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Abstract

In this article, the authors examine how low-income Black men in South Africa and the United States work with their kin to secure fathering and ensure the well-being of children. They use ethnographic and life history data on men who fathered children from 1992 to 2005 to demonstrate how fathers' roles as kin workers enable them to meet culturally defined criteria for responsible fatherhood in two contexts marked by legacies of racism, increasing rates of incarceration and HIV/AIDS, and a web of interlocking inequalities that effectively precludes them from accessing employment with good wages. Using a comparative framework based on kin work, the authors identify three common processes in both contexts—negotiation between maternal and paternal kin, pedifocal approach, and flexible fathering—that enable men and their kin networks to secure father involvement in economically marginalized communities. The article concludes with a discussion of the policy implications of the findings.

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Recent scholarship on fathering has placed emphasis on cross-cultural variation in parenting (Lamb, 2010; Morrell & Richter, 2006; Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 2002). However, there is a long-standing tradition of examining cultural similarities between African and African American families, dating to the works of Herskovits (1941) and Woodson (1936). Decades later, social inequalities found globally still disproportionately affect men of color in similar ways and undermine their abilities to meet their fathering responsibilities (Jarrett, Roy, & Burton, 2002; Roy, 2008). The role of kin is central to understanding both. Although the cultural norms shaping the role of kin in child rearing may vary across context, social and economic inequalities have made kin critical in supporting fathering in marginalized communities globally. In this sense, a comparative analysis of fathering in low-income Black communities affords the opportunity to examine how marginalized men and their kin in different contexts respond to similar forms of inequality that are found globally.

In this article, we draw on ethnographic data from one rural community in South Africa and life history data collected in two cities in the United States to answer the following question: How do fathers and kin work together to support fathering among low-income Black men in South Africa and the United States? The case for comparison rests on the fact that the experiences of Black men in both contexts have been fundamentally shaped not only by structural inequalities that have affected their abilities to be successful fathers but also by cultural norms that challenge hegemonic norms of family formation and fathering. Indeed, Collins (1998) has suggested that there is merit in comparing the effects of capitalism on Black family life in the United States and South Africa. The analysis presented here advances our thinking about how cross-cultural variation in fathering intersects with global patterns of social inequality.

What Is Responsible Fatherhood?

In most societies, achievement of adult male status is reflected in the ability to have and support children (Marsiglio & Pleck, 2004). Black men in the United States and South Africa have been assessed according to ideals of a “hegemonic masculinity” based on the experiences of White, middle class, heterosexual men (Connell, 1995). This model sees financial provision and

coresidence with children as the key markers of successful fatherhood (Christiansen & Palkovitz, 2001). However, these criteria have been challenged in the literature in both the United States and South African contexts. Low-income and middle-class men of color in both societies aspire to be providers and caregivers (Jarrett et al., 2002) but they encounter unique challenges leaving them, according to Hunter (2006), “fathers without *amandla* [Zulu word for power].” In apartheid South Africa, Black men had little choice but to migrate away from their homes to find employment (Ramphela & Richter, 2006). In the postindustrial context, wage labor relegates poor African American men to sources of contingent labor that may be outsourced to relocated businesses outside of major urban communities (Wilson, 1996). Moreover, decades of harassment and discrimination against Black men by law enforcement, courts of law, or employers have marginalized the efforts of fathers as providers in both contexts (Griswold, 1993; McClintock, 1995).

Black men in South Africa and the United States transition in and out of residence with their children as a result of cultural norms and economic pressures, both of which influence union formation and stability. Multiple sets of residential and nonresidential children complicate men’s parenting responsibilities in the United States (Manning, Stewart, & Smock, 2003) as it does in postapartheid South Africa. In 2002, 55% of rural Black children in South Africa were not living with their fathers (Posel & Devey, 2006). In the United States, 48% of Black children were not living with their fathers (Fields, 2003). Although these men are not completely absent from their children’s lives (Coles & Green, 2009), increasing rates of fathers and mothers having children with multiple partners often stresses households and places children’s well-being at risk (Harknett & Knab, 2007). In the postapartheid context, increasing rates of unemployment among Black men have made it increasingly difficult to solidify relationships resulting in a pattern of serial or concurrent unions with different women. The total unemployment rate for the country stood at 27% in 2002 but Black unemployment was at 40% (Bhorat, 2007). However, previous work in South Africa (Madhavan, Townsend, & Garey, 2008) and in the United States (Roy, 2004) found that most children have received some support from their fathers throughout their lives.

Although financial provision is included in the criteria for responsible fatherhood in both South African and U.S. contexts, it is not the sole or, in the case of young fathers, the most important factor by which fathers are judged. Men disadvantaged by racial, ethnic, or class inequalities may reject privileged avenues to manhood as described above and instead craft different ways to “be a man” in both contexts (Morrell, 2001; Staples, 1982). Acceptance of paternity, while fraught with insecurity, is considered to be a sign of

responsibility in both contexts. However, in the U.S. context, Anderson (1993) has noted that kin might feel some ambivalence about men accepting legal paternity when the future of the couple relationship is not clear. In the South African context, on the other hand, paternity acknowledgment is almost always preferred by extended kin. In the United States, norms for contemporary fatherhood appear to be shifting toward integration of provider expectations with expectations for caregiving (LaRossa, 1997). Such alternative perspectives on masculinities may emerge alongside the efforts of many Black families to create flexible roles for men who can serve as biological and social fathers without biological ties (Jarrett et al., 2002; Swartz & Bhana, 2009). For Black fathers in South Africa, responsible fatherhood includes providing the child with role model(s) and social capital, emotional support, and most important, love and care (Morrell, 2006). In addition, fathers are expected to help solidify the child's kin identity, which in the case of the patrilineal Tsonga examined in this analysis, refers to the father's family. All these things can be and, in some cases, should be, provided by adults other than the biological father.

Kin Work and Fathering

Our conceptual framework is anchored in the situated practice of *kin work*, defined as the work that members of a family do to keep the kin group functioning over time (Stack & Burton, 1993). It includes wage and nonwage work, intergenerational care of children or dependents, and family migration and migratory labor. The kin group includes immediate, extended, and fictive kin. Kin systems in Black communities in South Africa and the United States do not simply adapt to crises; they also reflect cultural markers of family strength and resilience (McDaniel, 1990; Sudarska, 1981). In both contexts, a combination of need and cultural preference has resulted in a "socially distributed model of child rearing" (Serpell, 1993). In the African American context, grandmothers are key caregivers in the absence of parents (Pearson, Hunter, Ensinger, & Kellam, 1990) and are highly respected as sources of wisdom and social support generally. Other male figures, namely, grandfathers and uncles, take on the role of social fathers to children whose own fathers may be unemployed, incarcerated, or in some other circumstance that would inhibit effective fathering (Richardson, 2009) or not coresident with their mothers (Jayakodi & Kalil, 2002). Others have highlighted the role of cultural traditions that encourage fluid and nontraditional role for adult members as another reason for the high prevalence of social fathering in African American communities (Billingsley, 1992). Finally, the

role of policy shapes kin involvement in the United States, where child custody is more circumscribed by legal rights than informal negotiations, and the mother's participation in welfare system is influenced in part through her relationships with the father of her children. Therefore, kin might actively discourage women from cohabiting but may encourage fathers' participation in other ways (Roy & Burton, 2007).

In many Black communities in South Africa, various kin members take on particular parenting roles ranging from formal education to moral guidance even when biological fathers are coresident with the child (Mkhize, 2006). Unlike the U.S. context, kin involvement is affected by the payment of bride-wealth by the husband's family to the bride's and the acknowledgement of paternity through damage payments made to the family of young women for impregnating them. Men's kin are more likely to be involved in childrearing when bride-wealth negotiations have been initiated or, at a minimum, when "damage payment" has been made by a man's family to a woman's family to formally acknowledge paternity and assume some responsibility for the child. Even though the Tsonga are patrilineal, maternal uncles maintain a special relationship with their nephews and nieces throughout their lives (Junod, 1962). This relationship is marked not only by deep affection and respect but also by a sense of loyalty on the part of an uncle to the children of his sister. In this sense, this relationship is unique among the network of parenting links. Whereas maternal uncles do not see themselves or are seen as substitutes for biological fathers, their involvement in child rearing, in the best of circumstances, would be encouraged by fathers as a sign of a functioning relationship between kin groups. A child's maternal and paternal grandmothers are also key figures in the network though their roles are somewhat different. Given that so many children are raised in their mothers' families, maternal grandmothers tend to be more involved in day-to-day care whereas paternal grandmothers offer advice and financial support. The role of kin in child rearing does not absolve fathers of responsibility but does shift the focus of fathering from an exclusively individualistic to a more communal approach to fathering. Furthermore, the absence of kin in child rearing would be cause for concern because it undermines efforts to strengthen a child's kin identity.

Research Sites

The South African research was conducted in the Agincourt subdistrict of Mpumalanga Province in the northeastern part of the country. The area is typical of much of South and southern Africa in three important respects:

The land is insufficient to support the population through subsistence agriculture or other local activities, there are very few local employment opportunities, and the population has high levels of migration and mobility. Unemployment in Mpumalanga was at 30%, with the rate for Black men even higher (Statistics South Africa, 2007). This means that men (and increasingly women) need to seek employment in towns and cities that are a considerable distance from the villages in which they live. The research in the United States was conducted in Chicago and Indianapolis, Midwestern cities that received thousands of migrants from sharecropping families during the Great Migration. These families lived in highly segregated low-income communities with up to twice the poverty rate of other neighborhoods in the respective cities. Neighborhoods in both cities suffered local effects of broader changes in the postindustrial economy as it affected traditional industrial sector jobs and employers who abandoned Illinois and Indiana's Black Belt. Unemployment rates for Black men in Chicago more than doubled to 29% by 1982 and, in these neighborhoods, rates remained high through the end of the 1990s, ranging from 15% to 26% (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000).

Data and Methods

In both data sets, we used turning 18 years old before or after 1990 to classify older and younger cohorts of men. In South Africa, 1990 signified the dismantling of apartheid and the opening up of new opportunities in education and employment (though unemployment remained high). In the United States, the new decade marked the rapid growth of the prison industrial complex and the dismantling of economic assistance for low-income families. In both data sets, we focus on fathers who had at least one child born after 1992 for two reasons: (a) to avoid the problems of comparing different life stages of children and (b) to minimize recall error associated with the description of events that occurred in the distant past.

The South African data come from the Children's Well-Being and Social Connections (CWSC) study conducted in 2002 in the Agincourt subdistrict of Mpumalanga province. The CWSC study was designed to study a number of groups of socially connected households to examine the full range of children's social connections and the effects of those connections on their well-being. We selected 13 children from 2 villages and collected data on the "contact group" of each of these children over a 4-month period. We found, on average, contact groups were made up of 6 to 7 households resulting in an extensive array of information on 89 households and about 650 individuals.

Among this group are 119 men who had at least 1 child between 1992 and 2002. Removing 4 men with insufficient data, we are left with 115 fathers of whom 59 turned 18 before 1990 and 56 after. Data on these men come in the forms of lifetime residence and support histories for their children, kinship diagrams, and discussions with them and their kin.

For the U.S. data, 89 African American fathers were interviewed over the course of 4 projects conducted between 1998 and 2004 in Indianapolis and Chicago. Young low-income fathers were recruited from community-based fathering programs, life skills programs in a work release correctional facility, and a child care center. Some were mandated to participate in these programs by child support courts, and others voluntarily enrolled. Their efforts to become more involved with their children and to access employment training and placement, parenting classes, educational, housing, and drug treatment referrals, and coparental counseling distinguished them in some ways from their peers who were not involved in such a program. Retrospective life histories were used to gather insight into how men gave meaning to life events that affected their abilities to act as providers and caregivers for their children. Fathers were also asked to discuss timing and sequencing of transitions and life events, such as changes in family structure, residential movement, and shifts in paternal involvement across multiple families; these were recorded on calendar grids. Out of the 89 men, 82 men who had at least 1 child born after 1992, 34 turned 18 years old before 1990 and 48 turned 18 years old after 1990. The remaining 7 did not have a child born after 1992.

Even though the data from the two sites were not in the same format, we were able to apply a comparable coding schema to each. We used a modified grounded theory approach and conducted multiple waves of coding: (a) to identify themes related to kin network strategies for shaping men's roles as fathers, (b) to compare and contrast profiles across data sets to examine processes identified during open coding, and (c) to select patterns within and across cases to describe a range of common processes that enable successful fathering through the practice of kin work. All identities have been protected through the use of pseudonyms.

The Practice of Kin Work

In keeping with the comparative framework presented earlier, we have identified three core processes common to *both* contexts that have emerged from our data analysis: (a) negotiations between maternal and paternal kin, (b) pedifocal approach, and (c) flexible fathering. We present illustrative vignettes of context-specific strategies that men and kin employ in each set-

ting that address each of these processes. They include fathers from both the younger and older cohorts (using the 1990 cutoff described earlier). Our examples are not meant to be mutually exclusive but rather were chosen because each emphasizes particular elements. Even though we only present six vignettes, we provide some sense of how common each strategy is in the respective communities.

Negotiation Between Maternal and Paternal Kin

From our data, it is clear that young men's efforts to nurture their children are supported by their own kin (paternal kin) and the kin of the mother of their children (maternal kin). It is understood that young men are not ready, emotionally or financially, to take on fathering responsibilities. Young fathers, young mothers, and both sets of kin negotiate everything from the everyday necessities of diapers, food, clothes, and medicine to intangibles, such as future obligations of children to kin. The success of such negotiations in both contexts depend on several key factors—residential proximity of the various kin, extent of trust in the other group's ability to care for a child, perception of the relationship between the man and the mother of the child, and, in cases where the union has dissolved, the attitude of the man's new partner toward the child. Young unmarried fathers would also be more likely to be living with their own parents who would exercise substantial influence over the process of parenting (Roy & Vesely, 2009), which inevitably leads to conflict (Swartz & Bhana, 2009). However, as the following examples of Fortunate from South Africa and Andre from the United States demonstrate, such negotiations are essential to securing a young man's status as a father.

When we met Fortunate in 2002, he was 21 years old and in his last year of secondary school. He lived with his mother, maternal grandparents, maternal uncle and his family, and Bongani, his "wife," as he referred to her even though no formal marriage had occurred. He also had a 2-year-old daughter with Bongani who had moved into Fortunate's household after the birth of the baby. Since Fortunate was still in school and not employed, his daughter was financially supported by Fortunate's maternal grandparents (the child's paternal kin) and by the child's maternal grandparents who live in the same village. There are differing assessments of the division of financial responsibility. Whereas Fortunate's grandmother claimed that she paid for everything, the child's maternal grandmother countered that the other side had never given any money toward the payment of day care fees as they had agreed on. It should also be noted that Bongani's father

never approved of Bongani's relationship with Fortunate and was angry when she got pregnant. This undoubtedly influenced the level of involvement of maternal kin.

However, Fortunate's acknowledgment of paternity and a statement of intent to marry served to ease tension. Fortunate was coresident with his daughter until he finished school and then left to work as a security guard in a large town a few hours away. Given the staggering unemployment rates that young men face, he had little choice in employment options. After this move, he sent money to Bongani as partial contribution toward their daughter's expenses. The day to day care of his daughter continued to be a joint effort by Bongani, Fortunate's mother, Fortunate's mother's mother, and Bongani's mother and siblings. Fortunate's maternal grandmother, a respected herbalist in the village, sees herself as well-positioned to address any health issues that arise in her household including those of the child.

This situation illustrates how kin work not only enables responsible fathering, but even serves to strengthen a young father's status. As explained earlier, there are several age-specific ways to demonstrate responsible fathering. In this case, Fortunate behaved in a culturally appropriate manner by acknowledging paternity, stating his intent to marry Bongani and deferring to his mother and grandparents for guidance on child rearing. From the perspective of Fortunate's kin, the formalization of his union is a culturally desirable goal. Therefore, it is in the best interest of paternal kin to promote this agenda by supporting young fathers and ensuring the well-being of the child. The process of kin working together to support young fathers was common to most of the men in our study as it was to young fathers in the U.S. context.

Andre was a 19-year-old father with a 4-month old daughter. Living with his mother, he graduated high school and began to take courses at a community college on the Southside of Chicago. He worked at various minimum-wage jobs, but Andre wanted to pursue journalism as a career. He was quite excited with the birth of his daughter, but he and Chassidy, the baby's mother, struggled to transform their intimate relationship into a supportive coparenting relationship. A critical aspect of Andre's fathering was that Chassidy's mother was supportive of his involvement and encouraged his participation in his daughter's life. However, at the beginning, the families remained tentative about his involvement made evident by Andre's description of child care arrangements:

When I first talked about how often I'd keep the baby, I said I'd take her three days [per week]. Chassidy and her mother said "We're going

to see,” because of lot of men these days don’t even want to see their kids. They were kind of surprised, and they were happy too. I’m at the point where I can call Chassidy and say “I want to come over to see my daughter right now.” I’m in good with her mother, she likes me a lot, and her mother kind of overrules everything. She just tells me, “You can see your baby anytime you want to see her.” Her mother’s a really nice lady, because she keeps her during the daytime while I go to school or work, and Chassidy’s going to work.”

In this way, both paternal and maternal kin worked together to scaffold a series of activities that would indicate how responsible Andre could be as a young father. The arrangement relied, in large part, on the trust established between both grandmothers in the families, with their priority being the health and well-being of their granddaughter. Support from maternal and paternal kin could buy time for young fathers such as Andre (and young mothers such as Chassidy) to complete school and establish themselves in stable careers. Kin members, in particular maternal and paternal grandmothers, could set a level of reasonable expectations for young fathers’ contributions. Andre, who was just starting work and college, understood the value of a minimal level of contribution, as well as the help that he received in not bearing the burden for all of support that might be placed on a full-time working father. He preferred to work with family members to create a flexible system of trustworthy caregiving that would hold up over time and outside the courts. As he said,

My mom talks to Chassidy’s mom all the time. We should be able to have that type of relationship where we could change the schedule if I can’t keep my daughter. I’d rather it be more up to Chassidy and me than the courts.

The cases of Fortunate and Andre reflect challenges facing young Black men worldwide. Whereas premarital fertility is nothing new to Black communities in either context, young Black men have a tenuous relationship to the labor market that makes it extremely difficult to meet their fathering responsibilities. Indeed, South Africa has a notably high youth unemployment rate (Altman, 2007) and the U.S. youth labor market has been characterized as “chaotic” in terms of providing employment opportunities with good wages for young people (Neumark, 1998). Therefore, young men’s aspirations to be providers to their children cannot be realized without the work of kin. Both these case studies underscore the role of young men’s parents and

grandparents in promoting the social reproduction of fathering arrangements that place high value on intergenerational linkages and elder knowledge and guidance on parenting.

Pedifocal Relations

Crosbie-Burnett and Lewis (1999) note that pedifocal kin networks offer an alternative view onto how families distribute priorities to parent–child relations. Rather than making father–child relationships contingent on the conjugal relationship of the biological parents, the care of children becomes a negotiated process requiring cooperation of the biological parents and respective kin groups. It is particularly effective for low-income men who attempt to meet their obligations to multiple children from different relationships with very limited economic resources and uncertain employment prospects. It is also consistent with cultural norms that do not stigmatize multipartner fertility. Child care responsibilities are distributed in a number of ways, including formal coparenting agreements, periodic support provision by fathers, regular visiting by fathers, reentry of fathers into their children’s lives as the kids age, and of course through negotiations with both sets of kin about the provision of financial support and child care. Not surprisingly, these arrangements are often marked by conflict and uncertainty as the cases of Enock and Patrice demonstrate, but there is little doubt that everyone involved is committed to ensuring the child’s well-being.

Enock was 50 years old, originally from neighboring Mozambique, intermittently employed and divorced twice but was involved in the lives of both sets of children, albeit to varying degrees. The three children from his first marriage lived with their mother and her kin in another village. Though not financially supporting them, he did visit them on occasion and felt that he should be involved in decision making about important matters such as marriage. His second marriage with Dudu ended in 1997 under difficult circumstances. She accused him of not terminating his first marriage when she moved in with him. He, on the other hand, held on to somewhat traditional values from his native Mozambique supporting the practice of polygamy (a man marrying more than one wife). It should be mentioned that the practice of polygamy in southern Africa has been declining and is virtually nonexistent among young men. Out of the four children they had together ranging in age from 21 years to 8 years, his 14-year-old son remained with him after the divorce whereas the other three moved with their mother to a neighboring village where their maternal kin resided.

Although the context of their divorce was far from amicable, both Enock and Dudu decided that all the children needed to be in regular contact with both parents and their siblings. Furthermore, both parents have provided financial support and have even helped one another out during periods of financial hardship. For example, Enock was not able to pay the school fees for his son's private school for a year because he had lost his job; therefore, Dudu stepped in and covered for him. Enock's financial support for his three nonresident children was not consistent and often burdened Dudu with most of the financial responsibility. Fortunately she could count on support from her own employed brothers to help her when needed. Despite his lack of consistency in providing support, Enock had no doubt that he would be leading marriage negotiations for his oldest daughter as was expected of him and that he would enroll his younger son in private school once he had the money to do so. Not surprisingly, tension around child-rearing styles surfaced periodically. For example, Enock told us that he was not happy with the way Dudu was disciplining the children made evident by his eldest daughter's pregnancy while in school. Additionally, he thought that educational success of the children was a higher priority for him than for his ex-wife. Dudu, on the other hand, repeatedly talked about his "betrayal" in the marriage and his inconsistency in providing financial support for the children.

With rare exceptions, children in this community take their fathers' surnames, which automatically identify them as part of their paternal kin group even if they reside with their mothers and maternal kin. Maternal kin encourage children to maintain a relationship with their fathers and their paternal kin for two reasons. One, the lack of a paternal identity means that a child has not "fully separated" from one's natal roots which is, according to key informants from the area, akin to a form of incest (personal communication, 2009). Two, it extends the safety net for the child and also solidifies one's position in the kin network. Therefore, maternal kin go to great lengths to ensure that fathers and paternal kin are not forgotten and, in the best cases, even provide support and visit regularly. In our study, most men whose unions had ended or had multiple unions retained contact with all their children and could enlist the support of the child's maternal kin to support this project. We see a similar pattern in the U.S. context with the example of Patrice.

At the time of the interview, Patrice was a 26-year-old father of five children. His three oldest children (ages 6, 3, and 2 years) lived in Mississippi with their mother, who had left to go home to her family and to attend university. His 5-year old son lived apart from him, with Patrice's second partner and her family, in Chicago. And he lived with his own parents as well as his current partner, with whom he had a 1-year-old daughter. Patrice's mother

invested in her own relationship with his children. She took her grandson to church every Sunday, and she took her granddaughter for a fast food hamburger every Friday. Her consistency allowed Patrice to focus on resolving his employment and relationship issues. Moreover, it was very rare to find young fathers who lived with their fathers as well as their mothers. Patrice's father was a Vietnam veteran who was a "workaholic." As a prototypical provider, he expected his young adult son to attain self-sufficiency as well. But Patrice's work experiences were quite limited, with part-time jobs over the past 5 years building drywall and various landscaping and contracting work. Patrice was dedicated to earning his GED, after dropping out of high school and hustling drugs 10 years earlier. In effect, his own parents' stability allowed him to not worry about finding a place to stay or food to eat and even advanced his own limited efforts at achieving a measure of maturity and involvement with his children.

Patrice's relationship to his children and multiple partners was complicated and marked with years of conflict and ambiguity. His first partner had left Chicago to go to school and "try to get herself together . . . so we put the relationship on hold for awhile, just focus on the kids." During this time, he had another son, and she was "devastated."

It was arguing and fighting and everything else. It worked out after a couple of years. After she got used to the fact that the baby is here now, so there's no sense in me holding a grudge towards the baby or towards him. It wasn't an easy thing for her to do at all. But if you really love them [children] then you'll be able to find some kind of common ground. You can at least be cordial to one another and that's basically what me and her did. Me and her cooled off on the relationship thing for a minute. We needed to find ourselves again. Get back in tune with each other. Basically figure out where we went wrong for me to go out and have another child, and have another relationship with someone else anyway. It took some soul searching and some hard thinking and trials and tribulations to get over that. It was pretty hard.

However, the mother of Patrice's second child was more resistant to accepting his previous family commitment. She had contemplated an abortion, but according to Patrice, "she decided to keep him for the wrong reasons—maybe if I keep the baby, I can keep [the man.]" She encouraged Patrice to sign over his parental rights, and he grew distanced from his son, not seeing him for almost a year. Over time, however, he "tried to make up for lost months . . . and I can say now, she's accepted my other kids. She's accepted

that me and her can only be mother and father.” Patrice even noticed that both of his oldest children—a girl and a boy want to know each other. He said, “They send little drawings back and forth to each other. They share toys and things, like when they’re both at the house together, they say, Kanye, can I ride your bike? Or Nasira, can I use your pillow?”

Both case studies demonstrate the practice of “coparenting” in the context of terminated or unresolved relationships. Coparenting involves not just the parents but kin from both sides. Whereas Enock and Dudu have attempted to work this through after their relationship ended, for Patrice, a strong focus on coparenting children worked to suspend relationships that originally had little chance of success. In other words, a pedifocal relationship could take pressure off of parents to resolve a chance at marriage or commitment that was risky at best. Patrice still considered the option of committing to his first partner in Mississippi. In family networks with multiple partners and children, kin play an important role in helping fathers manage their relationships to each of their children. However, whether intimate relationships remain unresolved or fathers confront new boyfriends of their former partners (Guzzo, 2009), conflict may be inevitable but the well-being of children is the focus.

Flexible Fathering

Whereas a pedifocal approach is all about the children, flexible fathering focuses on a specific father who plays many fathering roles with a range of children. His participation is critical in kin networks that constantly face economic insecurity but also reflect the high currency placed on fluid familial roles. Conversely, one child can have many different types of fathers over the life course. Men can be the biological fathers to children but not necessarily coresident with them or they can be nonbiological fathers sometimes as coresident. Additionally, they can be social fathers through nonintimate relationships as in the case of maternal uncles. Through complex family configurations of biological status, residence, and intimacy, and supported by kin, men can assume a variety of fathering roles that strengthens their status within the kin group and contributes to the well-being of children.

Gideon was 41 years old and married to Zanele. Gideon, similar to many men of his generation in South Africa, had worked in a town 50 km away from the village since 1986 but was always the financial provider for his wife and children and at times his extended family. He visited his wife and kids several times a month. His ability to maintain a job and be the principal provider for his family made him successful in the eyes of the community.

Furthermore, he took the issue of discipline very seriously with his children. He also contributed to his elderly mother's care and was willing to help out his sisters who often found themselves in economic dire straits.

Gideon's fathering role came in numerous forms. Most consistently, he was a nonresident, biological father to his five kids ranging in age from newborn to 21 years. He was the sole provider of all their needs. However, he also supported his 12-year-old daughter from an extramarital relationship. Even though Zanele was quite upset when she found out about the relationship and the child, she came around to accept the child and allowed Gideon to continue supporting her. On occasion, this girl even came to visit her father, Zanele and her half siblings. Additionally, Gideon assumed a social fathering role to three of his nephews ranging in age from 14 to 24 years whose biological fathers were experiencing ongoing difficulty with employment and alcoholism (but still in contact and even making intermittent contributions of school fees). Given the importance of maternal uncles in Tsonga culture, Gideon was the obvious choice for this role. Gideon's responsibilities extended well beyond financial provision made evident by the practical assistance he provided to get on his nephews out of jail. He also provided moral guidance an advice on education and employment, a role he was clearly proud of.

In return, all three boys had enormous respect for their maternal uncle and were willing to do things for him such as help with house repair and interestingly enough, help with child care for Gideon's young children. It should be mentioned that Gideon's older brother was treated as a father by Gideon's biological children. Both Gideon and his older brother, Willy, earned a great deal of respect from their families and the larger communities for taking on so many paternal responsibilities within their kin network. We see a similar situation with Earl in Indianapolis who struggled with maintaining steady employment but nonetheless became involved with several biological and nonbiological children over the course of his life.

Earl, age 28 years, served as a father figure for four boys—but in very different contexts. By the age of 19 years, he was the father of two boys, yet was still “on the streets . . . getting fast money, hustling, stealing, anything to make a buck.” After 4 years, he was incarcerated and his relationship with his boys' mother deteriorated. On his reentry back to his neighborhood, Earl hit a turning point—at 24 years, he began to realize the importance of his sons.

When I started coming around my children to fill in the gaps, be consistent—that made a difference. And it was things that they showed me, things I missed about them growing up. There were times when I felt I was

too young to be a father, but now my sons are more mature and responsible than some teenagers. And their mother has never discouraged me. She does all she can to let me be with my children. I have to commend her. She's like, "You're going to be whatever you're going to be, and that's fine." And I take it upon myself to come around.

Although his future with his sons' mother was limited, at 27 years, Earl began a relationship with a 41-year-old woman with two sons who were a few years older than his biological sons. Both of these boys had different fathers, and Earl struggled to create a relationship not based on biological bonds, but on nurturance and support for their development. The range of fathering roles that men had to embrace—involving coresidence or nonresidence, biological or nonbiological ties, intimate or nonintimate relations with children's mothers—meant that they had to develop different fathering strategies for different children over time—and often simultaneously. In Earl's case, this meant developing a relationship with his nonbiological children that complemented, not substituted for, his son's relationships with their biological fathers and provided support to their mothers. With his biological children, he needed to retain their trust and respect for him that he had only recently started to rebuild.

It was this sense of adaptation, given changing personal circumstances, which shaped Earl's expressions of care for his four boys. From our data, it becomes clear that men who play diverse flexible fathering roles are urgently needed in kin networks that rely on few men to care for many children. Earl's parents divorced when he was 3 years old, and his mother had two other children, his younger brothers. He relied heavily on his mother as the kin-keeper of his own children and partners. He said, "I talk to my mother every day . . . but so does my father, and my girlfriends and ex-girlfriends even. They would go to her before they go to their own mothers." But this reliance could only sustain him as a father for so long. Earl's own efforts to find a job had resulted in a part-time job at a discount clothing store, for minimum wage. He was "emphatically, hell no, emphatically" unable to make ends meet with his job. As he diversified his own roles to include financial provision and greater involvement with nonbiological children, Earl could rely less and less on his own mother to provide support for his children. Not surprisingly, her involvement with his nonbiological children is more circumscribed than her commitment to her biological grandchildren, particularly in the realm of financial provision.

As is clear from our examples, men have the opportunity (not necessarily desired) to be fathers under a variety of conditions. These roles are open to

both young and older men though there might be some cohort differences. For example, the advent of state child support grants in South Africa may give young men a way out of assuming fathering responsibilities or even acknowledging paternity. In the United States, younger fathers may have fewer men in their networks as a result of incarceration, a decline of marriage, which may mean fewer men consistently available, and unemployment, which would result in fewer men who are financially stable. This configuration clearly places burdens on particular men, which does lead to resentment and in some cases, major conflict. However, it also allows men to do their part as kin workers by stepping in for other men who cannot meet their paternal responsibilities due to job loss, incarceration, or death and to access such assistance themselves should they ever need it.

Discussion

From the analysis presented here, it is clear that the criteria for responsible fathering as delineated in hegemonic masculine norms are not the only measures of successful fathering. Although Black fathers in South Africa and the United States are stereotyped as uninvolved fathers who cannot financially support their children, the everyday lived experiences of men in families suggest a more complicated reality. Fathers and families resist these normative measures and find alternative ways to value men's contributions, beyond coresidence and provision. Men's ability to meet these goals depends on their relationships and negotiations with their kin and, in some cases, the child's maternal kin. Our cases make it clear that while the practice of kin work is different across contexts, there are at least three common processes that are applicable to these two specific Black communities in South Africa and the United States: the negotiation between maternal and paternal kin, a pedifocal approach, and flexible fathering. The physical separation of fathers and their children, the uncertainty of employment, the inadequacy of wages, and cultural norms that support more fluid roles for adults in both contexts necessitate a pedifocal approach that places greater value on flexible fathering. The continuous negotiation between fathers and their maternal and paternal kin is essential, particularly for young fathers, to solidify their roles as fathers to their biological children as well as the kids of extended kin.

Our analysis makes a contribution to the literature on kin work in three important ways. One, we focus on lived experience and show how kin negotiations, a pedifocal approach, and flexible fathering actually work in practice. Furthermore, we recognize how life stages condition the challenges and

opportunities for fathers to be providers—and nurturers—in family contexts. Two, we offer a comparative perspective that highlights common kin work processes that not only characterize kin responses to similar struggles faced by Black men but also challenge hegemonic norms about family formation and parenting in different contexts. In particular, we move beyond the focus on material provision as the marker for successful fathering, and we shift the focus from an individual model of fathering to one in which responsibilities are distributed among kin. Three, we situate our understanding of kin work in historical context by focusing on macrolevel changes in political, economic, and policy environments. Taken together, our analysis underscores the need to apply appropriate models of family functioning in assessing the effectiveness of fathering in communities that have had histories of social inequality.

The analysis presented here has several limitations. As is common with all qualitative research, claims of generalizability need to be tempered given the selection effects of the communities in which we worked. For the South African sample, the selection of the initial sample of children was randomized but only within each of the two villages. Although cultural norms and socio-economic constraints are quite similar within and across villages, variation in spatial location might result in different employment opportunities. This, in turn, may have implications for family processes. Additionally, kinship obligations in an urban context are likely to be different from the ones described for our rural sample. The U.S. sample is confined to the experiences of low-income Black fathers from community-based fathering programs, minimum security correctional facilities, and child care centers. It is likely that Black fathers from the general population enact their parenting in different ways in tandem with their families and kin networks (Roopnarine, 2004). In both contexts, we focused on the experiences of low-income Black men, which are likely to be very different from that of Black men from a higher socioeconomic class. Whereas we made an attempt to account for children's life stage, a more systematic analysis of different life stages is needed to fully understand how strategies change as children age. Finally, men's union status needs to be more systematically integrated into future work.

We believe that our analysis can help inform policy debates about strengthening father involvement in both contexts. In the United States, great emphasis has been placed on enforcing men's systematic contributions to children's well-being, through child support payments. In South Africa, on the other hand, more emphasis and more resources have been placed on a national system of poverty alleviation grants that does not place as much emphasis on fathers' financial contributions to their children. There is a growing recognition in both contexts that the optimal approach to strengthening the position

of Black fathers requires an acceptance of responsibility from government as well as families and communities (Casey Foundation, 2009; Department of Social Development, 2009). Future comparative analyses may indicate that new social policy initiatives can be adapted from different contexts—and can be effective in promoting father involvement and family well-being.

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