational success from fatherhood because providing has been central to being a father in the United States. In fact, men who are not employed or have low earnings often feel as if they have failed as both fathers and men (Potuchek, 1997; Townsend, 2002). Further, combining work and fatherhood has economic benefits, including higher hourly wages and annual earnings (Correll, Bennard, & Paik, 2007; Glauber, 2008). We might then expect that employed men, and men who place higher value on career success, will also place higher importance of fatherhood. Yet there is also evidence that men with higher earning jobs may place less importance

on active fathering if it conflicts with career opportunities (Marks & Palkovitz, 2004; Shows & Gerstel, 2009).

At the other end of the economic spectrum, men with few economic resources may find fatherhood very appealing because it gives them a measure of accomplishment denied them in the occupational world (Coltrane, 1997; Golden, 2007). Previous research suggests, for example, that young men in poor neighborhoods perceive more rewards to fatherhood than those in affluent neighborhoods (Anderson, 1999; Marsiglio, Hutchinson, & Cohan, 2001). Many men in such circumstances credit fatherhood with helping them “get themselves together” and/or recognize that, while having children outside of marriage or without stable employment is stigmatized by the larger society, their long-term economic prospects would otherwise prevent them from having children (Augustine, Nelson, & Edin, 2009). But when fatherhood is conceived mostly as economic providing, then men who are unemployed or have lower SES may place lower importance on fatherhood because they cannot meet the expectations of fathering (Hamer, 1998).

Existing research, then, suggests that the relationship between economic resources and the importance of fatherhood could be complex. If men define fatherhood as providing, then wealthier men should place more importance on fatherhood. If men define fatherhood as involvement, then lower income men should place more importance on fatherhood. Because we have no measures of how men are conceptualizing fatherhood, we cannot anticipate what the association between employment and importance of fatherhood should be. We do, however, contrast several employment statuses (part-time, unemployed, retired, in school, keeping house, disabled) to full-time status to assess whether the particular type of not-full-time employment matters, and include education in our analysis both as a direct indicator of the likely intrinsic rewards of work and as a rough measure of social class.

Leisure interests and pursuits could also present a potential conflict with fatherhood if fatherhood is seen as taking time away from leisure. Men tend to have more time for leisure pursuits compared to their female partners, and the leisure gap between men and women increases when they become parents (McGinnis, Chun, & McQuillan, 2003). While more men are becoming more directly involved in their children’s lives, much of this increased involvement is due to men’s greater participation in leisure activities *with* their children, especially children’s sports (Such, 2006), and men typically prefer engaging in play rather than other caregiving activities (Barclay & Lupton, 1999). Additionally, much of the leisure time fathers spend with children is in the company of mothers, who are presumably at least assisting with supervision and caretaking (Shaw, 2008). All of this suggests that men do not lose much in the way of leisure by becoming fathers, although they may perceive that they do. There is evidence that men often view childrearing activities as “anti-leisure,” suggesting that men who value their personal leisure time will have lower importance of fatherhood scores (Golden, 2007). We therefore hypothesize that men who place a high importance on leisure will place a lower importance on fatherhood.

*Culture, Identity and Importance of Fatherhood*

Most scholarly work on fathering and fatherhood has focused on White fathers (Marsiglio et al., 2000). Existing research suggests that the importance of fatherhood will be higher for White men than for men of color, especially Black men, for several reasons (Burton et al., 2010). Because fatherhood is so strongly linked to stable employment, Black men, whose unemployment rates are typically double those of White men, will have a more difficult time meeting the provider expectation of fatherhood (Hamer, 1998). In addition, there is evidence that, on average, Black men view childlessness more positively than White men (Koropecykj-Cox & Pendell, 2007). Research also suggests that Black men have lower attachment to and satisfaction with the father role because of uncertainty about paternity (Marsiglio et al., 2001) and concern about the wisdom of long-term investment in children (Fox & Bruce, 2001). On the other hand, Black men could see fatherhood as an alternative source of self-worth if employment is blocked (Roy, 2004).

There are fewer studies of Asian or Hispanic men and father involvement or the importance of fatherhood. Research on Asian fathers' parenting styles suggests that co-residential Asian fathers spend less time with their children but that they maintain strong parental control and discipline (Julian et al., 1994); therefore, it is unclear whether they will report higher or lower importance of fatherhood. Hispanics tend to place a high value on family (Sabogal, Marin, Otero-Sabogal, Marin, & Perez-Stable, 1987), and co-residential Hispanic fathers tend to be more involved than White fathers (Coltrane, Parke, & Adams, 2008; Hofferth, 2003; Toth & Xu, 1999), so Hispanic men may see fatherhood as being more important. On the other hand, gender role beliefs are linked with father involvement for Hispanic fathers (Sanchez-Ayendez, 1988), and Hispanics are less egalitarian than Whites or Blacks (Kane, 2000; Raffaelli & Ontai, 2004), suggesting that Hispanic fathers may report lower importance of fatherhood. Despite the mixed results of the existing research, we expect White fathers to report the highest importance of fatherhood and Black fathers the lowest, with Asian and Hispanic fathers falling in between.

Religiosity is likely related to the importance of fatherhood. Those who are more religious have both higher fertility and higher intended fertility (Hayford & Morgan, 2008), and conservative religious beliefs are linked to lower acceptance of childlessness (Koropecykj-Cox & Pendell, 2007). Religious participation in general is associated with high levels of father involvement (Bollinger & Palkovitz, 2003; Wilcox, 2004), especially for first-time fathers (Petts, 2007). The causal ordering of these relationships is unclear, however, because religion often becomes important to men once they become fathers and feel responsible for the moral upbringing of their children (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; Heath, 2003). This research suggests that importance of fatherhood scores will be higher for more religious men.

The influence of gender ideology on the importance of fatherhood is complex. On the one hand, there is a link between egalitarian beliefs and a positive view of childlessness (Koropecykj-Cox & Pendell, 2007), suggesting lower importance of fatherhood

scores for more egalitarian men. On the other hand, the call for men's greater parental involvement is rooted in an egalitarian view of marital relations and family life. In fact, the available evidence suggests that men's greater engagement in parenting activities is the result of a world view shared (or constructed) by both partners: If wives believe men should be nurturing, men rate this dimension as more central to the father identity *and* are more involved with their children (Cook et al., 2005; Fox, 2009; Rane & McBride, 2000).

Additionally, ideology and behavior are not always congruous. Middle-class fathers tend to espouse more egalitarian ideals yet often face employment constraints that present barriers to greater participation in household chores and parenting, whereas working-class men often use alternating shifts to increase their participation at home (in order to avoid costly childcare), regardless of espoused views on gendered responsibilities (Shows & Gerstel, 2009). There is also evidence that men need to construct a "masculine" form of childrearing in order to stay involved with their children (Golden, 2007), suggesting that men might *behave* in egalitarian ways while *espousing* more conventional (or conservative) gender views (Coltrane, 1997; Deutsch, 1999). We therefore are unable to predict the relationship between espoused gender ideology and the importance of fatherhood.

#### *Life-Course/Situation and Importance of Fatherhood*

Age and life-course variables likely influence the importance of fatherhood in men's lives, though it is unclear exactly how and whether the relationships vary over the life course. Men are capable of having children very late in life; therefore, they rarely "age out" of parenthood (biologically) in the way that women do (though they may age out socially, as their partners' fertility declines). Because wages generally increase with age, younger men should have a harder time providing economically for their families, which may depress importance of fatherhood scores (Hodges & Budig, 2010). However, young men report that they want to be parents and want to be emotionally involved with their children (Shaw, 2008) suggesting that even young men should have high importance of fatherhood scores. There is also some evidence that the importance of fatherhood may increase over the life course; parenthood is often seen as an "investment" in practical and social support in old age (Koropecykj-Cox, 2002). We therefore expect importance of fatherhood scores to be high even for young men, and to increase with age.

Marital status should be associated with importance of fatherhood because men are more likely than women to see childbearing as the purpose of marriage (Koropecykj-Cox & Pendell, 2007). In addition, many men feel pressure to meet the ideal of the "new father" to maintain their marriages (Williams, 2008). We propose, therefore, that to the extent that men continue to view marriage, work and fatherhood as a "package deal" (Townsend, 2002), married men should have higher importance of fatherhood scores than non-married men. Because we have data only on men in relationships with women, we can only compare married to cohabiting men; therefore, the effect is likely



to be weaker than if we could compare married, cohabiting, dating, and single men to each other.

There are several reasons to think that being a father should be associated with higher importance of fatherhood than not being a father. Research on father involvement suggests that when men become more active participants in the lives of their children, they discover unanticipated pleasures in parenting that increase their sense of well-being (Barnett, Marshall, & Pleck, 1992; Fägerskiöld, 2008; Knoester, Petts, & Eggebeen, 2007). Men who are involved from the beginning of their children's lives tend to continue to be involved over time (Bronte-Tinkew, Ryan, Carrano, & Moore, 2007; Cabrera, Fagan, & Farrie, 2008), even if the number of hours they spend in paid labor increases (Aldous, Mulligan, & Bjarnason, 1998). There is evidence that greater emotional investment in children can provide protection from job-related stress by providing an alternative source of satisfaction or well-being (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001). Finally, social desirability dynamics would make it uncomfortable for men who already have children to admit that fatherhood is not important to them. We therefore expect that the importance of fatherhood will be higher for men who are fathers compared to men who are not.

Finally, men who face fertility problems (both fathers and non-fathers) are expected to place a higher importance on fatherhood. The inability to conceive a child can be painful, and the father identity can become even more salient for individuals who want children but face infertility issues (Koropecj-Cox, 2002; Wirtberg, 1999). We also include a question about the general health of respondents and expect that those in poorer health may think of children as a means of support and assistance as they age, thereby increasing the importance of fatherhood.

It is likely that the economic, culture, identity, life-course, and situational factors will be associated with importance of fatherhood differently for men who are fathers and non-fathers, but it is not clear how associations will differ by fatherhood status. We therefore examine interactions between fatherhood status and all of the other independent variables in the model.

## METHODS

### *Sample*

We analyze the 932 male partners of women in a nationally representative sample of the United States — the National Survey of Fertility Barriers (NSFB). The NSFB is a national random-digit-dialing telephone survey of women and a subset of their husbands and partners.<sup>1</sup> The NSFB was designed to study the psychosocial consequences

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<sup>1</sup> The survey procedure used an initial set of screening questions to assess eligibility for the study. The screener determined if the number was a household (as opposed to a business) and if any women age 25-45 resided there. If more than one woman in this age range lived in the household, one was selected at random. This person was invited to participate in the survey. If the

of infertility and includes completed interviews with 4,787 U.S. women 25-45 years old that were conducted between September 2004 and December 2006. A "planned missing" design was used during interviews to minimize respondent burden. Respondents were randomly assigned two-thirds of items for scales, thus shortening the overall survey for each respondent. This type of missing data fulfills the 'missing at random' (MAR) assumption and does not bias results (Allison, 2002). We constructed the scales using the mean of available scale items in the analyses. The completion rate for the women in this sample is 53% for the screener (APPOR RR4). This rate is typical of recent RDD telephone surveys (Keeter et al., 2006), and the sample appears to have low bias because key characteristics closely match the characteristics reported by a larger survey with higher response rates, the National Survey of Family Growth.

Because male respondents were not the main respondents of the study, we cannot generalize our findings beyond men in married or cohabiting relationships with women aged 25-45. In addition, not all male partners were asked to participate, and not all of those who were asked complied. Among the women with partners, 47% of the partners completed the partner interview. Johnson and Johnson (2009) used the female partners' data to compare the couples in which men participated to the couples in which men did not participate among the first one-third of the completed surveys. They found that the following factors were associated with higher completion rates for men: greater relationship longevity, increased age, higher education, fatherhood, men's higher fertility intentions, the woman's having a chronic health problem, and race (partners of White women were more likely to participate). Therefore, we must consider this work exploratory and are careful to generalize only to men who are married or cohabiting with women ages 25-45. We know of no other large population based studies that measure importance of fatherhood; therefore, we proceed with the analysis of these data.

### *Measures*

*Importance of Fatherhood Scale.* The dependent variable was measured by five survey questions. Four items are measured on Likert-type scales reflecting agreement with the following questions: "Now, I'm going to read you a number of statements about families and children. Please tell me whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with each one." 1) "Having children is important to my feeling complete as a man;" 2) "I always thought I would be a parent;" 3) "I think my life will be or is more fulfilling with children;" and 4) "It is important for me to have children." A

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woman indicated later in the interview that she had a partner (a husband for married women, a male partner for cohabiting women, or a female partner for lesbians), an attempt was made to also interview the partner. Partners were usually interviewed in a later call to the household. Items were included in the screener to identify women who already had at least one child, planned to have no more children, and had not had a fertility problem. Women in this category were less critical for this study and only one in five who met these criteria was randomly selected to be interviewed.

fifth item was measured on a scale from very important to not important: 5) “How important is each of the following in your life ... raising children?” Factor analyses showed that these items formed a single factor that explained 64% of the variance. The Cronbach’s alpha is high ( $\alpha = .86$ ). To construct a scale, we took the average of the five items measuring importance of fatherhood. Scores range from 1 (strongly disagree with all items) to 4 (strongly agree with all items).

*Economic resources measures.* An indicator for *valuing work success* (“How important is being successful in my line of work?” 1 = very important), and an indicator for *valuing leisure* (“How important is having leisure to enjoy my own interests?” 1 = very important), were both compared to responses indicating less than very important (important, not important, and very not important) (= 0). Because 47% viewed work success as very important and 41% stated that work success is important and 40% and 41% viewed leisure as very important and important, respectively, the major distinction in responses in each case was between very important and important. We therefore dichotomized both variables to better meet the assumptions of multiple regression and to simplify interpretation of the associations. *Employment* was measured by a series of dichotomous variables indicating employed part-time, unemployed, retired, in school, keeping house, or disabled/other compared to employed full-time. *Economic hardship* was measured by combining women’s responses (1 = never to 4 = fairly often) to three questions: 1) “During the last 12 months, how often did it happen that you had trouble paying the bills?;” 2) “During the last 12 months, how often did it happen that you did not have enough money to buy food, clothes, or other things your household needed?;” and 3) “During the last 12 months, how often did it happen that you did not have enough money to pay for medical care?” This is a unidimensional scale with high reliability ( $\alpha = .82$ ). Responses ranged from 1 (never to all items) to 4 (fairly often to all items). Only the women were asked this question; therefore, we use women’s responses in all models. *Education* is measured in years completed.

*Culture and identity measures.* *Race/ethnicity* was measured by four indicator variables (*Black, Hispanic, Asian* or “*other*” compared to *non-Hispanic White*). *Religiosity* was measured by four questions: 1) “How often do you attend religious services?;” 2) “About how often do you pray?;” 3) “How close do you feel to God most of the time?;” and 4) “In general, how much would you say your religious beliefs influence your daily life?” Because these four items were measured on different scales, they were combined by first standardizing and then taking the mean to form a composite measure. These items form a single factor and have a high reliability ( $\alpha = .78$ ). *Gender attitudes* were measured by a single dichotomous variable that indicates a gender non-egalitarian response to either of the following statements: “It is much better for everyone if the man earns the main living and the woman takes care of the home and family,” or “If a husband and a wife both work full-time they should share household tasks equally.”

*Life course/situational measures.* Age is measured in years. A dichotomous variable for *Cohabiting* (1 = cohabiting) compared to married was created based on a question about current marital status and a follow-up question for women who are not married "Are you currently living with a partner?" *Fatherhood status:* men who answered "none" to the following question: "Counting all of your relationships, current and previous, how many children have you fathered?" were coded as "non-fathers" and those who responded 1 or more were counted as fathers. The gross measure of fatherhood we employ does not indicate how involved the men actually are with their children or if they even live with them. It also does not capture close relationships with step-children. It is, however, a general way to capture whether the actual status of having fathered a child modifies the associations between the variables in the model and subjective importance of fatherhood. *General health* was measured by the following question: "Now I have a question about your health. In general, would you say your own health is excellent, good, fair, or poor?" This variable is coded so that high values indicate better health. *Self-identifying as a person with a fertility problem* was measured by an affirmative answer to the question: "Do you think of yourself as someone who has, has had or might have trouble fathering a child?" compared to those who answered "no."

## RESULTS

Descriptive statistics for fathers and non-fathers are presented in Table 1. Most men in the sample have importance of fatherhood scores that were high or very high. This is true for both fathers and non-fathers but as we expected, fathers have higher importance of fatherhood ( $M = 3.50$ ) scores than non-fathers ( $M = 2.84$ ). Fewer than 10% of fathers gave responses indicating a low importance of fatherhood; the interquartile range clusters between 3 and 4, the highest scores of the scale. For non-fathers the interquartile range is larger, and the center spreads from about 2.5 to 3.5. The difference in the average importance of fatherhood scores between fathers and non-fathers is statistically significant. The smaller standard deviation among fathers than among non-fathers indicates consensus among fathers that being a father is important to them (see Figure 1).

Almost half the men said that success in their career is very important (47%), and more than a third said that leisure is very important (40%). Most of the men were employed full time (86%). Average education is close to three years of college ( $M = 14.88$ ), and economic hardship scores are quite low (1.47 on a scale from 1 to 4). The sample is predominantly White (76%), with Hispanic (12%) and Black men (7%) the next two largest groups. Because the religiosity scale is standardized it ranges from -2 to + 2. The mean for the sample ( $M = .02$ ) is near the center of the scale. About a third of the men (35%) endorsed non-egalitarian gender attitudes. The female partners of the men in this sample range in age from 25 to 45. Consistent with marital homogamy, the mean age of the men is 36.55 years old. Few men in the sample are cohabiting (3%), and few self-identify as having a fertility problem (14%).

Table 1  
*Descriptive Statistics for Variables in the Model by Fatherhood Status*

	Father <i>n</i> = 537		Not a Father <i>n</i> = 221		Total <i>n</i> = 758		Test Value <sup>a,b</sup> Sig.	
	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>		
Importance of fatherhood	3.50	.45	2.84	.81	3.31	.65	14.71 <sup>a</sup>	***
<i>Rational Choice / Economic Resources</i>								
Career very important	.47	.50	.47	.50	.47	.50	.05 <sup>b</sup>	
Leisure very important	.37	.48	.48	.50	.40	.49	8.91 <sup>b</sup>	**
<i>Employment status</i>								
Employed full time	.87	.34	.83	.37	.86	.35	1.97 <sup>b</sup>	
Employed part time	.02	.14	.05	.21	.03	.17	3.48 <sup>b</sup>	
Unemployed	.01	.11	.02	.12	.01	.11	.07 <sup>b</sup>	
Retired	.00	.02	.01	.07	.00	.04	2.41 <sup>b</sup>	
In school	.02	.14	.05	.21	.03	.16	5.10 <sup>b</sup>	*
Keeping house	.02	.13	.02	.13	.02	.13	.01 <sup>b</sup>	
Disabled, other	.03	.16	.01	.12	.02	.15	1.43 <sup>b</sup>	
Education in years	14.69	2.77	15.33	3.00	14.88	2.85	-2.83 <sup>a</sup>	**
Economic hardship	1.49	.72	1.43	.72	1.47	.72	.27 <sup>a</sup>	
<i>Culture and Identity</i>								
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>								
White	.76	.43	.79	.41	.76	.42	.87 <sup>b</sup>	
Hispanic	.13	.34	.08	.28	.12	.32	3.80 <sup>b</sup>	
Black	.07	.26	.05	.21	.07	.25	1.83 <sup>b</sup>	
Asian	.02	.15	.06	.24	.03	.18	5.10 <sup>b</sup>	*
Other Race	.02	.14	.02	.16	.02	.14	.18 <sup>b</sup>	
Religiosity	.13	.85	-.26	.89	.02	.88	5.56 <sup>a</sup>	***
Traditional gender Attitudes	2.11	.55	1.89	.51	2.05	.55	29.20 <sup>b</sup>	***
<i>Life course/Situational</i>								
Age	37.26	7.32	34.83	7.89	36.55	7.56	3.92 <sup>a</sup>	***
Married	.98	.15	.96	.20	.97	.17	3.44 <sup>b</sup>	
Cohabiting	.02	.15	.04	.20	.03	.17	3.44 <sup>b</sup>	
<i>Control Variables</i>								
Health	1.87	.67	1.83	.74	1.85	.69	.63 <sup>a</sup>	
Self-identify as infertile	.12	.32	.18	.39	.14	.34	.02 <sup>a</sup>	*

Note: <sup>a</sup> *t*-test <sup>b</sup> chi-square (Fisher's exact test).

National Survey of Fertility Barriers (NSFB), Male Partners, *N* = 932, weighted.

\**p* < .05 \*\**p* < .01 \*\*\**p* < .001.

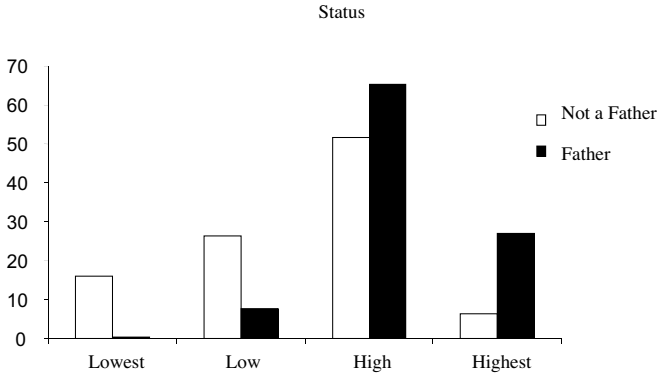


Figure 1. Percent of men by importance of fatherhood scores and fatherhood.

Fathers are less likely than non-fathers to say that leisure is very important to them (.37 vs .48). Fathers have lower education (14.69 vs 15.33 years), are less likely to be in school (.14 vs .21), are less likely to be Asian (.02 vs .06), are more religious (.13 vs -.26), are more likely to endorse non-egalitarian gender attitudes (2.11 vs 1.89), are older (37.26 vs 34.83 years) and are less likely to self-identify as having a fertility problem (.12 vs .18) than non-fathers. Having established a general picture of the sample and the differences between fathers and non-fathers, we next examine the associations between the indicators of economic, culture/identity and life course variables with importance of fatherhood.

The multiple regression analysis results are presented in Table 2. Model one shows the association between fatherhood status and importance of fatherhood. Model 2 displays results when economic, culture and identity, life course, and control variables are added to the analysis. Model 3 displays results with the interaction terms for fatherhood status and all other independent variables added.

Model 1 shows that fatherhood status alone explains 22% of the variance in importance of fatherhood scores. As expected, fathers have higher importance of fatherhood scores than non-fathers. The association remains positive, strong, and statistically significant when the other independent variables are added to the model. Model 2 shows that adding the remaining independent variables increases the adjusted R-square by 9% to 31%. This increase in explained variance indicates that importance of fatherhood is a function of more than fatherhood status alone. Five variables have statistically significant associations with importance of fatherhood in addition to fatherhood status: career being very important (beta = .15\*\*\*), Black race/ethnicity (beta = -.06\*), religiosity (beta = .20\*\*\*), age (beta = -.19\*\*\*), and self-identifying as having a fertility problem (beta = .09\*\*).

We anticipated that men who placed higher value on career success would also place higher value on fatherhood, and this expectation was supported. There is no main effect association between employment status, education or economic hardship and importance of fatherhood. Contrary to our expectations, there is no association between

Table 2  
*Multiple Regression of Importance of Fatherhood on Predictor Variables by Fatherhood Status*

	Model 1				Model 2				Model 3			
	B	SE	Beta	P	B	SE	Beta	P	B	SE	Beta	P
Father	.67	.05	.47	.000***	.64	.05	.45	.000***	.89	.06	.62	.000***
<i>Rational Choice/</i>												
<i>Economic Resources</i>												
Career very important					.20	.04	.15	.000***	.21	.04	.16	.000***
Leisure very important					-.05	.04	-.04	.281	-.05	.04	-.04	.234
Employed Part Time					-.15	.12	-.04	.225	-.25	.17	-.06	.157
x Father									.22	.24	.04	.356
Unemployed					-.28	.19	-.04	.146	-.23	.28	-.04	.420
x Father									.08	.37	.01	.827
Retired					-.32	.47	-.02	.501	-.85	.51	-.06	.097
x Father									1.29	1.08	.04	.234
In school					.16	.13	.04	.211	.50	.19	.12	.007**
x Father									-.75	.25	-.13	.003**
Keeping house					.14	.16	.03	.375	.15	.28	.03	.583
x Father									-.03	.33	.00	.934
Disabled					.02	.14	.00	.896	-.21	.30	-.05	.488
x Father									.25	.34	.05	.457
Years of Education					.01	.01	.06	.102	.02	.01	.07	.035*
Economic Hardship					.01	.03	.02	.632	.04	.03	.05	.134
<i>Culture and Identity</i>												
Hispanic					-.08	.07	-.04	.255	.11	.14	.05	.419
x Father									-.24	.15	-.11	.113
Black					-.17	.09	-.06	.046*	-.16	.18	-.06	.367
x Father									-.05	.20	-.02	.797
Asian					-.07	.12	-.02	.568	-.12	.16	-.03	.449
x Father									-.06	.22	-.01	.781
Other race/ethnicity					.11	.14	.02	.457	.45	.23	.10	.047*
x Father									-.43	.28	-.08	.124
Religiosity					.15	.03	.20	.000***	.15	.02	.21	.000***
Gender attitudes					.08	.05	.06	.077	.23	.09	.16	.015*
x Father									-.23	.10	-.16	.030*
<i>Life Course/Situational</i>												
Age					-.02	.00	-.19	.000***	-.04	.00	-.51	.000***
x Father									.04	.01	.39	.000***
Cohabiting					-.13	.13	-.03	.319	-.14	.12	-.04	.244
<i>Control Variables</i>												
Health					-.05	.03	-.05	.115	-.06	.03	-.06	.058
Self-identify a fertility problem					.16	.06	.09	.008**	.58	.10	.31	.000***
x Father									-.62	.12	-.26	.000***
Constant	2.84	.04		.000***	3.23	.19		.000***	4.02	.23		.000***
Adjusted R-square		.22				.31				.39		

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

importance of leisure and importance of fatherhood. Black men, however, do have the lowest and White men do have the highest importance of fatherhood scores, as expected. Religiosity has a positive and significant association with importance of fatherhood, but gender attitudes are not associated with importance of fatherhood scores. Contrary to our expectation, importance of fatherhood declines with age. As anticipated, self-identifying as having an infertility problem is associated with higher importance of fatherhood.

We assessed whether fatherhood status modifies the associations between the independent variables and importance of fatherhood one variable at a time and then included only the associations that were statistically significant in the final model. Adding the interactions between fatherhood status and the independent variables improved the explained variance by 8% to 39%. The employment status interactions indicate that men who are not fathers and are in school have higher importance of fatherhood scores ( $\beta = .12$ ) than full time employed men. Fathers in school, however, have importance of fatherhood scores that are similar to those of men employed full time ( $\beta = .12 + .13 = .01$ ). The association between non-egalitarian gender attitudes and importance of fatherhood is modest and positive for non-fathers ( $\beta = .16$ ), but there is no association for fathers ( $\beta = .16 - .16 = .00$ ). The association between age and importance of fatherhood is substantial and negative ( $\beta = .51^{***}$ ) for non-fathers, and much weaker for fathers ( $\beta = -.51 + .39 = -.12$ ). The association between self-identifying as having a fertility problem and importance of fatherhood is substantial and positive for non-fathers ( $\beta = .31^{***}$ ), but almost non-existent for fathers ( $\beta = .31 - .26 = .05$ ).

## DISCUSSION

The results presented here suggest that fatherhood is important in the lives of men; few men have low importance of fatherhood scores. In addition, these data suggest that our respondents view fatherhood as part of a “package deal” (Townsend, 2002). Rather than career and leisure competing with fatherhood, men tend to place great importance on all three, meaning that, while (at least some) men may face expectations for greater involvement in parenting and household labor, providing still appears central to the enactment of the father role and may be critical to maintaining the father identity. Our inquiry into the importance of fatherhood is built on a non-hierarchical formulation of identity theory that does not require the ranking of identities in relation to each other. Instead of asking respondents to rate the relative importance of various identities, we allow them to rate fatherhood, work, and leisure separately to determine *whether or not* they compete with each other, and we find that they do not compete.

We also assess which economic, culture/identity, and life course/situational factors are linked with importance of fatherhood for both fathers and non-fathers. We find that valuing leisure and career, espousing greater religiosity, embracing non-egalitarian values (for non-fathers), being married, being a father, being in poorer health, and self-identifying as having a fertility problem (for non-fathers) are all associated with higher importance of fatherhood scores. We also find that non-Hispanic White men report



higher importance of fatherhood scores than Black men. Cultural/identity and life course variables are as important, or more important, than economic variables in accounting for differences in importance of fatherhood.

We see a number of fruitful avenues for future research. First, we did not include all possible identities that might compete with fatherhood (especially “husband”), but future inquiries should use this non-hierarchical approach to do so. Second, including non-fathers in our analyses begins to redress the lack of knowledge about men who are not fathers outside of the study of infertility, but it will be important to study non-fathers over time to see how life course events may shape the importance of fatherhood in their lives. Finally, because it is possible for men to value more than one identity highly, the next investigative step would be to determine if placing high importance on two or more identities means that men would put a great deal of (or even equal) energy into behaviors associated with enacting each identity.

It seems clear from other work that father identity is linked to parental involvement (see, for example, DeGarmo, 2010), but it is not always clear how fathers are conceptualizing the role when they report on its importance (Habib & Lancaster, 2006). Are they referring to having, supporting, providing care for children, demonstrating virility (or some combination of these) when they say they place great importance on fatherhood? In this study, we have no measures of the meaning of fatherhood and therefore cannot assess precisely what men mean when they say that fatherhood is important. Future research should clarify which dimensions of fatherhood are salient for particular men and under which circumstances.

Fatherhood should also be examined in relation to motherhood, particularly because the couple context seems to shape the importance of fatherhood for men (Cook et al., 2005; Henley & Pasley, 2005; Rane & McBride, 2000) and because meanings of motherhood have also shifted in the last several decades. Although women are often depicted as making “hard choices” between work and motherhood (Blair-Loy, 2001; Gerson, 1985; Williams, 2000), McQuillan et al. (2008) find that women place a high value on both, just as men do. So, for both men and women, importance of career is positively associated with importance of parenthood. Despite this similarity, there is still significant asymmetry in “parenting” for men and women, as it is often assumed that women (rather than men) will be primary caregivers (Williams, 2000). Are we, then, capturing a different dimension of parenting (“having” for men vs. “raising” for women) when we ask about the importance of fatherhood and motherhood in people’s lives? If so, to what extent is that changing as men become more directly involved in their children’s lives? Finally, as some men embrace both paid work and increased caregiving obligations, what happens to their identities? For example, do they find greater emotional balance in their lives, and does valuing fatherhood provide psychic protections against the vagaries of the marketplace? These questions suggest that future research should focus on the relational dynamics within parental pairs to better understand how heterosexual couples assign importance to motherhood and fatherhood.

Although we believe our findings point fatherhood research in many fruitful directions, we must be cautious in interpreting the results presented here. First, the sample includes only cohabiting and married men; it is possible that these social contexts raise

the importance of fatherhood for men and that scores for single, non-cohabiting men would be lower. Further, though the men in this sample are partners of a nationally-representative sample of U.S. women of childbearing age, only 47% of eligible partners responded, and it is likely that the men who participated are more interested in fatherhood than the men who did not participate as the survey focused on family choices.

The use of cross-sectional data severely limits our ability to understand the dynamic relationship between fatherhood status and the importance of fatherhood. We do not know at this point whether those who place less importance on fatherhood are less likely to become fathers or whether becoming a father leads men to place more importance on fatherhood. Wave 2 of the NSFB should allow us to begin to address this issue as well as to disentangle cohort from aging effects. Exploring the dynamics that shape the importance of fatherhood is a fruitful area for research, but much remains to be done.

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