



**Fathering**  
1933-026X (Online)

**VOLUME 13**  
**ISSUE 2**  
**Fall 2015**

**MEN'S STUDIES PRESS, LLC**  
**PO Box 32**  
**HARRIMAN, TN 37748 USA**  
**WWW.MENSSTUDIES.INFO**  
**423-369-2375 (PHONE)**  
**423-369-1125 (FAX)**



**PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE**

**PUBLICATION DETAILS, INCLUDING INSTRUCTIONS FOR AUTHORS  
AND SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION:**

<http://www.mensstudies.info/OJS/index.php/FATHERING>

**TABLE OF CONTENTS FOR THIS ISSUE:**

<http://www.mensstudies.info/OJS/index.php/FATHERING/issue/view/112>

**FULL TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF USE:**

[http://www.mensstudies.info/Terms\\_and\\_Conditions.pdf](http://www.mensstudies.info/Terms_and_Conditions.pdf)

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.



SANGEETHA MADHAVAN<sup>1</sup>, PH.D., LINDA RICHTER<sup>2</sup>, PH.D.,  
and MARK GROSS<sup>1</sup>, PH.D. (CAND.)

---

## “Doing” and “Undoing” Gender in Fathering Research: Evidence from the Birth to Twenty Cohort Study in South Africa

*We investigate how gender influences research on fathering and the narratives that are produced in one study in urban South Africa. We draw on “doing” and “undoing” gender frameworks to examine three domains of the research process: 1) research design; 2) the data collection interview; and 3) data analysis and interpretation. Through close examination of methodology and reporting patterns, we argue that each domain represents an interactional context in which actors assess the drawbacks and benefits of “doing” and “undoing” gender. This analysis advances our understanding of the ways in which the research process unwittingly sustains parenting as a primarily feminine activity but also presents opportunities for resisting and altering dominant gendered norms about parenting.*

*Keywords:* fathering, gender, mothers, South Africa

Despite the recent surge in interest on fathering, much of what we know about fathers, how they think about their roles and what they do for their children, generally comes from mothers and women (Cabrera & Peters, 2000). The enduring power of gender norms in parenting influences not just how fathering as a gendered process is constructed but the research conducted on fathers and fathering as well. Extant research on reporting has consistently shown that mothers and fathers report on father involvement in different ways (Coley & Morris, 2002; Mikelson, 2008). For example, Coley and Morris (2002) found that even

---

<sup>1</sup> University of Maryland.

<sup>2</sup> DST-NRF Centre of Excellence in Human Development, University of the Witwatersrand Human Sciences Research Council, South Africa.

We are grateful for comments on earlier versions of the paper from Phillip Cohen and participants in a session at the National Women’s Studies Association Conference, San Juan, Puerto Rico, November 13–17, 2014. Funding for the Birth to Twenty Cohort study was provided by the Wellcome Trust Grant #: WT - 092097/Z/10/Z.

Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Sangeetha Madhavan, Dept. of African-American Studies, 1119 Taliaferro Hall, University of Maryland, College Park, 20742. E-mail: smadhava@umd.edu.



FATHERING, VOL. 13, NO. 2, FALL 2015, PP. 146-163.

© 2015 by the Men's Studies Press, LLC. All rights reserved. <http://www.mensstudies.info>  
fth.1302.146/\$15.00 • DOI: 10.3149/fth.1302.146 • eISSN/1933-026X



though mothers' and fathers' reports of fathering appear roughly similar, mothers consistently reported lower levels of father involvement than fathers do. Seltzer and Bandreth (1994) found a similar pattern when comparing resident mothers' and nonresident fathers' reports of paternal involvement post-divorce. Recent work on unmarried parents in the U.S. has even found high levels of discrepancy between mothers' and fathers' reports on who the child lives with, highlighting the difficulty of collecting reliable data on father involvement (Waller & Jones, 2014). Gender discrepancies in reporting have also been found among researchers interested in the gender division of housework (Batalova & Cohen, 2002). Such discrepancies are at least partly attributable to gender differences in the construction of parenting itself which lead to different sets of expectations about what fathers ought to be doing for their children. As such, the role of gender is not particularly surprising. What is puzzling is the scant attention paid to the gender dimensions of the research process itself which may be contributing to these discrepancies and the knowledge that results.

In an effort to address this gap, we apply West and Zimmerman's (1987) "doing gender" and Deutsch's (2007) "undoing gender" theories to examine three domains of the research process, and in particular quantitative research, in one study conducted in urban South Africa. We draw on the Birth to Twenty Plus (Bt20+) cohort study to examine: 1) the research design, including questions and how they are asked, created by researchers and governed by beliefs and practices within the research community; 2) the context of the interview for data collection, as a structured interaction between respondent and interviewer; and 3) data analysis and interpretation, which involves the researcher engaging dialectically with the data produced and existing knowledge in the field. Our objective is to show how specific interactions inherent in each of these research dimensions present spaces to maintain, and possibly strengthen existing, gendered scripts about fathering, while at the same time providing opportunities to challenge and ultimately transform these processes, the knowledge that they produce and the practices that they sustain.

The Bt20+ is a long-term birth cohort study in the greater Johannesburg-Soweto municipality, initiated in 1989 as an observational, ecological study of human development, health and well-being, following subjects from before birth into young adulthood. The majority of families live in socioeconomically disadvantaged circumstances. Prospective data collection began in the ante-natal period and has continued with yearly follow-ups. The study covers a broad range of topics including family dynamics, parenting, childcare, cognitive development, and social experiences at home, school, and in the community. With the exception of data collection that involved physical measurements and pubertal development, almost all the interviews were administered by female interviewers. Even though all four major population groups<sup>1</sup> are included in the data, we use data only from Black families, who comprise the vast majority of the cohort and the population of the Johannesburg area, to limit complexity introduced by cultural differences in parenting norms and family structure. Data on father involvement included extent of contact with child, and provision of financial and emotional support. Provision of financial support is operationalized by the question: "In the last month, has biological father provided any monetary or non-monetary support to child?" Emotional support is based on responses to the question, "Who supports the child and how (with choices including biological father and emotional support)?"

### THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

Even though Apartheid is over in South Africa, its effects linger on, particularly for Black Africans. Nowhere is this more evident than in family life and interventions aimed at ad-

dressing particular challenges that Black African families face. First, because of high rates of non-marital childbearing and multi-partner fertility, there often exists a set of competing and sometimes conflictual agendas around the care of children (Madhavan, Harrison & Sennot, 2013). Second, very high unemployment rates, particularly among Black African men, make it extremely difficult for fathers to meet cultural expectations of being financial providers for their children (Hunter, 2006; Wilson, 2006). Third, gender roles within Black African communities are being profoundly altered through reconfiguration of employment and educational opportunities and socio-cultural norms (Hunter, 2010; Makusha et al., 2013; Walker, 2005). Fourth, there have been a number of high profile campaigns aimed at discouraging violence towards women and children and promoting responsible fatherhood.

A lot of attention has been paid to “absent fathers,” partly a holdover from the *Apartheid* era labor migration, which separated Black African men from their families, but also a reflection of the high rates of union dissolution resulting in children living with mothers and maternal kin (Madhavan, 2010; Preston-Whyte, 1993; Russell, 2003). The most recent data show that only 28.9 percent of Black children in South Africa live with both parents (Stats SA, 2012). Where these men are in contact with their children, it is often limited to the provision of financial support—a phenomenon locally dubbed “ATM dads” (Mazemba, Thomson-DeBoor & Mphaka, 2013). Other work has provided a somewhat different portrayal by showing that substantial proportions of these fathers are involved in a range of ways in their children’s lives (Madhavan, Townsend & Garey, 2008; Makusha et al., 2013). Qualitative research in South Africa has attempted to capture the voices of fathers. Indeed, Swartz and Bhana (2009) provide a sympathetic portrayal of Black African and Colored teenage fathers by highlighting the tension between their desires to be involved with their children and the push back that comes from the mothers and maternal kin of the children because the men fail to provide financial support. Several of the chapters in Richter and Morrell’s edited volume on South African fatherhood (2006) are devoted to the views of fathers themselves (Khunou, 2006; Ramphele & Richter, 2006), and suggest that fathers, in particular Black fathers, want more rights and greater influence in decision making regarding their children.

Despite these efforts, the “absent” father image of Black African men continues to dominate. Yet we have a limited understanding of father involvement given that little is known about those fathers who may not be physically present but are involved with their children (Hosegood & Madhavan, 2010). It has also resulted in a virtual absence of research on consistency in reporting on fathering across respondents. However, inconsistencies in reporting make for only one aspect of the larger fathering research process that both sustains gender differences and provides spaces for resisting dominant gendered scripts about parenting. We now turn to the theoretical grounding to examine the stages in this process.

### “DOING” AND “UNDOING” GENDER

At its core, “doing gender” means creating difference between men and women that are neither natural nor essential, yet once created, are treated as such. In this sense, gender is considered as “routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 125). The emphasis on gender roles being produced and reproduced through continuous interactions among participants is the distinguishing feature of the concept. While recognizing its power, Deutsch (2007) suggests that its architects put too much focus on the inevitability of “doing gender” such that traditional gender roles and gender inequalities are left unshaken. She argues, instead, that these same everyday interactions can be sites of resistance and transformation of gender roles in order to “undo gender.” Taken

together, the two complimentary concepts lend themselves very effectively to examining the subject of this inquiry. In particular, we focus on three domains of the research process on fathering: 1) the research design; 2) the interview context; and 3) data analysis and interpretation. We treat each domain as an interactional context in which to examine how gender differences are maintained through the process of “doing gender” and how opportunities for change are brought about through “undoing gender.” Figure 1 shows a generic representation of these three domains and the linkages within and across them.

In it, each of the double-sided arrows signifies an interaction, whereas the single-headed arrows stand for a one-way flow of knowledge. The research process usually begins on the left side with the researcher engaging with existing literature and theories and possibly, interviewers and local informants, to inform decisions about design and, in particular, the choice of respondents. These decisions feed into the interview context where interviewers directly interact with respondents. The responses that result from these interchanges comprise the data that researchers interact with to arrive at findings from the study. When data come from different types of respondents, it is the researcher who is usually charged with the task of reconciling or, at the least, interpreting differences in reporting. The whole process is cyclical with new knowledge feeding back to inform subsequent studies. We now discuss, in detail, how “doing” and “undoing” gender is reflected in each of these interactional domains with respect to research on fathering using the Bt20+ study and data to support our claims.

**Research Design**

Researchers decide on the design of the study and, in particular, the choice of respondents, based on their reading of the literature, choice of theory, resource constraints and counsel from collaborators who have familiarity with ground context. This creates the interactional

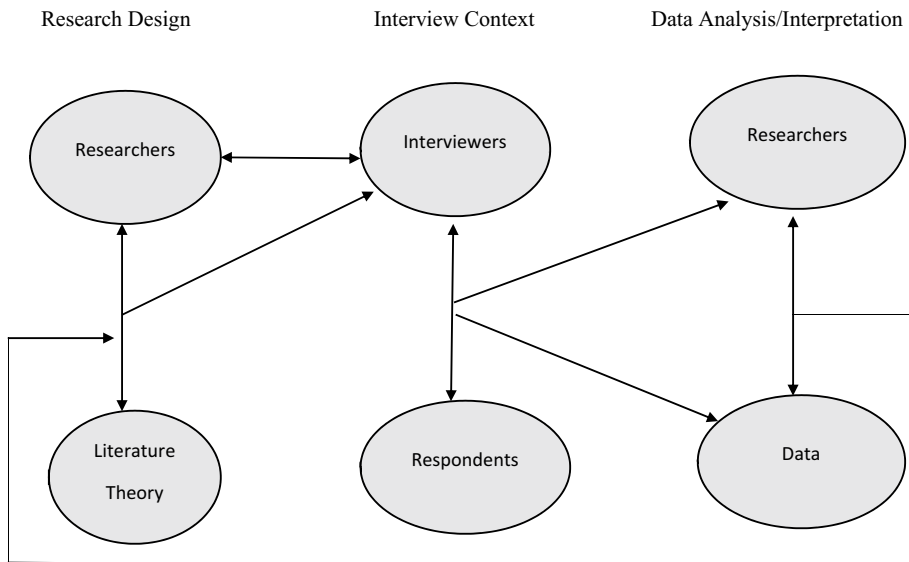


Figure 1. Interactional dimensions of research process.

site for researchers to do and undo gender. Women, specifically mothers, are most often asked about fathering because they are perceived to be more closely linked to children and, therefore, more knowledgeable about parenting. Moreover, fathers are often difficult to recruit and retain in research because they may either not be available at the times interviews are arranged or simply not interested (Mitchell et al., 2007). In some cases, fathers may be discouraged to participate by mothers (Fagan & Barnett, 2003). Indeed, in the South African context, the legacy of male labor migration coupled with high rates of out-of-wedlock child-bearing has made it exceedingly challenging to locate and recruit fathers for research purposes. However, researchers unwittingly contribute to this process with their own expectations of what men and fathers can and are willing to do. If one believes that answering questions about parenting is not part of men's gender repertoire, then there is little point in making the effort to recruit fathers into research on fathering and parenting. This may be particularly apparent when studies are working with tight resource constraints whether in terms of time or money. Several recent efforts have used innovative approaches to recruit and retain fathers (Cabrera et al., 2002; Mitchell et al., 2007; Sherr et al., 2006; Tach et al., 2014), and have demonstrated the enormous value in getting responses directly from them.

In Bt20+, similar to most studies on child development, mothers and women more generally have been the primary respondents about most topics, including fathering, throughout the course of the study. To a large extent, this is due to conditions that were present at the start of the study. Because the cohort was enrolled during the antenatal period and the initial focus was on infancy and early childhood, much of the data collection focused on breastfeeding and other infant care issues, topics on which mothers are the most appropriate informants. In addition, a large proportion of mothers (38.6%) were single at the beginning of the study as a result of delayed marriage, union dissolution and excess male mortality. Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents to all questionnaires related specifically to fathers and fathering in Bt20: 1) the "Perceptions of Fathering" questionnaire administered in 2004 when the cohort was age 14; 2) the prospective data collection on father involvement in 2004 and 2005 when the cohort was 14 and 15, respectively; and 3) a retrospective questionnaire administered in 2008 when the cohort was age 18. It also shows the proportions of children who had a father and/other adult male present across all respondent categories and the proportions with deceased fathers and mothers. We consider "other adult males" as an important respondent category because of the importance of social fathering in Black African communities (Mkhize, 2006).

The majority of questionnaires on perceptions of fathering was answered by biological fathers (64%) and the rest by other adult men (36%). Over 75 percent of prospective questionnaires at years 14 and 15 were answered by biological mothers followed by other adult women who answered another 18.4 percent and 16.1 percent of questionnaires, respectively, in each year. By contrast, less than 5 percent were answered by biological fathers, with another 2 percent answered by other adult men. As explained earlier, biological mothers and female caregivers became, through necessity and design, the *de facto* respondents in Bt20. However, it is important to consider life course dynamics of family structure and changing needs of children as they age and the evolution of the research process in response. For example, it is notable that at each of the three time points in which questionnaires on fathering were administered (2004, 2005 and 2008), over 30 percent of children in the cohort had their fathers living in the household with them and 16 to 22 percent of children had other adult men as co-residents in those years. Yet only about 4.5 percent of fathers and 2.0 percent of adult men served as respondents in those time periods. While male mortality for

Table 1  
*Distribution of Respondents to Questionnaires on Fathering, Birth to Twenty*

	Bio Father	Other Adult Male	Bio Mother	Other Adult Female	Total
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	
Perceptions of Fathering (year 14)	453 (64)	248 (35)	N/A	N/A	708
Prospective Questionnaire (year 14)	65 (4.5)	24 (1.6)	1097 (75.4)	268 (18.4)	1455
Father Present			420 (38.3)	46 (17.2)	525 (36.1)
Other Adult Male Present			210 (19.1)	100 (37.3)	326 (22.4)
Father Dead	N/A	5	144	47	
Mother Dead	2	6	N/A	81	
Prospective Questionnaire (year 15)	66 (4.9)	21 (1.6)	1016 (76.5)	214 (16.1)	1328
Father Present			383 (37.7)	30 (14)	460 (34.6)
Other Adult Male Present			162 (15.9)	70 (32.7)	220 (16.6)
Father Dead	N/A	5	123	41	
Mother Dead	2	10	N/A	72	
Retrospective Module (year 18)	68 (4.4)	23 (1.5)	1179 (75.7)	278 (17.9)	1557
Father Present			465 (39.4)	9 (3.2)	506 (32.5)
Other Adult Male Present			N/A	N/A	N//A
Father Dead	N/A	10	236	95	
Mother Dead	0	13	N/A	174	

*Note:* numbers do not sum up to the Total because of missing data.

Black men is high in South Africa, the death of fathers does not explain the small number of fathers who were respondents in these questionnaires.

Taken together, these distributions underscore the ever present practice of “doing gender”. Not only are women the ones actively sought out, but little effort is made to verify the responses with fathers who may be present. Women are assumed to have reliable information about father involvement which, in turn, makes it unnecessary to seek out fathers or other adult men. The anticipated interaction between interviewer and respondent provides the site at which researchers apply gendered expectations. Moreover, these appear to be unchanging over the life course of children and throughout the duration of the study itself. The choice of respondents does not change as new topics, such as fathering, are introduced over the course of the study. Mothers and female caregivers, once established as key respondents, remain so throughout the life of the study. However, these numbers also show that the opportunity exists for recruiting more fathers and men, to help undo the gendered nature of the recruiting process. Moreover, it underscores Deutsch’s (2007) point that gendered processes are not static and therefore there are continual opportunities to challenge dominant scripts. Nowhere can this be more effectively operationalized than in the context of longitudinal studies in which the choice of respondents can and should vary over time in response to the topics that are introduced over the course of the study. The fact that a perceptions-of-fathering module was included in life year 14 is a notable strength of the Bt20+ study as it shows that the researchers were attuned to changing life course conditions. Moreover, it offers at least some insight into how fathers think about their roles. More can be done with a longitudinal design but this necessitates a conscious shift in researchers’ expectations about who has legitimacy as reliable respondents. Practically, it would mean that more fathers are actively recruited, not as substitutes for mothers, but in addition to them. This would provide space for all respondents, women and men, to present their respective scripts which may, in turn, yield new insights into perceptions and practices of fathering.

### **The Interview Context**

The interview context may further influence the ways in which male and female respondents provide answers (Williams & Heikes, 1993). Therefore, it can serve as an interactional site between interviewers and respondents for “doing” and “undoing” gender. All participants — men and women — are acutely aware of their expected gender roles and follow culturally prescribed scripts to structure responses. In the South African context, given the value attached to financial provision, mothers are often unforgiving of men’s inability to provide, even in light of high unemployment. It is possible that fathers may internalize this responsibility to such an extent that they themselves provide reports that downplay their contributions. Deutsch (1999) has noted that respondents who are more wedded to traditional gender norms about parenting are more likely to underreport fathers’ roles. Other scholars have noted how the research interview is itself a venue for “doing gender” particularly when the interviewer is female and the respondent male, as this presents an occasion for masculinity to be played out (Pini, 2005; Presser, 2005); or when the interviewer is male and respondent female, which would necessitate a display of “muted masculinity” by the interviewer (Ortiz, 2005). For the issue at hand, this may mean that fathers are more inclined to draw attention to their roles as financial providers to female interviewers.

Conversely, interviewers can use the interview process as a site of resistance to normative prescriptions of gendered roles. When fathers are given the chance to respond, they gain agency in constructing the narrative about fathering. Male interviewers, drawing on shared



cultural models, may be able to offer a comfortable space for fathers to speak candidly about the challenges they face. Additionally, both male and female interviewers could use their positions to probe strategically into key responses to both confirm answers given but also to elicit more nuanced responses. For example, by paying close attention to inconsistencies in responses across questions, interviewers could ask follow-up questions that open up opportunities for greater reflection and possible modification of responses.

Table 2 shows how biological fathers and other adult men responded to a series of statements about their perceived roles and responsibilities towards children in the Bt20+ study. Three patterns stand out in these responses. First, the vast majority of biological fathers and other adult men are in agreement with most of the statements presented to them. Second, financial provision is widely accepted as one of the primary responsibilities of fathering and is closely linked to fathers' rights over the child. Third, most fathers see their responsibilities towards their children continuing even in the presence of the mother's new partner. Some might be quick to write off these answers as biased by social desirability or selection effects which predispose these fathers to agree so strongly with these statements. Indeed, when we compared children whose fathers did and did not respond to this questionnaire on selected characteristics, we found that fathers from a higher social class and with multiple children were more likely to have responded. However, neither factor precludes consideration of patterns that, we suggest, reflect “doing” and “undoing” gender. For example, 85 percent of respondents say that “not being part of a child's life would be one of the worst things that could happen in life” which is consistent with cultural norms about the importance of fatherhood as a core component of masculinity (Mkhize, 2006). In this sense, these respondents could be seen as actively displaying their expected gender roles most directly to the interviewer, who, in most cases, was female, but also indirectly ensuring that they are meeting gendered expectations of their communities. Interestingly, agreement to this statement may also be a reflection of more recent discourses around responsible fatherhood meant to upend existing negative stereotypes of men and fathers as being detached from their children. Either way, they are more in line with Deutsch's (2007) argument that conforming to expected gender norms need not necessarily sustain gender inequality and that cultural expectations may trump gender norms.

When asked about specific responsibilities towards children, a consistently high proportion of respondents agree that they should be fulfilling each of the specified roles. Providing financial support, protection and moral guidance are all consistent with cultural expectations of fathers in South Africa (Milkie & Denny, 2014; Natalier & Hewitt, 2010; Wall & Arnold, 2007; Yoshida, 2012) but also reify gender differences whereby men are assumed to be more powerful, skilled, and morally superior to women. Given that most interviewers were female, this type of gender display is all the more likely. However, it is somewhat surprising that such a high proportion state that they ought to be providing love and affection which resonates with discourses around masculinity that were evident among Black middle class men in the 1950s in South Africa (Clowes, 2006) and also more recent attempts to present men as emotionally engaged. In this instance, they could be seen as resisting or challenging normative expectations of men and fathers. While this may have been done for the benefit of the interviewer, it is nonetheless notable that they want to present themselves as loving and caring, qualities usually associated with women.

Perhaps the most revealing responses about “doing gender” concerns the role of financial provision. Not only do fathers consider it their primary responsibility and a key feature of a masculine identity (Hunter, 2006), but they also connect it to their ability to exercise rights over their children. Even in circumstances where many men cannot afford to provide fi-

Table 2  
Perceptions of Fathering as Reported by Biological Fathers (N = 453) and Other Adult Males (N = 248)

	Biological Fathers	Other Adult Males	Biological Fathers	Other Adult Males
Not being a part of my child's life would be one of the worst things that could happen to me				
Yes	384 (84.8)	211 (85.1)	434 (95.8)	237 (95.6)
No	47 (10.4)	29 (11.7)	13 (2.9)	6 (2.4)
If a father provides financial support to the mother for the children, he should have the right to see the child regularly				
Yes				
No				
If a father provides financial support to the mother for the children, he should have the right to make decisions about the child				
Yes	431 (95.1)	237 (95.6)	419 (92.5)	202 (81.5)
No	8 (1.8)	5 (2)	22 (4.9)	41 (16.5)
If a father can't afford to provide financial support, he should have the right to see the child regularly				
Yes	434 (95.8)	242 (97.6)	332 (73.3)	180 (72.6)
No	3 (.7)	0	95 (21)	58 (23.4)
If a father can't afford to provide financial support, he should have the right to see the child regularly				
Yes				
No				
If a father can't afford to provide financial support, he should have the right to see the child regularly				
Yes	438 (96.7)	243 (98)	278 (61.4)	119 (48)
No	2 (.4)	0	144 (31.8)	113 (45.6)
If a mother has a new partner, do you think the baby's biological father should be required to provide financial support to his baby?				
Yes	433 (95.6)	241 (97.2)	388 (85.7)	214 (86.3)
No	4 (.9)	3 (1.2)	48 (10.6)	25 (10.1)

Note: % do not add up to 100 because of missing data.

nancial support, 21 percent say that they should *not* have the right to even see their children and 32 percent say that they should *not* have decision-making rights over the child. This suggests that even pervasive structural inequalities do not provide a legitimate reason to dislodge firmly entrenched gender and cultural norms about the role of financial provision in establishing and maintaining a relationship with children. In this sense, it is useful to consider West and Zimmerman’s distinction between the individual level of “doing gender” and the institutional level, e.g., the labor market, which conditions these interactional processes. However, the fact that the majority of respondents believe that their right to see their children and be involved in their lives should not be dependent on their ability to provide may be indicative of men actively challenging such norms. Finally, 86 percent of fathers report that they should continue providing financial support even if the mother has a new partner. This may be indicative of a conscious effort to use biological fathering to define the relationship to the child. In both instances, there is some evidence that the interview circumstance provides men with the opportunity to resist and even challenge gendered discourses about the roles and responsibilities of fathers. Perceptions and beliefs, while important in giving voice to fathers, may not be consistent with actual practice, to which we turn next.

In moving from perceptions of fathering to actual practice, we pay close attention to the gender of the respondent. Table 3 presents distributions of selected aspects of biological father involvement as reported by biological fathers/adult men, biological mothers, and other adult women prospectively and retrospectively. Deceased fathers are excluded from the table. The responses of other adult men are combined with those of biological fathers because there were so few respondents. It should be noted that each set of responses pertain to different groups of children. However, the difference in distributions across respondent categories are, nonetheless, quite instructive in uncovering how gender influences the reporting of obligations and responsibilities around child care in the context of an interview.

For the prospective questionnaires, the differences across respondents for each of the categories of father involvement are quite striking. When asked whether there was contact between biological father and the child at year 14, 78 percent of biological fathers responded “yes” compared to 69 percent of biological mothers and 50 percent of adult females. The differences are starker still for questions regarding the provision of financial and emotional support in year 15. Whereas 75 and 58 percent of biological fathers responded affirmatively to each question, respectively, only 51.4 and 24 percent of biological mothers said the same and a low of 23 percent and 5 percent of adult females responded affirmatively to the same questions, respectively. When asked to consider these same dimensions retrospectively as a percentage of the child’s life, there is greater similarity between the responses of biological fathers and biological mothers on the extent of contact but the differences for financial and emotional support remain pronounced. Moreover, other female respondents tend to report particularly low levels of biological father involvement over the life course in all three dimensions.

There are two obvious explanations that need to be considered: 1) these are not all the same children; and 2) the fathers who respond have characteristics that are correlated with greater involvement with their children. To address issues of selection among the children and the fathers, we compared the groups on selected characteristics, i.e. social class, child sex, birth order and found few significant differences. Children whose fathers were in a higher social class with siblings were more likely to have their fathers respond to the year 15 questionnaire and the retrospective questionnaire. While it is likely that the fathers who respond to these questionnaires are selected on other characteristics not available in our

Table 3  
*Biological Fathering in Practice Reported Prospectively and Retrospectively by Type of Respondent*

	Bio. Father/ Other Adult Male N (%)	Bio. Mother N (%)	Other Adult Female N (%)
PROSPECTIVE (year 14)			
Bio. father contact with child	64 (78.1)	643 (69)	107 (50)
N*	82	932	214
PROSPECTIVE (year 15)			
Bio. father provides any type of material/ financial support	57 (75)	449 (51.4)	38 (22.9)
Bio. father provides emotional support	44 (57.9)	216 (24.7)	9 (5.4)
N*	76	874	166
RETROSPECTIVE (at age 18)			
% of Child's Life Bio. Father in Contact			
0	8 (9.9)	21 (2.2)	90 (49.2)
1-50%	4 (4.9)	215 (22.8)	13 (7.1)
51-89%	14 (17.3)	102 (10.8)	12 (6.6)
90-100%	51 (63)	587 (62.3)	66 (36.1)
Missing	4 (4.9)	18 (1.9)	2 (1.1)
% of Child's Life Bio. Father Provided Financial Support			
0	14 (17.3)	126 (13.4)	120 (65.6)
1-50%	4 (4.9)	211 (22.4)	15 (8.2)
51-89%	14 (17.3)	149 (15.8)	12 (6.6)
90-100%	45 (55.7)	439 (46.6)	34 (18.6)
Missing	4 (4.9)	18 (1.9)	2 (1.1)
% of Child's Life Bio. Father Provided Emotional Support			
0	22 (27.2)	504 (53.5)	168 (91.8)
1-50%	2 (2.5)	33 (3.5)	0 (0)
51-89%	3 (3.7)	95 (10.1)	0 (0)
90-100%	53 (65.4)	307 (32.6)	15 (8.2)
Missing	1 (1.2)	4 (4)	0 (0)
N*	81	943	183

\* The Ns are different from those in Table 1 because fathers who died before year 14, year 15, and year 18 respectively have been removed.

data, it is unlikely that selection alone would explain the observed differences. By reporting that biological fathers are not providing financially, whether accurately or not, women are likely expressing their displeasure with these fathers for not only meeting their financial responsibilities but also for falling short on other expectations as well. They are enacting their culturally scripted gender roles both in front of a female interviewer as well as among their families and peers. The fact that only 22 percent of biological mothers and 5 percent of other adult women report that fathers are emotionally engaged with their children suggests that women may not have the necessary scripts to acknowledge men's emotional attachment to their children. In other words, they are actively maintaining distinct differences between what is considered masculine and feminine behaviors.

Conversely, the fact that such high proportions of fathers and men report strong attachment may reflect either an effort by male respondents to defy the cultural stereotypes of men

being emotionally aloof and/or an attempt to meet new or different gendered expectations of parenting within the interview context which in this case, involved a female interviewer. Either way, their responses underscore the point made by West and Zimmerman that to “do gender” does not necessarily mean to live up to normative conceptions of femininity or masculinity but to engage in behavior at the risk of gender assessment. Alternatively, we might see it as a concerted effort to thwart the normative expectation through actively “undoing gender.” This may be done purely for the benefit of the interviewer in the limited setting of the interview context or it may reflect a subtle attempt by men to offer a new discourse on parenting to both men and women in their communities. Either way, it underscores the importance of being attuned to the ways in which respondents are engaging in a discourse that is as much about their existing or aspirational roles as men and women as it is about father involvement.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

It has long been noted, particularly among feminist researchers, that researchers’ own subjective notions of who should be doing what, informs how we accord weight to the responses that are given (Harding, 1993; Mohanty, 1984, 2003). This is most apparent in analyzing differences and discrepancies in reporting. For example, it has been shown that discrepancies in reporting on with whom the child lives occur frequently when comparing the reports of non-cohabiting parents. This is explained as the result of confusion brought on by increasing complexity in family arrangements and parenting particularly those that involve non-residential parenting (Mchale, Waller & Pearson, 2012; Waller, 2012; Waller & Jones, 2014). We suggest that there is considerable value in explaining differences in reporting through the lens of “doing” and “undoing” gender. On the one hand, we may interpret consistency in reporting as a reflection of the enduring power of gendered norms on parenting. Taking this approach, we, as analysts, are “doing gender” by deferring to the status quo dictated by cultural/local norms. Similarly, where there is a discrepancy, we may privilege mothers’ responses based on explicit or implicit agreement with gendered scripts that emphasize the integral role of mothers in knowledge production about child rearing needs. On the other hand, we might adopt an approach more in line with “undoing gender” and consider inconsistencies and differences in reporting as terrain to examine the extent to which gender differences are actively challenged.

The graph in Figure 2 shows how fathers and mothers/other women report on father involvement in practice relative to fathers’ perception of the importance of these roles. High levels of agreement (over 90 percent) are found between practice and perception on father contact across all respondents. Put simply, when fathers say that they should be present in a child’s life, most respondents report that they actually are. However, this is not the case for financial support provision and emotional engagement where we see greater divergence between perceptions and practice and notable differences across respondents. First, there is lower level of agreement between practice and perceptions even among male respondents (82 percent for financial support and 63 percent for emotional engagement). Second, there is even lower level of agreement between practice and perceptions when the respondent is the mother or another adult female. Only about 74 percent and 45 percent of female respondents report that fathers are actually providing financial and emotional support, respectively.

What do we learn about “doing” and “undoing” gender from these data? One explanation for the high levels of agreement between perceptions and practice across respondents for fa-

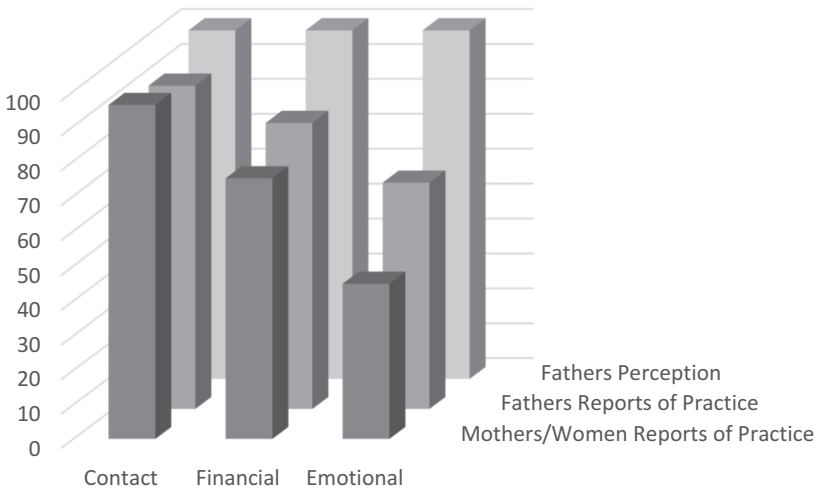


Figure 2. What do fathers say they should do vs. reports of what they actually do in practice?

ther contact is that this aspect of involvement may be the least threatening to gender scripts. In other words, reporting that fathers are in contact with children allows both men and women to “do gender” in a way that does not fundamentally betray any prescribed role. Alternatively, the consistency in reporting on contact also fits with the idea of *accounts* (Heritage, 1984) through which members of a society regularly render a status report on others which may include both praise and criticism. Such a position could be seen as more liberating than the more conventional “doing gender” approach might accord. The other two domains are more contentious. For financial provision, the relatively high levels of consistency among male respondents is in line with men’s efforts at both being true to gendered norms about fathering responsibilities but also to their own stated beliefs. In this sense, it can be seen as a double display of expected gender roles. Women, on the other hand, may be more circumspect about reporting affirmatively on this dimension regardless of men’s stated commitment to this aspect of fathering. In other words, the interplay between fathers’ perceptions and their practice is not as important as their own level of satisfaction about fathers’ roles as providers. Emotional engagement is clearly difficult even for male respondents who may simply find it off-script to identify themselves as emotionally engaged in practice even if they reported as such on perceptions. Women appear to be even more reticent about acknowledging this aspect of fathering in practice even if fathers place high value because “doing” so may blur gender distinctions that they are actively attempting to maintain. Alternatively, the fact that the majority of male-respondent reports on practice are in agreement with their perceptions may reflect a subtle shift in men’s efforts to make good on their perceptions in a domain conventionally reserved for women.

## DISCUSSION

Our objective in this article is to advance our understanding of how gender influences (in particular quantitative) research on fathering, using two influential theoretical frameworks:

West and Zimmerman’s (1987) “doing gender” and Deutsch’s (2007) “undoing gender.” In particular, we were motivated by the concern that so much of what we know about fathering comes from mothers and women, not fathers themselves. Whereas extant research has repeatedly uncovered notable inconsistencies in reporting on father involvement across respondents, very little attention has been paid to the gender dimensions of the research process itself that may contribute to producing these differences in reporting and the knowledge that results. Moreover, applying the theoretical levers of “doing” and “undoing” gender allows us to consider how social science research on fathering sustains gendered processes and inequalities, but also opens up spaces that could be used to resist and alter these paradigms. Our focus on South Africa provides a needed contribution to the literature on research methods and fathering research, which currently is dominated by studies based in Western contexts. More importantly, South Africa offers an ideal context in which to consider both the intransigence of gender norms in the perception and actuality of fathering and the multiple forces at play that seek to upend them. In this sense, our findings are likely to have broad relevance to a range of contexts both across and within countries.

We focused on three specific domains of the research process on fathering—the research design, in which decisions about respondents are usually made; the interview context; and data analysis and interpretation—because each stage presents an interactional context in which to examine both “doing” and “undoing” gender. By taking this approach, we situate researchers, interviewers, respondents, existing bodies of knowledge and new data in dialectical relationships with one another such that actors are constantly assessing the risks and benefits of upholding or resisting dominant gender scripts. This may take the forms of researchers grappling with existing bodies of knowledge which offer a range of views on fathering, the ground reality and practical challenges of recruiting fathers. Or it may play out in the more intimate interaction that takes place between interviewers and the selected respondents, each of whom is acutely aware of his/her positionality vis-à-vis the other but also is beholden to wider audiences (e.g. families, communities) and larger socio-political structures. Finally, researchers often find themselves in the heart of the dialectic during the process of analysis when they attempt to make sense of reports from various respondents. Throughout the entire process, all actors are influenced by their own subjectivities which influence all interactional domains.

Our findings show evidence of both “doing” and “undoing” gender in each of the three domains. In the design phase when researchers arrive at decisions regarding selection of respondents, it is clear that mothers and women are, by far, the most common respondents. While fully appreciating the difficulty of locating fathers and other men as respondents, the analysis points to the enduring power of gendered norms that accord greater legitimacy to mothers as reliable respondents. This is made evident in two ways: 1) fathers and other men were, in fact, listed as member of the household and therefore, contactable, in a surprisingly high proportion of interviews in which mothers or other women served as respondents; and 2) no attempt was made to alter the recruitment strategy as children aged out of early childhood during which mothers may comfortably claim greater legitimacy on matters related to child rearing. However, it is precisely this feature of all longitudinal studies, along with the fact that fathers may, in fact, be more accessible than thought to be, that also opens up possibilities to recruit more fathers and men as respondents whereby providing opportunities to have multiple discourses on fathering. Moving to the interview context, our data suggest that both men and women are strongly influenced by gendered scripts of fathers’ roles in the way they answer questions about what fathers should be doing and what they actually do in practice. This is particularly notable in the provision of financial support,

an expectation of fathers shared by men and women and one that is closely linked to fathers' access to children. Conversely, the provision of emotional support is considered to be a clearly demarcated feminine role. Once again, however, there are subtle indications of resistance to these norms in the form of men voicing agreement with being emotionally engaged with children. Whether this is really a harbinger for change is difficult to say but the very fact that the majority of male respondents are willing to, at least, say that they should be emotionally present is notable. Finally, our scrutiny of reporting consistency shows that considerable differences exist between how mothers and female respondents report on father involvement in practice, particularly emotional engagement, and fathers' stated perceptions about their roles.

In using a dual "doing-undoing gender" framework to understand the role of gender in the research process and interpretation of data on fathering, our intent is not to deny the critical role that mothers play in the lives of children. The latter role, we know from scores of studies, is essential for children's welfare (Arendell, 2000; Bowlby, 1951; Hobcraft, 1993; Stolz et al., 2005) and, quite often, more influential than fathers (Booth & Crouter, 1998). Nor is it to undermine the value of their own narratives which often are a valid reflection of what fathers do for their children (Dollahite, 2004). Our intention, rather, is to invite critical reflection on researchers' complicity in maintaining dominant gender paradigms through the research process and the possibilities to challenge them. Specifically, it calls for redoubling efforts to include fathers' own reports, either directly from them (preferred) or indirectly, through interviews with men with similar demographic characteristics which would provide some insight into possible sources of bias in mothers' reports but also contribute towards "undoing" gender in the research process. While by no means easy, the current historical moment appears to be an ideal time to consider such strategies because not only is there increased interest in fathering but a growing recognition that exclusive reliance on mothers' reports results in an incomplete picture, at best, of men's roles in parenting. Moreover, research in South Africa is poised to pioneer some of these changes because of academic and policy attention given to Black fathers. While the South African context is unique in many ways, observations made in our study are relevant to other contexts including the U.S. because what we have interpreted through the theoretical lens of "(un)doing gender" may be taken to reflect research practices on the topic of fathering generally if not universally. Therefore, we hope other researchers will build upon our effort to better understand how we "do gender" in our research and share ideas about how to "undo gender" in future work.

## REFERENCES

- Arendell, T. (2000). Conceiving and investigating motherhood: The decade's scholarship. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 62, 1192-1207.
- Batalova, J.A., & Cohen, P.N. (2002). Premarital cohabitation and housework: Couples in cross-national perspective. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 64(3), 743-755.
- Booth, A., & Crouter, A.C. (1998). *Men in families when do they get involved? What difference does it make*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Bowlby, J. (1951). *Maternal care and mental health*. New York, NY: Schocken.
- Cabrera, N., & Peters, E. (2000). Public policies and father involvement. *Marriage & Family Review*, 29(4), 295-314.
- Cabrera, N.J., & Brooks-Gunn, J., Moore, K., West, J., & Boller, K. (2002). Bridging research and policy: Including fathers of young children in national studies. In C. Tamis-LeMonda &



- N.J. Cabrera (Eds.), *Handbook of father involvement: Multidisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 489-524). New York, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Clowes, L. (2006). Men and children: Changing constructions of fatherhood in Drum magazine, 1951–1965. In L. Richter & R. Morrell (Eds.), *Baba: Men and fatherhood in South Africa* (pp. 108-120). Pretoria, South Africa: HSRC Press.
- Coley, R.L., & Morris, J.E. (2002). Comparing father and mother reports of father involvement among low-income minority families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 64, 982-997.
- Deutsch, F. (1999). *Halving it all: How equally shared parenting works*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Deutsch, F. (2007). Undoing gender. *Gender & Society*, 21(1), 106-127.
- Dollahite, D.C. (2004). A narrative approach to exploring responsible involvement of fathers with their special-needs children. In R.D. Day & M.E. Lamb (Eds.), *Conceptualizing and measuring father involvement* (pp. 93-110). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Fagan, J., & Barnett, M. (2003). The relationship between maternal gatekeeping, paternal competence, mothers' attitudes about the father role, and father involvement. *Journal of Family Issues*, 24, 1020-1043.
- Harding, S. (1993). Rethinking standpoint epistemology: “What is strong objectivity?” In L. Alcoff & E. Potter (Eds.), *Feminist epistemologies* (pp. 49-82). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Heritage, J. (1984). *Garfinkel and ethnomethodology*. New York, NY: Polity Press.
- Hobcraft, J. (1993). Women's education, child welfare, and child survival: A review of the evidence. *Health Transition Review: The Cultural, Social, and Behavioral Determinants of Health*, 3(2), 159-175.
- Hosegood, V., & Madhavan, S. (2013). Understanding fatherhood and father involvement in South Africa: Insights from surveys and population cohorts. *Fathering: A Journal of Theory, Research, and Practice about Men as Fathers*, 10(3), 257-273.
- Hunter, M. (2006). Father without amandla: Zulu-speaking men and fatherhood. In L. Richter & R. Morrell (Eds.), *Baba: Men and fatherhood in South Africa* (pp. 99-107). Pretoria, South Africa: HSRC Press.
- Hunter, M. (2010). *Love in the age of AIDS: Inequality, gender and rights in South Africa*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Khunou, G. (2006). Fathers don't stand a chance: Experiences of custody, access, and maintenance. In L. Richter & R. Morrell (Eds.), *Baba: Men and fatherhood in South Africa* (pp. 265-277). Pretoria, South Africa: HSRC Press.
- Madhavan, S. (2010). Early childbearing and kin connectivity in rural South Africa. *International Journal of Sociology of the Family*, 36(2), 139-157.
- Madhavan, S., Harrison, A., & Sennott, C. (2013). Management of non-marital fertility in two South African communities. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 15(5), 614-628.
- Madhavan, S., Townsend, N., & Garey, A. (2008). Absent breadwinners: Fathers' connections and paternal support in rural South Africa. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 34(3), 647-663.
- Makusha, T., Richter, L., Knight, L., Van Rooyen, H., & Bhana, D. (2013). “The good and the bad?” Childhood experiences with fathers and their influence on women's expectations and men's experiences of fathering in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. *Fathering: A Journal of Theory, Research, & Practice about Men as Fathers*, 11(2), 138-158.
- Mazemba, E.M., Thomson-DeBoor, H., & Mphaka, K. (2013). So we are ATM fathers: A study of absent fathers in Johannesburg. Report, Centre for Social Development in Africa.
- Mchale, J., Waller, M.R., & Pearson, J. (2012). Coparenting interventions for fragile families: What do we know and where do we need to go next? *Family Process*, 51(3), 284-306.
- Mikelson, K.S. (2008). He said, she said: Comparing mother and father reports of father involvement. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 70, 613-624.

- Milkie, M.A., & Denny, K.E. (2014). Changes in the cultural model of father involvement: Descriptions of benefits to fathers, children, and mothers in parents' magazine, 1926-2006. *Journal of Family Issues*, 35, 223-253.
- Mitchell, S.J., See, H.M., Tarkow, A.K.H., Cabrera, N., McFadden, K.E., & Shannon, J.D. (2007). Conducting studies with fathers: Challenges and opportunities. *Applied Development Science*, 11, 239-244.
- Mkhize, N. (2006). African traditions and the social, economic and moral dimensions of fatherhood. In L. Richter & R. Morrell (Eds.), *Baba: Men and fatherhood in South Africa* (pp. 183-200). Pretoria: HSRC Press.
- Mohanty, C.T. (1984). Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Boundary 2*, 12(3), 333-358.
- Mohanty, C.T. (2003). *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Natalier, K., & Hewitt, B. (2010). 'It's not just about the money': Non-resident fathers' perspectives on paying child support. *Sociology*, 44, 489-505.
- Ortiz, S.M. (2005). The ethnographic process of gender management: Doing the "right" masculinity with wives of professional athletes. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 11, 265-290.
- Pini, B. (2005). The third sex: Women leaders in Australian agriculture. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 12, 73-88.
- Presser, L. (2005). Negotiating power and narrative in research: Implications for feminist methodology. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 30, 2067-2090.
- Preston-Whyte, E. (1993). Women who are not married: Fertility, 'illegitimacy', and the nature of households and domestic groups among single African women in Durban. *South African Journal of Sociology*, 24(3), 63-71.
- Ramphela, M., & Richter, L. (2006). Migrancy, family dissolution and fatherhood. In L. Richter & R. Morrell (Eds.), *Baba: Men and fatherhood in South Africa* (pp. 73-81). Pretoria, South Africa: HSRC Press.
- Russell, M. (2003). Understanding black households: The problem. *Social Dynamics*, 29(2), 5-47.
- Seltzer, J.A., & Brandreth, Y. (1994). What fathers say about involvement with children after separation. *Journal of Family Issues*, 15(1), 49-77.
- Sherr, L., Davé, S., Lucas, P., Senior, R., & Nazareth, I. (2006). A feasibility study on recruiting fathers of young children to examine the impact of paternal depression on child development. *Child psychiatry and human development*, 36(3), 295-309.
- Stolz, H.E., Barber, B.K., & Olsen, J.A. (2005). Toward disentangling fathering and mothering: An assessment of relative importance. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67, 1076-1092.
- Swartz, S., & Bhana, A. (2009). *Teenage tata: Voices of young fathers in South Africa*. Cape Town, South Africa: HSRC Press.
- Tach, L., Edin, K., Harvey, H., & Bryan, B. (2014). Family complexity and father involvement from a father's Perspective. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 654, 169-184.
- Walker, L. (2005). Negotiating the boundaries of masculinity in post-Apartheid South Africa. In G. Reid & L. Walker (Eds.), *Men behaving differently: South African men since 1994* (pp. 1-20). Cape Town, South Africa: Double Storey Books.
- Wall, G., & Arnold, S. (2007). How involved is involved fathering? An exploration of the contemporary culture of fatherhood. *Gender & Society*, 21, 508-527.
- Waller, M.R. (2012). Cooperation, conflict, or disengagement? Coparenting styles and father involvement in fragile families. *Family Process*, 51(3), 325-342.
- Waller, M.R., & Jones, M.R. (2014). Who is the residential parent? Understanding discrepancies

- in unmarried parents' reports. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 76(1), 73-93.
- West, C., & Zimmerman, D.H. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender & Society*, 1(2), 125-151.
- Williams, C.L., & Heikes, J.E. (1993). The importance of researcher's gender in the in-depth interview: Evidence from two case studies of male nurses. *Gender and Society*, 7(2), 280-291.
- Yoshida, A. (2012). Dads who do diapers: Factors affecting care of young children by fathers. *Journal of Family Issues*, 33, 451-477.