

2012 - Issue Four

Fatherhood Matters

MARGARET LARACY

Catherine S. and Cabrera Tamis-LeMonda, *Handbook of Father Involvement: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2002)).

Research on fathers has itself become a burgeoning area of research in recent decades. Some observers note that fatherhood has been “rediscovered” in the social sciences and become a key theme in various streams of research. The *Handbook of Father Involvement* follows this trend, drawing into one volume perspectives from multiple disciplines, with sections addressing demography, developmental psychology, sociology and anthropology, evolutionary psychology, public policy, and economics. Within a social and cultural context often marked by skepticism about the need for fathers, and in which many children live apart from or do not know their fathers, this volume communicates a significant message: fatherhood matters, and vitally so.

The centrality of fathers in the lives of children comes to the forefront in the study of child development. This review focuses exclusively on the substantial section of the *Handbook* dedicated to “Father Involvement and Child Development,” edited by Michael E. Lamb, who also contributed two of the four chapters. Topics addressed include: “(1) the initial development of relationships between fathers and their children in infancy; (2) the effects of father-child relationships on the child’s integration into social relationships outside the family; (3) the diverse faces, facets, and consequences of father involvement; and (4) the role of nonresidential fathers in their children’s lives” (p. 91).

Lamb first takes up the issue of infant-father attachment. He points us to some of the ways in which fathers are like mothers: fathers experience hormonal changes around the birth of their infants, they adjust their speech patterns when interacting with infants, and they demonstrate sufficient sensitivity and responsiveness to form strong bonds with their young children. Mothers, we learn, are by no means the sole attachment figure. Reliable differences in the response to mothers and fathers on the part of the infant are also observed. For example, relative to fathers, mothers are typically the preferred attachment figure of very young children. Between the ages of 10 and 20 months, children show a preference for mothers both as a “secure base” from which to explore, and as a source of safety and comfort in times of distress. By two years of age, however, no such preferences are reliably observed: both parents are equally sought as attachment figures. Furthermore, during the earlier months in which mothers are more sought as a “safe haven,” fathers are more often sought out for playful interaction, especially among boys. Indeed, other research has shown that as playmates, fathers are preferred, both by boys and girls, to mothers throughout childhood.

Play, it seems, is a particular gift of fathers. In a chapter addressing “Fathers’ Contributions to Peer Relationships,” Ross D. Parke and his colleagues note that fathers “tend to engage in more physically stimulating and unpredictable play than mothers do” (p. 145). This style of interaction is, in turn,

positively linked to children's social competence. Through the more energetic and physical play of fathers, children learn to manage affect, direct attention, and understand emotions. The distinctness of fathers and their role in child development emerges in the research on paternal interaction.

Lamb, Parke, and the other contributors to this section survey a broad array of research. The focus is clearly on early childhood, however, which means that somewhat later developmental outcomes do not appear. For example, the link between externalizing behaviors in boys and criminality in adolescent males and low father involvement and absence is not discussed. Nor, for girls, is the fact that those with absent fathers tend to engage in earlier sexual activity and are more likely to become pregnant as teenagers relative to peers who live with their fathers. These later outcomes reflect low father involvement over the course of development. When sons lack the discipline and affirmation of fathers, many of them display antisocial behaviors. Girls, on the other hand, seem to look for the affirmation of men through sexual relationships. Evidence suggests that fathers provide order and structure in different ways than mothers. They also play a vital role in affirming their children in their gender identities. These themes are absent from this section on fathers and child development. Nonetheless, those interested in the research on father-child relationships and outcomes in early childhood will find a helpful introduction in this book.

Despite the many strengths of this work as a survey of research, one finishes reading it without having discovered just what is meant by "fatherhood." The problem is one of scope: it is not a matter of science to define what a thing is. Thus, the social sciences are in need of an extraneous discourse in order properly to define their subject. In turn, operational definitions of "father involvement" are then constructed and utilized without clarity about the nature of fatherhood.

This issue of the definition of terms comes to the forefront in a chapter entitled "Involved Fathering and Child Development: Advancing Our Understanding of Good Fathering." Rob Palkovitz makes the case that greater levels of father involvement are not a matter of quantity but of quality, stating: "what is most beneficial is 'good fathering'" (p. 120). This is certainly a reasonable claim; however, in order to identify "good fathering," it is crucial first to define the term "fathering." Rather than defining this term, however, Palkovitz proceeds by posing the question "Who are fathers?" He describes the complexity of the issue, noting that fathers and fathering contexts are diverse. Asking about fathers becomes ambiguous, he writes, because of the different issues that surface when confronted with varied "biological, social, psychological, and legal perspectives" (p. 121). Indeed, it is true that the perspectives listed do not finally answer the question: what is fatherhood? This is a philosophical and ultimately perhaps a theological matter.

Lamb's second contribution is a chapter entitled "Nonresidential Fathers and Their Children." Here, too, we see that the fundamental nature of fatherhood remains unclear. Specifically, the link between spousal love and fathering a child is absent. The "nonresidential" status of many fathers is described without recognizing the wound that this physical separation represents. While Lamb's efforts to help fathers remain connected to their children in the wake of divorce are positive, the breakdown of a marriage does more than physically separate fathers and children. A deeper investigation of marriage, family, and the person is needed to see more clearly what a father is, how this relates to marriage, and what paternal presence means for a child in this context.

In introducing the *Handbook*, Tamis-LeMonda and Cabrera point out the value of a cross-disciplinary approach, suggesting that the study of father involvement has been "an insular enterprise," and indicating that this text's "integrative approach is fundamental to a comprehensive understanding of human development generally, and to fathering more specifically" (p. xii). Such an integrative, cross-

disciplinary attempt is laudable, as it attempts to overcome the fragmentation of knowledge so characteristic of the modern sciences. At the same time, the problem faced by each of these disciplines remains that of definition. If an integrative paradigm that can serve the fullness of the human person is to be achieved, philosophical and theological methods are needed to provide conceptual clarity and to facilitate a unified and authentic view of man and of reality. In the second edition of this text, which is forthcoming, another decade of research will be added to the wealth of valuable observation contained in this first edition, but I would venture to say that the task of achieving a truly fruitful integration on the issue of fatherhood will remain.

