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Admonished, then Excused: Portrayals of Fathers' Low Levels of Involvement with Children Across the 20th and 21st Centuries

We examined portrayals of low father involvement (LFI) in cultural discourse. In an analysis of 575 fathering articles from Parents magazine from 1926 through 2006, we found that LFI was discussed often, in over half (56 percent) of the articles across the period. Our analysis focused on five of the most frequently discussed causes for LFI: father's work, character, and leisure pursuits, traditional social norms, and maternal gatekeeping. Father's character and leisure, admonished in the earlier years, were discussed less frequently and less critically over time, especially in the 1960s through 1980s, when mothers and norms were more likely to be blamed for LFI. We theorize that such timing may represent a cultural initiative to protect men and their time during an era of dramatic family change when their position of power was comparatively vulnerable.

Keywords: father involvement, cultural construction, content analysis, social problems, gatekeeping, norms

Unfortunately, many fathers' early desires for attachment fade because they are not encouraged to participate. Deprived of an early relationship, (or choosing not to have one), fathers have a more difficult time establishing a solid tie later on. ("A Celebration of Fathers," *Parents*, June, 1979, pp. 68-71)

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Why are fathers not involved with their children? Scholars have addressed this question through survey analysis and interviews to assess fathers' actual choices and behaviors (for a review, see Lamb, 2010). In this article, we approach the question from a different angle, one that has received less attention in the literature. We apply a cultural analysis to the study of low father involvement (LFI) to better understand not why fathers are not very involved with their children, but, rather, how cultural discourse frames LFI as a problem.

We assess how LFI has been addressed in the culture through content analysis of 80 years of *Parents* magazine articles that referenced the topic. Specifically, we examine the identified causes of low involvement (e.g., work obligations, laziness, traditional social norms), and how discussions of these causes have changed over time both in frequency and in tone. In assessing change over time, we pay special attention to changes in the LFI discourse relative to pivotal family-related demographic shifts, including maternal labor force participation and rates of divorce. In short, we investigate the *social meaning* attached to fathers' lack of involvement with children and changes in that meaning over time (Griswold, 2012).

Culture scholars theorize extensively on the cultural construction of meaning (Alexander, 2003; Geertz, 1973; Griswold, 2012). One important vein of this scholarship examines the cultural construction of social problems, the discursive process by which social practices or cultural objects are constructed as problematic through the definitional and framing practices of invested actors and institutions (Benford & Snow, 2000; Best & Harris, 2013). Scholars have investigated the construction of a range of social "problems," from nuclear power to pigeons, through content analysis of cultural texts, such as song lyrics and newspaper articles (Binder, 1993; Ferree, 2003; Fine & Christoforides, 1991; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Jerolmack, 2008; Misra, Moller, & Karides, 2003; Usdansky, 2008). This branch of theorizing maintains that cultural discourse as communicated, for example, through media, creates rather than merely exposes social problems (Blumer, 1971; Griswold, 2012).

Scholars recognize that the meaning attached to a practice or object can change over time. Some theorists suggest that eras marked by major social change are most conducive to the production of new meanings because it is during these "unsettled times" (Swidler, 1986) that people are exposed to new norms and standards and are more willing to interpret cultural objects or social practices in new and different ways (Coltrane & Adams, 2003; Griswold, 2012). Others focus on who does and does not benefit from the cultural reinterpretation of a particular object or practice (Smith, 1990). From this critical feminist perspective, the construction of problems does not change based on cultural instability, but on the interests of those in power (Cantor, 1987).

Here we examine the social meaning attached to LFI in cultural discourse. Relatively few scholars focusing on cultural portrayals of fathers have examined the meaning or interpretation of father involvement, especially low father involvement. Work on the culture of fatherhood focuses instead on portrayals of fathering roles (e.g., provider versus nurturer) (Atkinson & Blackwelder, 1993) as well as depictions of fathers in popular cultural products such as cartoons (Day & Mackey, 1986; LaRossa et al., 1991, 2000). Researchers examining how father involvement is portrayed in the culture have concentrated on discussions of fathers who *are* involved with their children rather than those who are not (LaRossa, 1997; Wall & Arnold, 2007) and the benefits of such involvement (Milkie & Denny, 2014). For example, in their analysis of a year-long Canadian newspaper series on family issues, Wall and Arnold reported that fathers' involvement and nurturance were

framed differently than mothers' and that discussions of paternal involvement were often paired with affirmations of masculinity. LaRossa (1997) addressed the culture of low father involvement during the early 20th century in his analysis of childrearing manuals, magazines, and newspaper articles from the period. He showed that the subtext throughout many fathering articles during the 1920s and 1930s in *Parents* magazine was "stop excluding fathers—they are important" (p. 125, emphasis in original). He highlighted the 1920s as an era in which fathers were especially marginalized, though he did not specifically document who or what kept them from being more involved.

Even though prominent discourses about fatherhood (Furstenberg, 1988; LaRossa, 1997; 2010; 2012) and motherhood (Hays, 1996; Richardson, 1993) are closely intertwined with the lived experience of parents and social policies (Doucet, 2006; Griswold, 2012), research on cultural depictions of LFI is rare. We contribute to the literature on the culture of fatherhood by examining changes in the discussion of LFI over time with careful attention to social context. LaRossa (1988) asserts that "the culture of fatherhood changed primarily in response to the shifts in the conduct of motherhood" (p. 452). Accordingly, we assess changes in the LFI discourse relative to changes in two structural realities central to family life and the care of children—mothers' labor force participation and divorce rates.

We ask two primary research questions: (1) What was identified as leading to fathers' low involvement—i.e., when LFI was discussed, what was the perceived cause? and (2) How did the purported causes change over time, and how did the tone of the discussions change over time? We present results addressing each of these questions below, following a description of our methodological approach.

METHOD

To examine how low father involvement has been portrayed in cultural discourse, we conducted a content analysis of a long-running popular child-rearing periodical, *Parents*. The title of this periodical when first published was novel in that it addressed both mothers and fathers, at least nominally. Other periodicals giving advice on childrearing during the 1920s when *Parents* was founded, such as *Ladies Home Journal*, explicitly addressed women only. General interest periodicals of the time, such as *The Saturday Evening Post*, occasionally discussed fathering, but it was not a central theme. Although the content of *Parents* was implicitly directed toward women (Strathman, 1984), it was still uncommonly sensitive to the father-child relationship and therefore has been examined by other scholars doing similar work on culture and fatherhood (LaRossa, 1997; 2010; Rutherford, 2011; Young, 1990). Moreover, it has great historical reach, making it an excellent text for analyzing change.

Despite it being the most prominent and long-running advice periodical addressing fathering, *Parents* espouses a largely white, middle-class, dominant model of fathering that is not necessarily linked to the reality of how fathers actually behave or to the true "causes" of low father involvement. Given our emphasis on the cultural portrayal of low father involvement rather than the actual experience of it, we assert that *Parents* is an important cultural text to analyze for this purpose. Nevertheless, the fact that the text principally represents this dominant model of fathering is a limitation of the study.

Sample

The sample for the analysis consisted of all articles referencing father involvement with children from *Parents* magazine from 1926 to 2006. Articles were collected in two phases. The objective of the first phase was to identify articles during the period from 1926 to 1995 that referenced the father-child relationship. Phase one began with a broad search of articles, using the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* to search for articles using the following terms: "fathers," "daughters," "sons," "parents," and "parent-child relationship." All articles identified during this phase were further analyzed for specific mention of the father-child relationship. Phase two expanded the sample into the modern era through analysis of the tables of contents of *Parents* magazine from 1996 to 2006 for articles that referenced fathers or fathering in any way. Approximately 15 articles across the entire period were missing from the university archive or damaged and unreadable in their full form. The sample derived from phases one and two consisted of 681 articles, the population of articles that discussed fathers and fathering. Of the 681, 106 articles were rejected because they either a) did not discuss fathers' *involvement* with children, but rather the mother-father relationship, fathers' financial investments, tips for Father's Day gifts, and so on, or b) were written about or directed at parents in general and made no substantive distinction between maternal and paternal involvement. The final "involvement sample" consisted of a total of 575 articles that referenced father involvement.

The involvement sample of 575 articles was then coded for the level of involvement discussed in each article. Articles were coded for their mentions of *high* father involvement, *encouraged* father involvement, and/or *low* father involvement. Articles were coded as high involvement if they contained any discussion of a father(s) who was especially involved with his children; for example, a discussion of a father taking his children on a camping trip was coded as high involvement. Articles were coded as encouraged involvement if they contained any discussion of fathers encouraged to be more involved with their children; for example, an expert suggesting fathers become more involved in their children's Parent Teacher Association was coded as encouraged involvement. Articles that discussed fathers as either uninvolved with their children or less involved than they or others would like them to be were considered low father involvement articles; for example, an article that mentioned that a father was never home from work in time to tuck his children into bed was coded as low involvement.

We conceive of LFI as a relative concept—was the involvement being discussed as low or limited at the time the article was written? What is considered "low involvement" may vary across era, but our focus is not on what does (or does not) constitute a low level of involvement but the fact that *the article framed it as such*. Although we did not distinguish articles about or authored by married fathers from those about or by non-married fathers in our analysis, the vast majority of articles in our sample discussed married fathers' low involvement and focused on interpersonal interaction with children, not financial involvement. Others have noted that the cultural narrative of the "deadbeat dad" is ubiquitous, referring to non-residential fathers, especially African-Americans, who "deny paternity or shirk their paternal obligations," namely in terms of financial obligations (Furstenberg, 1988, p. 193). However, although low father involvement, especially financial support, from unmarried fathers is roundly condemned in the culture, it was largely absent from the discussion in our sample of articles, which focused on involvement being interactional and directly linked to children's development.

Articles could be multiply coded for type of involvement. For the purposes of this study, we excluded articles that made no reference to LFI ($n = 255$). The remaining 320 articles (56 percent of the involvement sample of 575 articles) were coded as containing at least one reference to low involvement (regardless of the presence of high or encouraged involvement discussions) and constituted the “low involvement sample” on which we conducted the analysis.

Coding Procedure

All authors worked to establish a coding scheme for the content of the low involvement articles to understand not only why fathers were said to not be involved with their children, but how this limited involvement was discussed. Thus each mention of low father involvement was associated with two components—a cause code (the reason given for father’s low involvement) and a tone code (the tone the discussion took). All authors open-coded 20 articles in the sample across the eight decades and met to discuss emerging themes. Based on the extant literature and open coding, the final content coding scheme consisted of 13 cause codes.

Table 1 shows definitions for each of the 13 cause codes used in the analysis and provides examples of each cause. The purported causes we observed in the low involvement articles (in order of frequency) include: father’s work, father’s character (e.g., his dispositions, traits, and inclinations), reasons associated with the child, traditional social norms, father’s leisure pursuits, maternal gatekeeping, father’s inadequate socialization, institutional gatekeeping (institutions, such as hospitals, keeping fathers from being more involved), divorce, father’s biological unsuitability for caretaking, father’s general level of busyness (not explicitly tied to work), father’s time in personal care, and father’s or child’s illness preventing greater involvement.

Given their prominence, we focused our analysis on father’s work, character, and leisure, as well as traditional social norms and maternal gatekeeping (highlighted in Table 1). We do not address the latter seven causes in great detail in this paper due to their relatively infrequent treatment. We also do not discuss one relatively commonly discussed cause, “child reasons,” an unusual category because the low involvement was due to something about children themselves that inhibited greater involvement, such as their age or sex, lack of interest, or preference for the mother. There was a fair amount of ambiguity in the discussion of this cause not seen in other categories and without a clear origin of blame. For these reasons, we do not focus on child reasons here.

Table 2 shows the tone codes used and provides a brief explanation of each tone. We grouped tones into two major categories: naturalizing tones and problematizing tones. The former group consisted of tones that either discussed the low involvement in an expositional or matter-of-fact manner (neutral tone) or discussed the low involvement in a way that excused or was understanding of it (justifying tone). Whether the low involvement was discussed unquestioningly or as unavoidable, the message was that LFI is a natural and routine part of family life. The problematizing group consisted of tones that either discussed the low involvement disapprovingly (critical tone) or discussed the low involvement in a remorseful way, often retrospectively from a father’s perspective (regretful tone). Discussions using either a critical or regretful tone conveyed the belief that LFI is a problem that can or should be addressed and challenged. Tones that were outside of the thematically substan-

tive groups, including, prescriptive (tone was encouraging and instructive in nature), dejected (tone was disappointed in nature, used when low involvement was due to child rejecting his/her father), and indeterminable tones, were small in number. We categorized these as Other tones.

Each reference to a LFI cause was coded for the tone with which the reference was made. Tone was attached to the cause rather than the article because articles could mention multiple causes for LFI and thus could not be classified overall by tone. Articles could be multiply coded for different cause and tone pairs, but were only coded once for the same cause and tone pair per article even if there were multiple mentions of that cause with the same

Table 1
Low Father Involvement Cause Definitions and Examples

Cause	Example
1)* Father's work	time conflict, work-related travel
2)* Father's character	disinterest, laziness, selfishness
3) The child	age/sex of the child, disinterest, mother preference
4)* Traditional social norms	fathers are expected to be breadwinners, not nurturers
5)* Father's leisure pursuits	playing golf, spending time with friends
6)* Maternal gatekeeping	mothers discouraging fathers' involvement
7) Father's inadequate socialization	fathers feeling unprepared for parenthood
8) Institutional gatekeeping	hospital rules barring fathers from delivery rooms
9) Divorce	father not living with child
10) Father's biological unsuitability	father's inability to breastfeed, not naturally nurturing
11) Father's general busyness	the father has too much to do to be involved
12) Father's personal care	sleeping, grooming
13) Illness of parent or child	child's hospitalization or father's depression

* Focal causes.

Table 2
Low Father Involvement Tone Codes and Descriptions

Tone	Brief Description
1) Naturalizing Tone <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neutral • Justifying 	Tones that naturalized LFI as the status quo explanation was matter-of-fact with no implied judgment explanation was understanding or excusatory
2) Problematizing Tone <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical • Regretful 	Tones that problematized LFI as in need of a solution explanation was judgmental or disapproving in nature explanation was remorseful, often retrospective
3) Other Tone	Tones that neither problematized nor naturalized LFI explanations were prescriptive, dejected, indeterminable

tone. For example, in “The Challenge of Fatherhood,” (June, 1967, pp. 41-43) we coded two norms-related LFI references, the first communicated with a naturalizing (specifically, neutral) tone and the second with a problematizing (specifically, critical) tone.

Traditional social norms reference with naturalizing tone: “The day to day job of child rearing has always been considered woman’s work—at least in our western world, and indeed, throughout most of the world. A father’s role has been to provide for his family and—with older children—to be the main disciplinary force.”

Traditional social norms reference with problematizing tone: “Until recently we have been less sensitive to the fact that men, too, have been cheated of an experience that does not fit traditional stereotypes of masculinity. Many of our ideas about manliness have seriously hindered men from becoming creative fathers.”

The first and third authors conducted the majority of the coding. The intercoder reliability rate of 0.95 is based on a comparison of the two authors’ coding of 10 randomly selected articles using the 13 cause codes and 3 categories of tone codes.

Following the quantitative analysis, we also conducted an in-depth qualitative analysis of the 320 articles in the low involvement sample to achieve a more comprehensive assessment of the nature of the articles. Doing so allowed us to pay attention to themes and patterns not addressable through the quantitative analysis and to be sensitive to nuance. To minimize influence from the quantitative results, the qualitative analysis was conducted separately before quantitative coding was tabulated and analyzed.

RESULTS

We first present results from the quantitative analysis on who or what was said to be responsible for the low involvement. Based on these results, we concentrated on five of the most frequently cited causes of LFI—father’s work, father’s character, traditional social norms, father’s leisure activities, and maternal gatekeeping—to address our second research question about how these discussions changed over time, both in frequency and in tone. We discuss whether the explanation of the low involvement used a problematizing (critical or regretful) tone or a naturalizing (neutral or justifying) tone. First, we reiterate that LFI was mentioned and discussed frequently overall ($N = 320$), in over half (56 percent) of all articles on father involvement ($N = 575$). With the exception of the 2000s, the discourse was fairly common across time, as well, with the percentage of father involvement articles that discussed LFI remaining above 50 percent across all decades. Figure 1 shows the steady representation of LFI discourse over the period.

Most Common Purported Causes of LFI

What or who was most commonly identified as leading to LFI? Figure 2 shows the percentage of LFI articles citing the 13 causes. Work was the most frequently cited cause for LFI with almost half (48 percent) of all LFI articles discussing work reasons for fathers’ low involvement at least once in the article. The following quote from an article in the 1980s is an example of a discussion in which work was identified as causing fathers’ lower involvement:

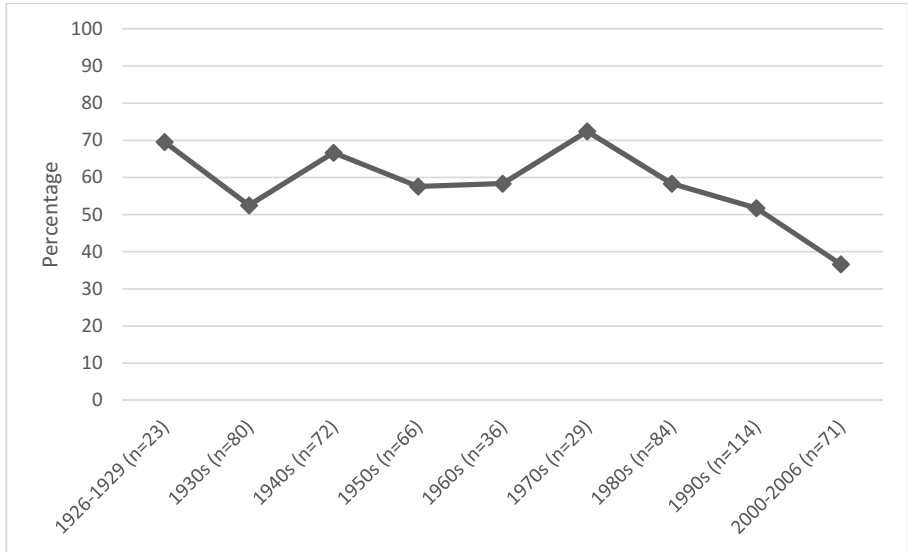


Figure 1. LFI articles as a percent of all father involvement articles, by decade.

Perhaps one of the biggest obstacles to men's spending more time happily involved with their children, however, is that men still feel the major responsibility for bread-winning and that their work hours too often conflict with their children's hours. ("The New Fatherhood," February, 1982)

Reasons related to a father's character (30 percent) were the second most prominent set of reasons given as causing LFI across the 80 year period. Recall that we coded the cause of LFI as father character if the low involvement was due to some dispositional attribute or inclination in the father that led him to be uninvolved: he was portrayed as lazy, selfish, or just generally uninterested in being more involved with his children. The following quote from a 1928 article is an illustration of fathers' characters, here their obliviousness and ego, inhibiting greater involvement.

Vast numbers of our American fathers leave children strictly to mothers and nurses. These fathers are not definitely unkind, but just oblivious. They visualize the children as units of the family, but they can never get over the fence of their male ego into the land of their children's dreams and interests. ("What a Mother Thinks About Fathers," September, 1928)

Reasons related to the child (27 percent), traditional social norms (24 percent), father's leisure (14 percent) and maternal gatekeeping (13 percent) also appeared regularly throughout the LFI articles, as shown in Figure 2. As mentioned, despite its prominence, we do not focus attention on the child reasons code due to conceptual ambiguity and a lack of clear origin of blame. Further, although father's inadequate socialization was mentioned in proportionately the same number of articles as maternal gatekeeping (see Figure 2), we do not

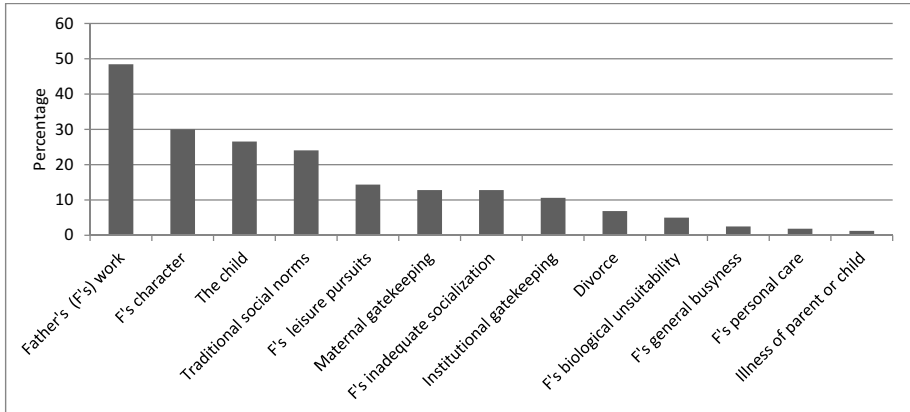


Figure 2. Percent of LFI articles that referenced the cause at least once in the article.

report on it here because results for this code strongly resembled results for traditional social norms. Although the two codes were conceptually distinct, they were closely related and an analysis of inadequate socialization did not contribute additional insight. Therefore, due to space limitations, we focused on the more frequently mentioned traditional social norms in this study. We concentrate the remainder of our analysis on the five highlighted causes in Table 1.

Change Over Time in the Portrayal of LFI: Frequency and Tone

Our second question addressed how the discussion of the purported causes of LFI varied over time both in frequency and in tone. We show that certain perceived causes for LFI were met with harsher sanctions than were others, depending on the era. We situated our longitudinal analysis within sociohistorical context in an effort to more fully appreciate the significance of the shifts in LFI discourse. We tracked changes in the discourse relative to fluctuations both in mothers' labor force participation and the divorce rate, two social realities relevant for fathering expectations and behavior.

Clearly, second wave feminism pushed the boundaries on the rights and place of women in society beginning in the 1960s (Lorber, 2010). Two related trends position the 1960s through the 1980s as a pivotal period of change for American *families*: maternal labor force participation and divorce rates. The labor force participation rate of mothers of young children (under age 6) increased modestly between 1940 and 1960 in the U.S. Beginning in the 1960s, the rate rose dramatically through the 1980s. The U.S. labor market saw double-digit increases in the percentage of working mothers through this time period. Between 1990 and 2000, however, the rate of increase in mothers' labor force participation slowed to only a 6.4 percentage point increase and there was actually a decrease of 2.7 percentage points between 2000 and 2005 (Bureau of Labor Statistics), a pattern considered part of the stalled gender revolution (Cotter, Hermsen, & Vanneman, 2011; England, 2010). The U.S. divorce rate also increased considerably during the same turbulent era of the 1960s through

the 1980s: from 2.2 divorces per 1,000 people in 1960 to 5.2 divorces per 1,000 people in 1980 (National Center for Health Statistics). At no other point in the 20th century did the divorce rate jump as dramatically as it did during that 20 year period, before beginning to decrease in the 1990s. Given the social upheaval it rendered for families, we pay special attention to this era in our analysis of LFI discourse over time.

In the sections that follow, we present both quantitative and qualitative results which show that father's character and leisure were discussed less frequently and as less problematic over time, especially in the 1960s through 1980s, when mothers and norms were more likely to be blamed. Critical indictments of fathers for their low involvement were proportionately more common in the first half of the 20th century when men's social position in the family was more fixed; however, these criticisms grew increasingly rare and more benign by late mid-century as their position became more vulnerable, due in part to mothers joining the workforce and divorce rates increasing rapidly. We theorize that such timing may represent a cultural initiative to protect masculine interests during a time of dramatic family change that threatened men's heretofore stalwartly dominant position in the family. We discuss this further in the analysis below that highlights *each* of the five featured causes of LFI.

LFI Due to “Father Causes”: **Father's Character, Leisure, and Work Become Less Criticized.** The quantitative analysis of articles discussing LFI due to father's character showed that discussions of LFI due to his disposition steadily declined through the first half of the 20th century. Figure 3 shows the percent of low involvement articles that mentioned character-related LFI, calculated for each decade, over time.

Further, our assessment of tone showed that articles were especially likely to employ a problematizing tone to discuss father's low involvement in the first half of the 20th century

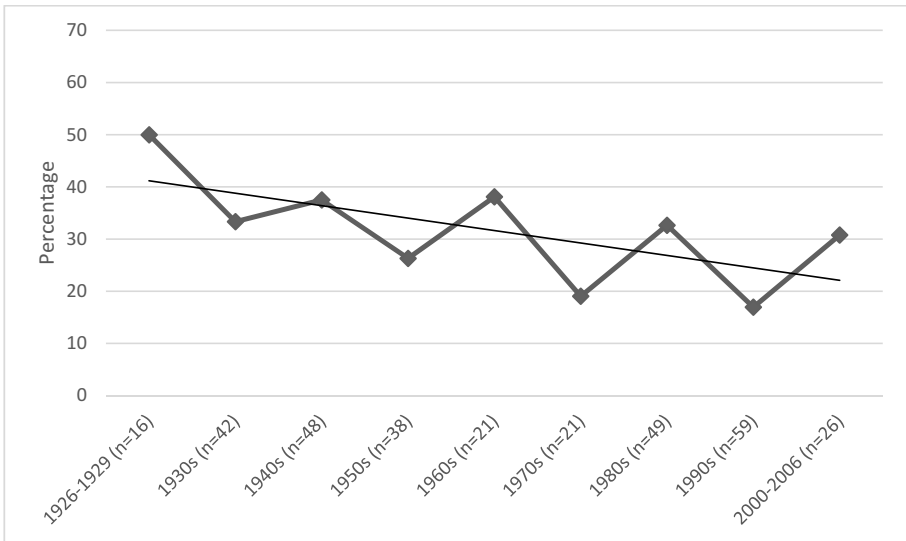


Figure 3. Percent of low involvement articles containing at least one reference to character-related LFI, by decade, showing trendline.

when his character was considered the cause (data not shown). Articles written from the 1920s through the 1950s took fathers to task for individual character and personality attributes that prevented greater paternal involvement. Fathers were criticized for being mean, emotionally distant, and generally unwilling to develop companionship with their children. For example, an article from the 1920s described the problem with fathers like this, admonishing fathers for being self-absorbed:

This troublesome male ego exhibits itself most pronouncedly in two ways toward children. Too many fathers regard children as accessories after the fact—the fact being themselves. The home is simply a kind of private hotel, operated for the man’s personal comfort, and the children must not be too much in evidence. Father doesn’t like the noise. Father can’t be bothered. Father is too tired. Father must not be disturbed. These are age-old rules of the home, laid down by the male. (“What a Mother Thinks about Fathers,” September, 1928)

The 1950s saw continued high frequency of LFI discussion citing father’s character for his lack of involvement, though the tone of the criticism was not as harsh. By the 1970s, articles citing father character as the reason for LFI dropped off and the discussion stagnated. The discussion of character-related LFI picked up again in the 1980s, yet the criticism directed at fathers lacked the acerbity seen in the 1920s through the 1940s. Potentially, the harshness of criticism waned in line with the post-World War II campaigns which encouraged women to return home, step aside from their wartime jobs, and allow men to reclaim their rightful (public) place in the workforce (Honey, 1984; LaRossa, 2010). The discussions of LFI attributed to father character from the 1950s and beyond that focused on fathers not pulling their weight in childcare duties at home had a softer tone, a trend that continued through the 1990s and 2000s. For example, an article from the 1980s gently criticized fathers’ preferences and their overall disinterest in being involved in the more routine (read: less fun) side of childcare:

Fortunately, husbands do not neglect their infant as they do housework, but they clearly prefer playing with their babies to doing routine caretaking chores. In fact, in one study in Boston, only 25 percent of fathers had a regular caretaking obligation. That means that 75 percent of the fathers had no routine caretaking responsibility, and 43 percent said they never changed diapers at all. (“The Reluctant Father,” July, 1986)

Articles citing father’s character as being responsible for LFI during this time period also often took a humorous approach to the low involvement, lightly making fun of fathers for their dispositional flaws (e.g., helplessness, squeamishness) which purportedly render them less competent than mothers. For example, an article from the 1990s explained fathers’ lack of participation in dirty parenting jobs in a manner that excused their behavior:

It is particularly hard for men to adapt to the realities here. It’s time for a little bit of honesty. Men are, in general, the helpless creatures of the universe, and one of our many dirty little secrets is that we’re more squeamish than women are. Let’s assume for a moment that a child throws up. (A fair assumption, don’t you think?) All the

mothers I know would pitch right in, cleaning up with whatever was at hand: napkins, towels, their own clothes. None of the fathers would. Fathers stare at vomit. They feel that if they stare at it long enough, it will just go away. (“The Decline and Fall of the Civilized Parent,” 1993)

Discussions of LFI due to father leisure in many ways paralleled the story on father character. Fathers’ lack of interest in paternal involvement was often discussed in conjunction with their participation in leisure pursuits, including reading the newspaper, playing golf, and “hanging with the guys.” As with temperament-related LFI, Figure 4 shows that leisure causes for LFI were relatively frequently cited in the 1920s and became less common over time.

In addition to a correspondence in frequency, the tone of the leisure-related LFI discussions was similar to that of character-related LFI. That is, just as criticisms of LFI due to fathers’ personalities tempered over time, so too did criticisms of LFI due to fathers’ leisure pursuits (data not shown). Articles panned fathers’ leisure during the first half of the century, often ridiculing fathers for their perceived “need” for leisure time away from family. In the following excerpt from a 1927 article, a medical expert chastised the so-called “tired business man” for engaging in so much discretionary (lowbrow) recreation at the expense of his paternal involvement:

Yet this tired business man we hear so much about has time for golf, for motoring, for lunchtime “conferences” that consume two or three hours of his crowded day. He takes time for music, though it may be jazz; for art, though it may be the comic strip; for drama, though it may be the pitiful travesty so often presented. Is it then not possible for him to squeeze in some time each day for that equally important task of get-

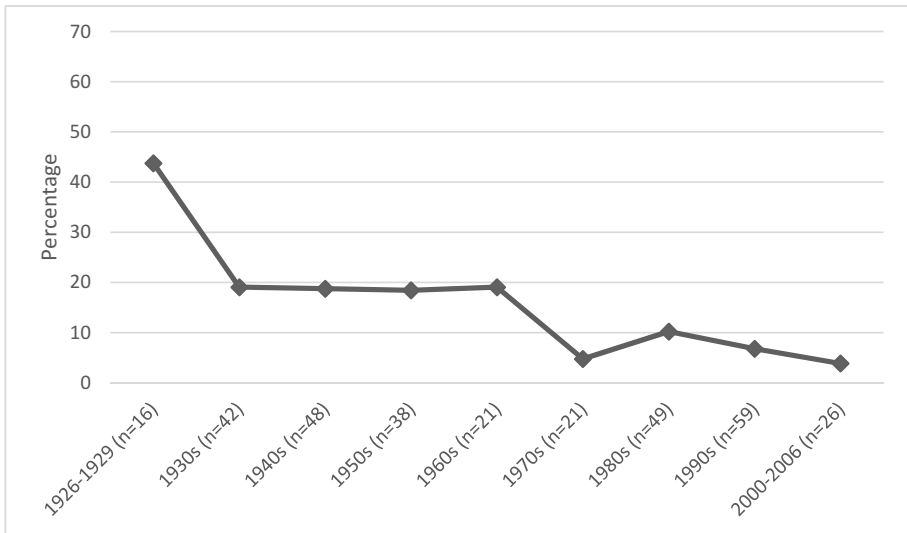


Figure 4. Percent of low involvement articles containing at least one mention of leisure-related LFI, by decade.

ting acquainted with his own child? (“What a Child Should Demand of His Father,” August, 1927)

By the later decades of the century, however, as discussions of leisure-related LFI waned altogether, so too did the biting quality with which they were expressed compared to earlier decades when fathers’ positions in the family were less in question. By the 1980s, LFI due to leisure time was still criticized but with less sharp sarcasm. In the quote below from 1988, father’s leisure was not condoned, but the citing of research studies objectified the problem and directed the blame less squarely on men’s *desire* for non-family time.

In times of calm, mothers and fathers tend to share the management of older children and adolescents. But when a major problem arises, studies show, mothers most often deal with it, while their husbands stick to reading the newspaper. (“Diffusing Disaster,” October, 1988)

LFI due to father’s work was another fairly protected cause of low involvement. As mothers’ labor force participation and divorce rates climbed into the 1980s, discussion of LFI due to work approached its lowest point. Figure 5 shows the proportion of articles mentioning work-related LFI over time.

The qualitative analysis showed that fathers were often let “off the hook” for their work-related low involvement by framing these discussions of work as a given, a fact of life. For example, the following excerpt from a 1970s article presented the *benefits* of fathers’ work schedules for children:

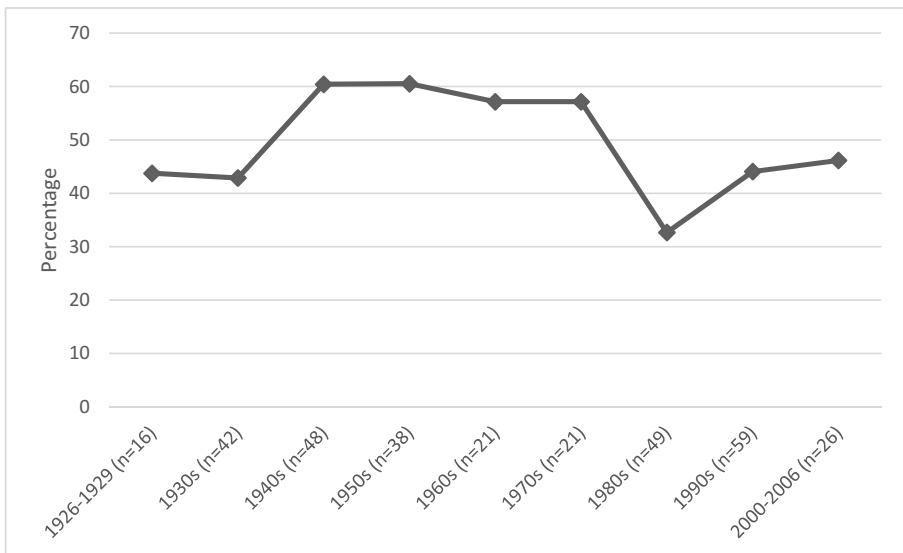


Figure 5. Percent of low involvement articles containing at least one mention of work-related LFI, by decade.

Since mothers care fulltime for small children more often than fathers do, the difference in their daily schedules is also instructive. By gradually understanding that his father goes away and comes back at specific times, the child learns about structure and predictability. (“A Celebration of Fathers,” June, 1979)

Similarly, some naturalizing discussions of work-related LFI justified fathers’ low involvement with children due to the structural constraints of their work, as in this quote from the 1960s:

For catching trains, buses, quick lunches and competing in the market place are tough and tiring. It’s asking a lot to expect these tired men to rush up to the house and chortle merrily to their sons, “Baseball, anyone?” (“Needed: A Stand-In for Dad,” June, 1961, p. 16)

Together, patterns in the coverage of father’s character, father’s leisure, and father’s work as reasons for his low involvement paint a compelling picture of a cultural initiative to protect men and their time in an era when their status was especially vulnerable. The quote from the 1979 article featured at the introduction of this paper shows men’s involvement prerogative being figuratively protected by parentheses: “Deprived of an early relationship, (*or choosing not to have one*), fathers have a more difficult time establishing a solid tie later on” (emphasis added). By separating it in this way, the focus of the indictment was not on fathers’ own choices but on a cast of unnamed others—mothers, norms, etc.—for depriving fathers of greater involvement.

LFI due to Traditional Social Norms and Maternal Gatekeeping: Upsurge in the 80s. At the same time that father-related reasons for LFI were only being gently critiqued, reasons unrelated to fathers for their low involvement were pointedly blamed. In particular, critiques of prohibitive traditional social norms and maternal gatekeeping surged, especially during the 1980s.

Figure 6 shows the proportion of low involvement articles that discussed LFI due to traditional social norms. Discussion of norms-related LFI spiked in the 1980s when 41 percent of all low involvement articles made at least one reference to traditional social norms discouraging greater father involvement.

The norms-related LFI discourse became more critical during the 1980s relative to earlier decades (data not shown). However, of all the causes cited for fathers’ low involvement, traditional social norms are the most diffuse and least tangible. Although criticism of norms-related LFI did intensify during the 1980s, blaming social norms for fathers’ low involvement further removed the blame from fathers themselves. In short, if traditional norms are the problem, then there are few concrete solutions, especially ones within fathers’ control.

A close reading of all articles that discussed LFI due to traditional social norms showed that in earlier decades, particularly the 1920s through the 1950s, norms were blamed for leaving fathers on the sidelines. In these decades, fathers were frequently portrayed as the victims of a culture that shut them out of childrearing. In problematizing discussions of LFI due to norms, articles complained about stereotypes of incompetent fathers and disparaged norms of masculinity for leading fathers to believe that childcare was unmanly. For exam-

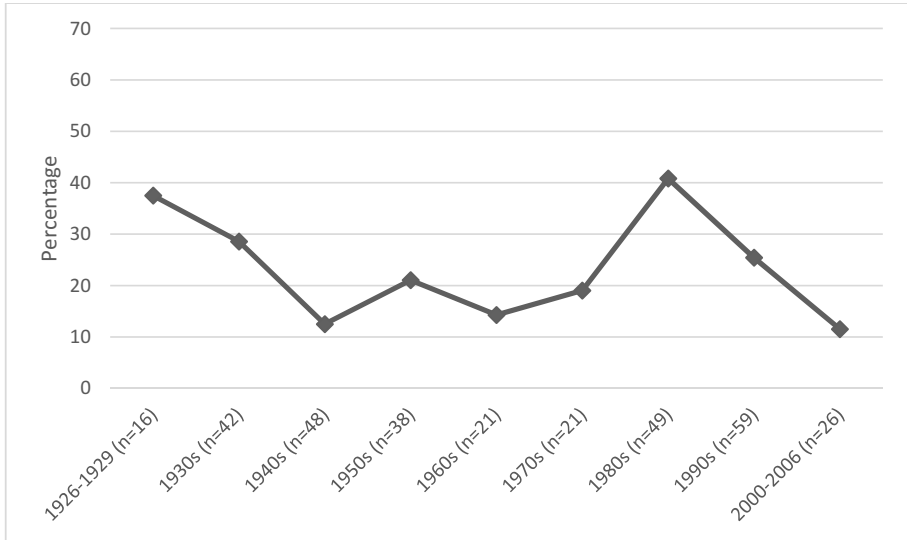


Figure 6. Percent of low involvement articles containing at least one mention of norms-related LFI, by decade.

ple, an article from the 1950s blamed constraining stereotypes for keeping fathers out of infant care:

But I wasn't prepared for the fact that first-time fathers are not only treated as unnecessary extras but also as the butt of many stale, poor jokes. The stereotype of a new father, I found, is that of a proud but all-thumbs idiot who sits grinning happily and inanely while his wife takes care of the baby. Of course it's true that mothers do the lion's share of baby tending—but that doesn't mean that fathers don't have some natural advantages in caring for a child! ("A New Father Speaks Up and Says It's His Baby Too," August, 1959, pp. 52-53)

While articles in the earlier era commonly criticized traditional social norms for excluding fathers from parenting, there were also a few counterpoint examples during the earlier decades in which fathers were blamed for allowing norms to excuse them for sidestepping their responsibilities as parents. For example, a father wrote an article in 1932 dispelling the ubiquitous myth that men are inherently incompetent at caring for an infant and criticizing his contemporaries for buying into gendered expectations about parenthood:

Of course some of us young fathers are just hopeless. Somehow we've gathered the idea that it's effeminate to do anything for a young baby. "That's woman's work," I've heard young fathers say. And that, gentlemen, is the prize fallacy. Taking care of a young baby entails pure manual labor. ("Confessions of a Newborn Father," June, 1932)

Taken as a whole, these results show that norms-related LFI was discussed in the 1920s through 1950s as portraying fathers as both victims to parenting norms that excluded them as well as responsible for perpetuating these norms. By the 1980s, the articles presented fathers themselves as less responsible, and focused on cultural expectations and social norms as being in flux as fathers and mothers struggled to adjust their behaviors and own expectations regarding parenthood. An article from 1989 demonstrates how culture was criticized as holding fathers back from egalitarian parenting:

But be forewarned: *Given our cultural upbringing*, being equal partners may be harder than you think. Unless your husband is an at-home father or takes paternity leave, your partnership may fizzle out. Avoid the inclination for the mother to be the dominant caregiver by fostering both you and your husband's strengths as parents. ("Help Your Husband Be a Great Dad," September, 1989, *emphasis added*)

Similarly, another article from the same decade expressed frustration with the slow pace of cultural change:

Traditionally, fathers have been considered the most and least important parent of the pair. As wage earners, they were indispensable. As childrearsers, they played second fiddle to mothers, who, conversely, were considered second-fiddle wage earners. All that is changing, although in the struggle to insert a little equality into the business of child rearing, evolution has been slower than the editors of Ms. Magazine might have us believe. ("The Father-Daughter Connection," July, 1989)

Additionally, starting in the 1980s, changing social norms were presented as terrain that fathers and mothers must navigate. This was often accompanied by the subtext that society needs to be understanding of fathers' slowness to change:

Old patterns take time to break ... many couples who share child care and work responsibilities seem to have to come to the realization that social revolutions, such as increasing fathers' involvement with their children, do not happen overnight. ("My Spouse, My Partner," July, 1980)

We argue that this discussion of norms-related LFI, during the 1980s in particular, demonstrates a deflection away from fathers themselves when discussing LFI in the wake of major family changes. Whereas accounts in the earlier part of the century (1920s–1950s) actually *challenged* portrayals of fathers as hapless, bungling parents cast to the side by prohibitive norms and discussed fathers' flawed characters as preventing them from involvement with children, writers in later decades were wont to excuse the persistent lag in father involvement based on a "cultural upbringing" and slow-changing norms that did little to encourage greater paternal involvement in the family.

Mothers were also frequent targets of criticism for perpetuating LFI, especially during the 1980s. Figure 7 shows that references to LFI due to "maternal gatekeeping"—mothers' sometimes deliberate efforts to inhibit greater father involvement—were proportionately most common in the 1920s and 1980s relative to discussions of mother-related LFI in other decades.

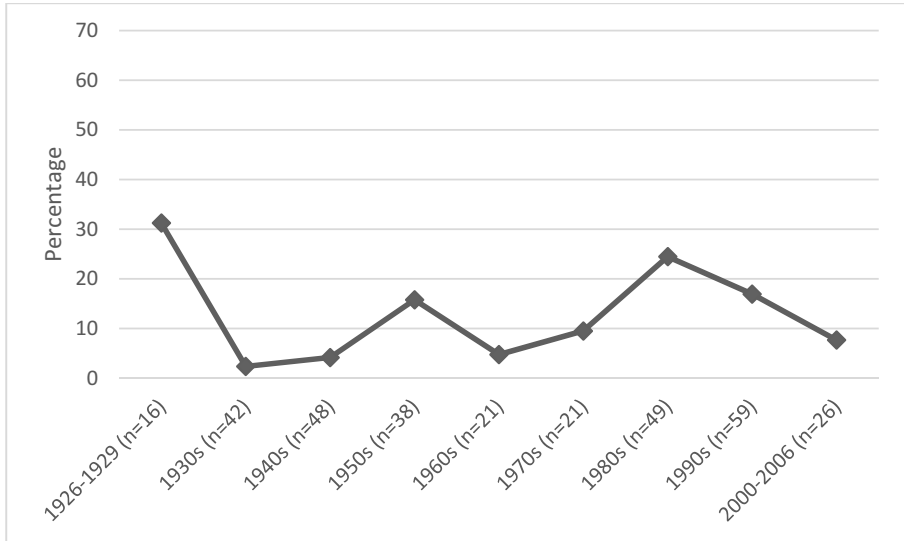


Figure 7. Percent of low involvement articles containing at least one mention of gatekeeping-related LFI, by decade.

The 1980s, a decade that saw a dramatic increase in mothers' labor force participation, saw the greatest number of actual references to maternal gatekeeping, with 12 articles citing LFI due to maternal gatekeeping at least once (Figure 7). During this time, mothers were criticized for their "possessiveness" and selfish mothering which served to keep fathers out of greater parental involvement. In the following excerpt from a 1989 article, the author clearly isolated the mother as the locus of blame, accusing her of conspiring against her husband:

Whereas in the previous categories you and your husband collaborate to establish his inferiority, in this trap you setup systems whereby you, and only you, can bestow care upon your child. In doing so, you actually may deny your husband, subtly or not so subtly, a chance to bond with baby. ("Help Your Husband Be a Great Dad," September, 1989)

Mothers' gatekeeping tactics were discussed not just by experts, as in the quotation above, but by penitent mothers and advice-seeking fathers. One seemingly desperate father wrote to the magazine in 1985 for counsel on how to convince his wife to "lighten up" and let him go out in public with his daughter:

One of the greatest obstacles to letting the husband take over seems to be maternal resistance. "I enjoy helping with the baby very much. Perhaps you can tell me how to convince my wife to let me take the baby (eighteen months) and do things, go places just the two of us," wrote W. Spencer of Roy, Washington. "I have spent a lot of time talking to my friends about this subject and they all say they have the same

problem. I babysit for up to eight hours at a time and take care of the baby myself when my wife is asleep, yet she is afraid to let me take her anyplace by myself.” (“Fathers Speak Out,” September, 1985)

Although not all discussions of mother-related LFI were especially critical of mother herself (one more neutral mention from a 1989 article referred to some mothers being “not entirely eager” to share childrearing responsibilities with fathers rather than blaming their “possessiveness”), the majority across the century were more critical than neutral in nature (data not shown). In all, we maintain that the timing and tone of the discussion of gatekeeping in the 1980s was telling given the high and rapidly increasing rate of mothers’ labor force participation at the time. Just at the time more mothers needed more help from fathers due to more demands on their time from paid work or single parenthood, the cultural discourse on why fathers were not more involved devoted more attention to what mothers themselves were doing to prevent greater involvement.

DISCUSSION

How was fathers’ lack of involvement with children portrayed in the culture over the bulk of the 20th and into the 21st century? We illuminate who and what were identified as responsible for LFI and how discussions of these causes changed over time both in frequency and in tone, from the inception of a popular advice periodical in 1926 through 2006.

LFI was mentioned and discussed frequently overall, in more than half (56 percent) of all articles on father involvement, and relatively steadily over time (Figure 1). The nature of the discussion, however, was not static. Instead, we found that how low involvement was discussed in cultural discourse showed many purported causes of the low involvement, and varied by the era in which the discussion took place. Fathers’ characters and leisure pursuits, for example, were sharply criticized for inhibiting greater involvement during the first half of the 20th century, but that biting criticism waned beginning in the 1960s; mothers’ so-called gatekeeping efforts, on the other hand, received a good amount of critical attention in the 1980s for keeping fathers from being more involved. We situated these results in social context relative to changes in the labor force participation rate of mothers of young children and the divorce rate given their relevance for fathering expectations and family life in general.

We found that the discussion of lack of father involvement was relatively uncritical during times of dramatic family change, and indeed in many ways was discussed as more of a problem earlier in the 20th century when fathers’ positions in the family were not significantly challenged. Father’s character and leisure were bluntly criticized earlier in the century but critiques conspicuously subsided by mid-century, for preventing men’s greater involvement. Meanwhile, as critical portrayals of father-, work-, and leisure-related LFI waned, nebulous “traditional social norms” were instead blamed, and there was no clear or easy remedy for this cause. Moreover, mothers were blamed. There was an upsurge in discussions of maternal gatekeeping as a cause of LFI, and the tone for blaming mothers was often critical.

Our theoretical framework suggests that social practices are constructed in culture as problematic based on the interests of certain groups, particularly privileged or powerful groups (Cantor, 1987; Smith, 1990). Based on results from our quantitative and qualitative

analyses, our findings underscore a critical feminist perspective (Smith, 1990) to suggest that the patterns we observed in the portrayal of LFI over time were due to a cultural reticence to criticize fathers during an era when fathers' dominant positions within the family were challenged. In the case of *Parents* magazine, blaming men for their lack of involvement is antithetical to patriarchal power which is constituted in part from mothers' continued unpaid labor and less powerful positions in the home and at work.

We assert that our results may contribute to the ongoing theoretical deliberation about when social practices are more likely to be culturally constructed or reinterpreted as social problems—during periods of major social change and/or when patriarchal interests are less vulnerable. Our results lend support for the critical feminist approach to theorizing on the timing of social problem construction. Meanings are not likely to change merely during “unsettled times,” but the contestation must be located and understood through the lens of a critical perspective that carefully considers how meanings attached to social practices and objects change systematically in response to existing relations of ruling (Smith, 1990). Depending on the pattern of power relations in play at a given time, certain kinds of problems—and certain kinds of solutions—will be easier to construct through cultural discourse than others.

Cultural texts are not neutral, and the portrayal of a social group such as fathers is linked intimately with their social power. As we know, these images and articulations are not occurring in a vacuum, but in relation to the real world lived experiences of parents in a larger political context (Griswold, 2012; Hays, 1996; Richardson, 1993). The representation of fathers in this particular cultural text—*Parents* magazine—is heavily skewed toward the white middle-class, and thus may be one central reason why these fathers are spared harsh critiques in times of changing family structures. It is interesting to note that the lack of criticism of (unmarked by race, but ostensibly white) fathers in the 1960s through 1980s in *Parents* co-occurred with a cultural shift that turned critical attention toward Black family structure in the U.S. at the same time, coinciding with the publication of the Moynihan report in 1965. Thus, white middle-class fathers were spared criticism for their lack of involvement with children during the same historical period that African-American mother-headed family structures, and, by extension, unmarried or absent Black fathers (“deadbeat dads”), came under attack.

In conclusion, we documented the portrayal of low father involvement across the 20th and into the 21st centuries. We showed how the social practice of fathers' involvement with their children was described and problematized (or not), and how this linked to pivotal demographic and social shifts in family life. We provided new theoretical insights based on a unique historical data set, and further developed a critical perspective on cultural texts and social change. In all, this work provides a roadmap to a deeper understanding of the complexities of framing social problems that considers power relations in addition to key historical moments.

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