Recent research on fatherhood and families, as well as sociocultural developments of the last decade, have highlighted the critical role that fathers play in their children’s development; the multidimensional nature of father involvement; the importance of the mother-father relationship in creating a positive and healthy environment for children; from a policy perspective, these developments have begun to question policies that focus solely on fathers’ provisioning role [for a review see Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000]. One of the consequences of this extensive body of work is the blurring between biology and social prescriptions of fatherhood, thus challenging Margaret Mead’s assertion that ‘motherhood is a biological necessity, but fatherhood is a social invention’.

Research is needed to answer the questions regarding who are fathers? What do they do? How are they involved with their children? How is their involvement related to children’s development? What are the barriers they face to be the fathers they would like to be? Studies on how fathers’ relationships with their partners mediate their involvement with, and impact on, their children’s well-being have been accumulating since the 1960s. The early body of research focused mainly on fathers in two-parent families, with an emphasis on middle-class families, and hence, provided an empirical data base that generally excluded low-income and minority men. On-going studies of the last decade have begun to remedy this situation by focusing on fathers in low-income and minority families [Cabrera, Brooks-Gunn, Moore, West, Boller, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2002; Coley, 2002; Johnson, 2001]. This challenging research is showing important similarities and differences between poor and middle class fathers. Among an array of findings, this work high-

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lights the need to understand within-group variation in middle-class families as well as examine broad generalizations about how low-income families function.

As a field builds knowledge, it produces answers to old questions but also stimulates new ones and points to new foci of research. There is consistent and accumulating evidence that men would like to be involved with their children and that children who have positively involved fathers are better adjusted and have better life outcomes than those whose fathers are not involved [Lamb, in press]. There is robust evidence showing that fathers’ emotional investment in, attachment to, and provision of resources for their children are associated with the well-being, cognitive development, and social competence of young children even after the effects of family income, neonatal health, maternal involvement, and paternal age are taken into account [Amato & Rivera, 1999]. Although there is some evidence suggesting the positive father involvement is also beneficial for men’s own development, this area is in need of much exploration.

One of the emerging questions coming out of the existing research on fathers is what happens to men’s development as they become fathers? This is an important question and answering it not only will add to our understanding of adult male development, but it will also provide insight into relevant questions: What is a good father? How do fathers get involved with their children over time? How do men think about their roles as fathers and their impact on their children? These questions are at the core of Rob Palkovitz’s book entitled *Involved Fathering and Men’s Adult Development: Provisional Balances*. This is a timely contribution to the field because it focuses on the developmental changes that men undergo as they embark in the parental journey. With scholarly insight, commitment, and a keen personal understanding of the challenges, costs, and opportunities of being a father, Palkovitz provides a conceptually-sound account of what happens to men as they become parents, and describes the challenges, joys, fears and frustrations as well as the provisional balances involved in being a father today. In this essay I first review Palkovitz’s basic premise for the book and his methodological approach. Next, I discuss key themes and implications of what Palkovitz’s men say about being a dad, and end with some concluding thoughts about where his research might take us.

**Palkovitz’s Premise and Methodology**

Palkovitz’s book is based on the premise that fathers are different from non-fathers and that the effects on parenting on adult development are virtually unknown. He rightly points out that we know most about infancy, childhood, adolescence, and senescence, relatively little about middle-age and least about developmental change during young adulthood. Of course, it is during young adulthood when most people make the transition to parenthood. (Palkovitz does not focus on people who make the transition to parenthood in their teens or in old age.) He argues that the existing research on the transition to parenthood characterizes it as a short-term adjustment and does not consider its long-term and cumulative effects. The lack of knowledge on this topic provides the key rationale for the substance of this study as well as for the choice of methodology, a qualitative approach.

A general criticism of the work on fathers is that in the absence of a theoretical understanding of how paternal involvement affects child development as well as a
paucity of psychometrically sound measures of father involvement, most research has used a maternal template to examine what fathers do. This approach potentially misses unique dimensions of fathering. Hence, starting with a qualitative study to explore what fathers think of their role as fathers is scientifically the right starting point as it would provide the raw material with which to construct more appropriate research tools. Palkovitz’s sample design and instrumentation allow for an in-depth understanding, in men’s own voices, of the process involved in becoming a father. These data generate useful insights and rich hypotheses that can guide other researchers interested in examining how parenting provides a unique context for adult development.

**Men as Fathers: Themes and Implications**

The book is organized into five sections, each consisting of a series of chapters. The first section, entitled *Foundations for Understanding Fathering and Development* includes chapters that focus on theory, explain the research plan, detail how men construct the fathering role and what it means to be a dad today, and examine fathering from a life course perspective. Although not evident at first glance, this life-course framework essentially organizes the book, with each section focusing on a particular aspect of development, that is, the self, social, and work domains. The section on the self domain examines the emotional aspect of fathering, the faith or religious affiliations of fathers, and examines issues related to men’s attitudes toward health. The section on the social domain details the balance between being a husband and a father and examines relationships with relatives, friends, and members of the community. The section on the work domain explores the balancing act between having a family and being a worker. The last section of the book entitled *Summary, Evaluations, and Applications*, includes a cost-benefit analysis of being an involved father and examines how men find provisional balances among the many roles placed on them.

Although the chapters in each section do not follow a similar format, they are well laid out and generally follow a clear outline. For example, Chapter 1 offers a comprehensive review of the literature and lays the theoretical foundation for the study. Palkovitz explains the utility of using a life-course approach which considers multiple and interdependent trajectories. He writes that ‘[t]he developmental trajectories of separate domains (e.g. self, social, and work) may be modified in noticeably different manners by the same level of father involvement’ [p. 20]. And ‘[b]ecause it is constrained by time and energy expenditures, father involvement is mutually influenced by and exerts influence on concurrent investments in other trajectories (e.g. work, marriage, community involvement)’ [p. 20].

Palkovitz is careful not to endorse all father involvement as positive. He briefly explains that ‘more is not always better’ and that there are situations where less rather than more involvement is better for families. However, issues of domestic violence, substance abuse and mental health are very prevalent across socioeconomic groups, especially among poor families, where these are intertwined with issues related to poverty and isolation. It would have been useful to take this opportunity to discuss in a little more detail how these negative issues – domestic and community violence and poverty – are related to fathering, especially to thresholds
of good fathering. In most situations, ‘good fathering’ lies along a continuum and is dependent on external circumstances (e.g. divorce, loss of employment, loss of spouse, etc.). While a discussion of the chronicity of these ailments would have been outside the scope of this book, an examination of how men struggle on a daily basis to be better fathers would give the reader a deeper understanding of the dynamic process of being a father.

Palkovitz also offers an insightful analysis of the empirical findings supporting the relationship between parental involvement and adult outcomes. Compared to married non-fathers, married fathers show more maturity and psychological health. Parenthood is believed to have an effect on adults’ maturity, operationalized in terms of integration and differentiation of the self. Longitudinal data suggest that varying patterns of paternal involvement differentially relate to men’s status during midlife. However, these studies are generally based on middle-class samples of men in two-parent families. We do not know what these processes mean for men who experience short-term or chronic poverty, are teens, or have diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. For example, how does parental involvement under hardship conditions affect men’s maturity? Many nonresident fathers are mandated to pay child support but cannot visit their children. How does this type of ‘involvement’ affect their development? Moreover, there are ‘social dads’ who fulfill their own generative needs by fathering other people’s children. How do these empirical findings apply to men who are not biologically related to their children?

The conceptual model of father involvement that Palkovitz lays out clearly and comprehensively emerges from the theoretical literature he reviews. Father involvement is influenced by and, in turn, influences other roles in which men engage. Presumably, although it is not stated in Palkovitz’s model, father involvement begins with the birth of one’s child when the transition to parenthood takes place. However, there are some studies suggesting that men’s behaviors prior to the transition into parenthood play an important role in shaping father involvement, and ultimately child outcomes. For example, fertility behavior, whether the birth was planned and the timing of the birth have been linked to paternal involvement [Axinn, Barber, & Thornton, 1998]. These behaviors – wanting a child or not – and the underlying motives have yet to be incorporated into models of father involvement.

In Chapter 2, Palkovitz offers a clear explanation of the sample design and methodology used in this study. The sample for this study includes 40 men recruited through newspaper ads in a suburban area in the eastern United States. The sample was diverse, although it did not include Hispanics, Asians, or teens, and included men who ranged in age from 21 to 45 years of age. Palkovitz notes that one of the limitations of the study is that the sample is biased toward responsible, involved fathers – all men he interviewed perceived themselves to be involved and hence are not representative of all fathers. The sample is also biased in another way. The men self-select into the study and hence are not representative of all involved fathers in the eastern United States. The reasons why these men decided to participate in this study may in part account for the findings. In essence, this sample is rich enough to generate hypotheses but we must keep in mind that if the sample had included Latinos, Asian, Native Americans, or teen dads, the answers to the questions most likely would have been different.
Palkovitz summarizes historical trends in fatherhood in Chapter 3. He focuses on the contemporary roles of fathers and quotes Lewis and O’Brien [1987], who strongly state that the ‘heterogeneity of fathering roles … invalidates general statements about the father’ [cited in Palkovitz, p. 36]. With this caveat, we are left with a large number of roles that contemporary fathers engage in. But the absence of a discussion of culture and poverty make it easier for the reader to forget the warning and assume that fathers are a homogenous group. For example, take the role of the provider. Palkovitz finds that although the good provider role is still central to men’s accounts of fatherhood, it is in transition. He cites many studies supporting the fact that men see their roles as fathers to include more than the provider role. But data coming out from qualitative studies of poor men suggest that for these men the role of the provider is the most important one [Nelson, Clampet-Lundquist, & Edin, 2002]. If they cannot provide for their families economically, they do not want to or cannot be involved in any other way [Nelson et al., 2002]. In fact, their partners or the mothers of their children in the classic ‘If you don’t pay, you can’t stay’ scenario will prevent them from playing any other role. Hence, hardship and economic vulnerability encourage some types of father involvement more than others do. This is also true of how public policies set priorities for low-income men. The most regulated form of father involvement is child support. In fact, in many states child support is not linked to visitation. Clearly, men’s emotional relationship to his children is neither seen important nor is it encouraged.

In Chapter 4, Palkovitz applies a life course approach to his data and shows that men articulate several key themes about being a father. Fatherhood has changed them because they are more settled down, have become less self-centered, and more giving. Fathering, Palkovitz reports, entails major responsibility and generativity, and may be experienced as a jolt to the system. It expresses itself in divergent pathways, and it precipitates life-course alternatives. Through in-depth probing, these men are confident that their changes in personality and life outlook are brought about by fathering rather than by other life circumstances.

Chapters 5 through 13 describe in detail how Palkovitz’s fathers feel that engagement in fathering has shaped the development of the self, social, and work domains. Fathers can articulate the joy, anger, and frustrations involved in being a father. It is interesting that although these men acknowledge the challenges and the negative aspect of parenting, they say that the positive side of parenting outweighs the negative. Moreover, they understand that the uniqueness of these feelings – no other person or situation can evoke the same level emotional intensity and magnitude – is experienced because they are fathers. This sense of reward and joy is reflected in how men feel about themselves physically and emotionally. For example, Palkovitz reports that some men in his study vowed to have a better diet, exercise more, and lead a healthier life style because they are aware that they need to be good role models for their children. On the other hand, some fathers say that they would like to exercise but cannot find the time or energy. Again, we need to keep in mind economic class and cultural issues when interpreting these findings. Access to health care is a big issue for low-income families; even those men who work do not always have access to adequate health care and other benefits such as family leave. For example, many small companies are not mandated to provide health benefits to their employees. Having shift work or more than one job can be very stressful and jeopardize men’s health. Consequently, these fathers may have poor health regardless of
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their desire to be healthy. In general, however, these reports support general findings that men in marriages are healthier than men who are single or divorce. Something about being married (and having children) helps men stay in better health.

Many men in Palkovitz’s sample articulate, quite eloquently, the balance (and struggle) between being a father and a husband. Having children places a strain on marriages and many marriages do not survive. Involved fathers report more stress, more fatigue, and less time with partners. It is a noticeable change to the family system to go from a world where adults are the center of attention to one where the children take this role. The transition is difficult for many couples and anecdotal evidence suggests that keeping relationships intact and nurtured while negotiating parenthood takes time, energy, and planning. This struggle is common to all couples across socioeconomic groups. It is exacerbated, however, by added stress endemic to those who live in poverty.

In addition to finding equilibrium within the immediate family, Palkovitz’s men felt that relationships with their and their partners’ parents and relatives can be a source of strength but also stress. In his sample, most of the men reported negative feelings about their own fathers and made firm promises to be better than their own fathers had been to them. They experienced physical or emotional neglect or abuse and feelings of abandonment. However, at the same time these men felt that they understood and appreciated their parents’ efforts. These two opposing feelings, Palkovitz argues, provides a balance and sets a positive context for the ongoing relationship between men and his relatives. The resolution of the conflict between men and their own fathers is not always this easily achieved. This is another example where Palkovitz’s select sample might be obscuring the variation of this issue among all men. In many instances, these issues are not resolved in one’s lifetime; rather for men the struggle to forgive and understand one’s parents is constant.

Since fathers exist only because of relationships, in a less obvious but equally important way, men’s involvement with their families is shaped by the type of employment they have. The balance between work and family is key to a man’s sense of paternal responsibility because both compete for their time and attention. Although for many parents issues of child care and family time are important considerations in choosing employment [Presser, 1989], many men have jobs that are inflexible, have shift work, and work for employers who view child care and child management as mainly mothers’ responsibility. Palkovitz’s men report the tension between wanting to work more to provide for their families and wanting to work less to spend more time with their children. An interesting dichotomy in attitudes toward work and commitment to work is found between those fathers who are less well off and those who have economic means. Fathers who have a higher income and more education pare down their work commitments and willingly get on the ‘daddy track’ to spend more time with their children. The opposite is true for those fathers who are low-income. This dichotomy speaks to the fact that although men play many roles within their families, the way they prioritize these roles is a function of their own unique and individual circumstances. An interesting omission from the discussion of how men view work is fathers’ views for the future. Part of being a provider is ensuring the economic prosperity of your family not just now in the present, but also in the future. How do men build wealth? How they ensure that their families will be well taken care in the event of an unexpected accident or
death? How do men make provisions for college or retirement? These issues add another layer of concern and perhaps stress as men balance the needs of the present and those of the future.

The book ends with a very uplifting note – no matter the cost, Palkovitz’ men say, fatherhood is worth it. The men report that being a father brings intrinsic joy as they watch their children grow into adults; makes them feel proud of their children’s accomplishments but also of external praises they hear about their children; gives life a special meaning; and provides a rich context for personal growth – they are better men because of their relationships with their children. The costs of being a father include the usual suspects: lack of time, sacrifices in the work place, lack of energy, marital stress, spreading too thin to play so many roles, and the fact that children grow up and leave the nest. However, when asked to weigh the costs vs. the benefits, all the men said that the costs were minimal in comparison of what they get from their children. These are wonderful confessions. When all is considered, most men love being dads and they wouldn’t trade this job for any other.

But if this study is to guide researchers to understand how men become fathers, then at the very least it would have been useful to speculate on how this cost and benefit analysis would look like, given our current knowledge on these issues, for men who are outside the main stream. Mental health issues, conflicting relationships with the mothers of their children and their own families, unemployment, alcohol and substance abuse combine to create formidable challenges for these men and their families. Which men are least likely to afford the ‘cost’ of being a father? How do poor, teen, and minority dads weigh the cost and benefits of being a dad? Is there room for intervention to help them afford the cost? When a father is unemployed and your child is clamoring for a pair of new sneakers, it is difficult to imagine the benefits of being a father. When men cannot fulfill what they view as their primary role, the costs might outweigh the benefits.

**Conclusion**

In general, *Involved Fathering and Men’s Adult Development: Provisional Balances*, is a wonderful, creative and important contribution to the research on fathers. It offers important lessons both substantively and methodologically. The commitment, patience, thoughtfulness, and special skills required to conduct a rigorous qualitative study cannot be understated. This important step, for a variety of reasons, is missing from many studies on fathers. Understanding what fathers say about their own development rather than relying on third party informants, mainly mothers, will lead to great epistemological dividends. We need similar studies that focus on other samples of men so that we can begin to get a picture of how different types of men develop their paternal credentials.

Palkovitz’s study highlights important themes and I only regret not reading about his thoughts on how to take these themes/ideas and turn them into next steps or directions for research, policy, and practice. The themes that resonated with me include: men’s understanding and construction of the costs and benefits of being a dad; the ways in which men keep a balance among the various roles they play given the diverse and conflicting demands placed by many roles; and the manner
in which men abstract meaning from being a dad. The cost vs. benefit analysis is an important issue because as I alluded to earlier, there are many men who are in no position, psychologically or financially, to pay the cost although they may want to. For these men, the experience of fathering may not lead to maturity and self-development. Instead, it might be viewed more as a burden and may lead some men to forfeit it and abandon their children. A similar argument can be made for the issue of striving to balance the different demands in your life. Even for middle-class families, who enjoy economic well-being and can purchase more commodities (child care, vacations, health care) to improve their lives, this is a constant struggle that can swing the pendulum between being an effective parent and being ineffective. How do these processes look like for other men? Where should we look next?

Although the implications of this study are not specifically outlined in the book, it is easy to envision the many ways in which this book can help researchers, practitioners, and policy makers engage in more insightful endeavors. For example, Palkovitz’ men are committed to their children, experience personal growth, understand the cost of being a father, and do not see themselves as secondary parents but rather as co-parents. As we design our next studies, it will be important to include fathers’ voices to relate how fatherhood is changing them, what are the challenges and opportunities they face, and how they become the fathers they want to be. In fact, Palkovitz’s findings make a strong case that studies that use other informants to assess the impact of paternal involvement on children have serious limitations and cannot expand our knowledge base. Similarly, we cannot exclude mothers’ voices. Data gathered from men about the process of fatherhood will shed light into how, that is, the mechanism by which father involvement influences child development. This is an important next step because to date most studies on fatherhood are correlational in nature. Moreover, Palkovitz’s study provides evidence that fathering is not a passive process; the process of fathering has profound effects on men themselves and important implications for children. How does fathering alter men’s developmental trajectories? From a policy perspective, Palkovitz’s study emphasizes the need to provide services and intervention for men that are tailor-made and take into account their unique conditions. His study provides evidence that for some men being a father can be the most important instigator of change. Men want to do right by their children. We can no longer assume that men, including low-income men, who do not pay child support do not care about their children. This might be the case for a group of men, but perhaps not for the majority. We owe it to the men, the children and their families to devise polices that help them fulfill the many paternal roles they wish instead of assuming that their economic contribution is the only way of loving their children.

References


