Impossible Standards and Unlikely Trade-Offs: Can Fathers be Competent Parents and Professionals?

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This is the worst period in history to be a dad.
– Adam Carolla, in his book *Daddy Stop Talking* (2016).

The topic of fatherhood has garnered increased scholarly attention over the past several decades. Initially limited primarily to sociology, developmental psychology, and the humanities (Lamb 2004), management scholars are now focused on understanding fatherhood given the rise in dual career couples (e.g., Masterson and Hoobler 2015; Shockley and Allen 2018), and the availability of family friendly organizational policies (Allen 2001; Kossek and Lautsch 2018). Where prior literature recognized the important role that fathers play in the psychological wellbeing of their children (Yeung et al. 2001), the family unit (Lamb 2004; Yeung et al. 2001), and society as a whole (Dowd 2003), management literature considers the impact of fatherhood, and in particular, “involved fathers” – those who are more engaged, accessible and nurturing in their children’s lives – in the workplace. Research finds that when fathers are more involved with their children, they may experience increased job satisfaction, greater work-family enrichment and lower work-family conflict (Ladge et al. 2015). However, they may also face a backlash if involved fathering detracts from perceptions that they are ideal workers that can be fully present and devoted to work above all else (Coltrane et al. 2013; Williams et al. 2013; Rudman and Mescher 2013).

While fathers today are becoming more involved at home than in prior generations, scholars question just how “involved” involved fathering truly is (Wall and Arnold 2007), and the extent to which workplace and societal norms may limit a

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father's ability to actually enact such involvement (Williams et al. 2016). When men take their involvement in their child(ren)'s lives "too far," they may personally feel they are out of their comfort zone or may put others out of their comfort zone, particularly in contexts where traditional views of fatherhood (e.g., as household provider) persist. As the opening quote suggests, this could be considered "the worst" time to be a dad because now there is an expectation that fathers will not only be competent and committed professionals, but also competent and committed parents.

Comedian and author of *Daddy, Stop Talking*, Adam Carolla further lamented in an interview with *Men's Health Magazine*, "A certain amount of interaction between a father and his kids is necessary. . .but. . .it's not about logging the minutes you're spending with your kids. . .My kids, here's what they need. They need a lot of interaction with their mommy. And they need some interaction with their daddy. But mainly, they need to respect their dad. They need to say, 'I don't see my dad as much as I see my mom, but that's okay because my dad busts his tail for this family.'" While Carolla's sentiments are certainly not reflective of all dads' perspectives, in our own research of working fathers, we noted some implicit protests around the expectations facing dads today (Humberd et al. 2015; Ladge et al. 2015). One research participant, who was a relatively new father, admitted that he was surprised and even annoyed by his high level of involvement with his child relative to his spouse. Such views may be a reflection of outdated gender norms, or they could suggest that we are creating impossible standards for fathers, similar to those that have long plagued working mothers.

Many questions remain with respect to what it actually means to be an involved father today and the ways in which organizations can encourage a more holistic view of men as ideal parents *and* professionals. In this chapter, we reflect on these considerations by drawing from prior research and set an agenda for further examining fatherhood in an organizational context.

1 Traditional Notions of the Ideal Father in Work and Family Contexts

Idealized views of fatherhood have been characterized by a "deep-seated ambivalence" since the early 1800s (Pleck 1997:351, as cited in Burnett et al. 2011). Traditionally, an ideal father was a man viewed as the primary breadwinner (O'Brien and Shemilt 2003). While mothers were expected to intensely focus on children, fathers were expected to focus solely on work. In this traditional sense, the notion of an ideal father coincides with the notion of an ideal worker – someone who is fully devoted to one's organization taking little time for himself or family (Reid 2015; Williams 2001). To be an ideal worker, a father's primary responsibility to the family can only be to provide financial support with minimal caregiving expectations. Fathers who did engage in more childcare responsibilities than expected or

take time off for paternity leave might be seen as weak or “liberal sissy men” because “a real man works” (Weber 2013). While these views are largely seen as outdated, they continue to persist in depictions of fathers on television, in movies, and in the popular press, which emphasize the father as the sole provider of the family, who is often portrayed as a lazy, irresponsible, incompetent “part-time” parent (Nathanson and Young 2006; Wall and Arnold 2007).

Traditional expectations of fatherhood exist in response to masculine cultural norms tied to workplace norms that stipulate less involvement with family and more time in the office for men in particular (Cooper 2000; Coltrane 1997). A good dad, in the traditional sense, was someone who simply showed up to school events and engaged in few other childcare activities (Hochschild 1989), given his primary site of engagement was the workplace. Research finds that fathers receive a “fatherhood premium” at work, garnering higher earnings than childless men, because having children signals they have a family to support (e.g., Hodges and Budig 2010; Killewald 2013). Due to traditional beliefs that a father’s central role is to provide for his growing family, Dahl and colleagues suggest that male executives may “have an impulse to husband his firm’s resources for himself and his growing family, potentially at the expense of his employees by reducing their wages or increasing them less than he otherwise would have done” (Dahl et al. 2012:672). This research found that when male CEOs have children of their own, they pay themselves more, particularly when fathering a son; they also pay their employees “less generously” even more so when they have a daughter first rather than a son (Dahl et al. 2012). Thus, the transition to fatherhood influences men’s own values in ways that may reinforce traditional notions of fatherhood, and these reinforced views can have unintended organizational impacts.

On the home front, traditional notions of fatherhood are also reinforced by feminine norms and gender ideologies, which often determine paternal involvement (Bulanda 2004). In the United States, individuals are socialized to believe that men and women are associated with particular roles in the household, with women engaging in more of the housework and childcare activities than men (Coltrane and Ishii-Kuntz 1992). Even in couples with more egalitarian views, research suggests that after the birth of their first child, many couples tend to fall back on traditional gender roles (Coontz 1997). Similarly, in the most egalitarian societies where paternity leave is widely available and encouraged (e.g., Nordic countries), women still take substantially more time off after childbirth (OECD 2017). Research suggests that when men do engage in a high degree of parental involvement, it can lead some women to prevent their husband’s involvement because it violates the perception that a woman’s primary domain is in the home (e.g., Allen and Hawkins 1999). As Bulanda (2004:40) notes, “it may be that the gender ideology of a traditional wife leads to a lack of reinforcing behavior for a less traditional husband who attempts to become more involved with his children. Her belief that a man is not capable of nurturing or caring for children may lead her to limit the amount of her husband’s involvement.” Even when mothers welcome their spouses’s involvement, they may still believe that it infringes on their primary role or they may think that fathers do not have the skillset or ability to nurture their children (Allen and Hawkins

1999). Additionally, mothers are often shamed when they do not provide the primary care for their children (Cain Miller 2018). Together, these reinforcing dynamics make traditional notions of fathering – tied to work and masculinity – difficult to change.

2 Contemporary Fathers in Work and Family Contexts

“I’m a dad, not a hero. I’m also not babysitting them. I’m their dad.” – Peter Mountford.

Despite the cementing of traditional notions of fathering in societal and organizational contexts, recent scholarship explores the changing role of the father. Some suggest as a result of the Great Depression, men may have begun to be seen as poor, ill-fated providers (Lamb 2004), encouraging them to become more active, involved and nurturing parents (Griswold 1993; Pleck 2004). Further, the changing nature of family structures and increases in the number of dual career couples necessitated a multidimensional view of a father’s role, beyond simply a provider but also that of caregiver, role model/teacher, and protector (Lamb 2004). Researchers have documented the “modern” father from Western conceptualizations, where views have shifted from the father as the sole breadwinner and provider towards an idealized view of fathers as more involved in caregiving and emotionally present for their children (Burnett et al. 2011; Cabrera et al. 2000). The “involved father” is one who “should be flexible enough to both earn a wage and be able to help fix dinner and read a bedside story” (Burnett et al. 2011:164). In many ways, this new dad is beholden to similar expectations facing working mothers.

2.1 *The Upside of Involved Fathering*

Ensuing narratives suggest that the “involved father” benefits not only their children, but also their spouse and themselves. Greater paternal involvement may be a positive contributing factor to children’s educational attainment, adolescent behavior, and overall psychological well-being (Furstenberg Jr. and Harris 1993; Marsiglio et al. 2000). More involvement can also have positive impacts on the family’s overall well-being (Glass 1998), particularly when shared caregiving alleviates the burden experienced by many working mothers (Hochschild 1989). When fathers are active caregivers, they create a more equitable household (Coontz 2009, 2016) where children benefit from having two parents they can equally connect with (Deutsch 1999) and each partner feels less stressed, less guilty, and less career impact from family strains (Holcomb 2000). There are also intrinsic benefits for fathers when they are directly involved with their own children (Deutsch et al. 1993). Anecdotal experiences of fathers reflect such benefits: On a fathers blog, James Norton notes, “Speaking personally, I like changing diapers. Let me restate that: I take satisfaction

in changing diapers. Since breastfeeding isn't an option, it's an aspect of childcare where my own limited talents can contribute, if not actually shine. I like the post-diaper smiles. And I like taking my son on walks, and being around to catch all those silly-but-significant little developmental milestones. But most of all, I like knowing that I'm participating actively in raising him – we've been having dude time together since he was born, something that I hope continues for the rest of my life" (Norton 2013).

Involved fathering may also have positive impacts to organizations. In our own research, we found that the more time fathers spent with their children on a typical day, the more satisfied they were with their jobs and the less likely they were to want to leave their organizations (Ladge et al. 2015). Greater involvement was also associated with less work-family conflict and greater work-family enrichment for these fathers. In another study, we found that new fathers can benefit interpersonally at work with colleagues viewing them as more mature and serious, but with a softer side, once they become parents (Humberd et al. 2015). Recognizing fathers as involved parents can build camaraderie and support amongst working parents in organizations more broadly.

Given these positive outcomes, work-family support in organizations has become less about organizations solely supporting mothers, and more about considering how to help all workers in organizations thrive in their work and family lives through both policy reform and informal support (Harrington and Ladge 2009; Kelly et al. 2008). When fathers have access to and feel they can utilize workplace flexibility policies, they report increased job satisfaction, productivity and organizational commitment, and report having better relationships with their co-workers (Bowers 2014). These shifts may be attributed in particular to Millennial generation fathers in the workplace, who report a stronger desire than any other generation to be more involved with their children, viewing their fathering role as a combination of both breadwinner and caregiver (Harrington and Fraone 2016).

Even with these promising shifts, there are open questions as to what constitutes involvement. Many studies that track the household division of labor in families combine all aspects of childcare and housework, making it difficult to assess which aspects of fatherhood men spend the most time engaging in (Bulanda 2004). Further, there may be gender differences in terms of the type of involvement men have with their children, as compared to women, with fathers engaging in "play" with their children, while mothers are often focused on the caretaking and nurturing aspects of parenting (Lamb 2004). Some research finds that when fathers have less traditional attitudes about gender roles, they are more involved in a wide breadth of interactions with their children including leisure activities away from the home, working on projects, helping with homework or playing, having one-on-one conversations and watching television (Bulanda 2004). These complexities lend to questions about the boundaries of fathers' involvement, and potential downsides that can arise from expectations of involvement.

2.2 *The Downside of Involved Fathering*

While the above discussion certainly recognizes the positive aspects of involved fathering, fathers in dual career couples still face similar work-family balance challenges that mothers face, such as “always feeling rushed” (Livingston and Parker 2019) and never feeling fully engaged in either domain (Humberd et al. 2015). Unlike mothers however, men have fewer role models to look to for support and guidance on balancing work and family (Ladge and Greenberg 2019), and fathers may be less likely to express their desires for involvement fear of being seen as less of an ideal worker or less of a man (Behson 2013). Even though workplace flexibility are purported to be available for all employees, most managers and employees still associate these benefits with women more so than with men, contributing to beliefs that men will not need to adapt their careers to manage family as much as women (Burnett et al. 2011).

When fathers do make use of flexible work arrangements, they face a greater “flexibility stigma” – an informal penalty resulting from perceptions that one is uncommitted to their work if they make use of such arrangements – than women (Williams et al. 2016). Working fathers may even “fake” their hours to manage their needed flexibility while still appearing as a committed worker (Reid 2015); yet in doing so, these men may feel less authentic, and subsequently less engaged in their work. In some ways, it’s a difficult dilemma for working dads in organizations: if they make use of the work-family benefits available to them, they are seen as uncommitted, yet if they manage their flexibility in stealth ways, they feel less engaged and perhaps are less productive with their work. Some men have fought against these biases by protesting unequal treatment and taking legal action against their employers (Levs 2015; Johnston 2018), with over a quarter of child-care related discrimination cases filed by men in the past decade (Calvert 2016).

While workplaces may espouse to be receptive to men’s role as fathers, many organizations do not actually support these men in being active and involved caregivers, particularly as it relates to paternity leave. In the United States, only 12% of private sector employees have access to paid parental leave (U.S. Department of Labor 2015) and when it is offered, it is typically short, unpaid, or requires the use of vacation and sick time. Although the number of companies offering paternity leave has increased in the past decade (Harrington et al. 2014; Livingston 2014b), most American fathers still return to work within 2 weeks of their child’s birth (Harrington et al. 2014) and many choose to not even use any paternity leave at all, even when they have access to it (Williams 2013). Some research suggests that men may experience biases that can lead to decreased earnings when they do take paternity leave (Rege and Solli 2013), so it is not surprising that many fathers who do have access to leave say that they do not make use of such policies due to informal norms and workplace pressures in their organizations (Harrington et al. 2014). While maternity leave has become a generally accepted option for women, many organizations (including managers, and colleagues of the employees) still do not expect fathers to take leave; doing so, violates implicit norms

of masculinity, leaving men unable to benefit from any policies that may actually be offered to them.

Together, these norms and social pressures can result in longer-term career consequences for men who want to be involved dads, such as being passed up for promotions and depressed earnings (Coltrane et al. 2013), more harassment and general mistreatment (Berdahl and Moon 2013), and overall perceptions that they are uncommitted to their work (Behson 2013).

3 Reconciling the Old and New: Redefining Fatherhood

The picture for working fathers today is complex. Involved fathering is perhaps more accepted and encouraged today than ever before, yet the fatherhood role is still associated with the work domain more so than the family domain. Men face such high expectations of the type of fathers they should be, that it is hard to tell if it is even possible to reconcile these complexities in practice. Likewise, some argue that the father's role in a family has in fact not changed much at all (Wall and Arnold 2007), while other work suggests that fathers are taking on more family and childcare responsibilities in dual-income households (Parker et al. 2017). Further, fathers may perform specific tasks (e.g., watching children at a sporting event or assisting them with technologies) that are a unique form of involvement than is typically assessed or captured (Parker et al. 2017).

Given these variations in how involved fathering is understood and assessed, men themselves may be confused as to how best to reconcile these old and new fathering expectations. Fathers may receive more praise than women for completing ordinary parenting tasks, but face biases at work when adjusting their work to accommodate their family life (Coltrane et al. 2013; Rudman and Mescher 2013). Our own research findings about the positive workplace outcomes associated with involved fathering suggest that there may be an "optimal" amount of time that allows for such benefits to arise: In our study, fathers spent an average of only 2.5 h with their children during a typical work day (Ladge et al. 2015). A New York Times article aptly stated: "the power of expectations sheds light on why employers reward fatherhood—but only if they don't think men are spending too much time on it" (Cain Miller 2014). Further, even if men espouse a more involved fatherhood, their actual practices often diverge from such notions (Hochschild 1989). A key finding of study we collaborated on found that "while fathers believe that caregiving should be divided equally, they acknowledge that this is not the current reality in their families" (Harrington et al. 2011; Ladge et al. 2015).

There is no question that competing views of fathering exist, and men in professional careers in particular are likely to experience tension around these conflicting expectations. Although fathers may be expected to be more involved in caregiving in the home, images of the ideal, devoted worker are still entrenched in our broader societal expectations and institutional arrangements (Gerson 2009), creating multiple, and seemingly conflicting, expectations of what it means to be a

father (Humberd et al. 2015). Our research has found that men don't necessarily hold one image of themselves as fathers but instead hold multiple images of themselves as fathers that are sustained through norms and expectations in their day-to-day work and personal contexts. In a qualitative study of 31 first time fathers, our analysis revealed that participants express several different images of themselves as fathers, which represent the various internalized meanings and expectations they hold of how they view themselves and hope to be viewed by others as fathers. The meanings coalesced around four common fathering images – provider, role model, partner, and nurturer – that comprise the content of their fathering identities (Humberd et al. 2015). As these images span from more traditional to more involved notions of fathering, men in our study seemed to maintain the multiplicity of meanings.

Not surprisingly, men express confusion and ambivalence around how to enact their fathering role while trying to preserve an appropriate work image (Reid 2015). For example, outside of work, fathers may emphasize their involvement to increase other's perceptions of kindness and compassion for working dads (Richards 2014), while downplaying their caregiving role at work in order to seem committed to their careers. This confusion and ambivalence has cross-domain effects such that men may adopt a work-family image that may or may not align with their actual identity (Ladge and Little 2019). Thus, even if more involved fathering may be the expected standard today (Ladge et al. 2016), there is little empirical evidence that men are able to truly enact these new expectations in their day to day lives across work and home domains (Coltrane 1997; Gregory and Milner 2011; LaRossa 1988).

4 Where Can We Go from Here? Bolstering Paternal Competence at Work and at Home

When referring to mothers, we don't add the term "involved" as we do with fathers – for mothers, involvement is implied, yet for fathers, it has to be assessed. In applying that term, it assumes that there is variation in the extent to which fathers should focus on their child(ren). The question then becomes, how do we get to the point where involvement is implied for fathers and not something that needs to be evaluated or speculated? Can expectations of fathers change so that we always assume they are competent, dedicated parents, just in the same way we see them as competent and dedicated professionals? Much research and practical advice considers how women should deal with the guilt that may be associated with being a working mother and build confidence in their abilities to have both a successful career and family life (e.g., Holcomb 2000; Sandberg 2013; Ladge and Greenberg 2019). Similar conversations to guide working fathers toward building a sense of confidence across both domains is necessary; yet this research needs to take into account multiple areas that we consider below.

First, while research is beginning to explore what men can do to manage work and family effectively, there is a need to also examine what women, and couples

together, can do to support involved fathering in their everyday lives. Recent research has considered the negotiations that spousal couples engage in to decide whose career takes priority (Livingston 2014a) as well as how partners in dual-career couples shape each other's professional identities (Petriglieri and Obodaru 2018). How can we build on these lines of work to truly consider the couple as a unit engaging in the work and home domains? There is much room truly understand the intersections between each partners' sense of confidence and competence in work and home domains. In our own research, we find that fostering new mothers' maternal confidence is important to their experiences of work-family conflict, and ultimately their ability to stay in the workforce (Ladge et al. 2018); but, what does this say about fostering men's paternal confidence? Perhaps part of mothers' ability to build their own sense of confidence in managing work and family could be supported by also recognizing that men need to build similar sense of confidence. It may also be useful to consider the confidence and competence of the parental unit together. Focusing on the parental unit more broadly could also help to move away from dividing gender and further reinforcing traditional norms.

Secondly, future research must also focus on the complexity of family structures that exist today, because understanding what constitutes involvement will differ greatly for different types of families. Indeed, much of the existing literature draws from samples of upper middle class, white fathers in traditional family structures. Some work has begun to acknowledge the different challenges facing fathers in dual-career couples compared to couples with stay-at-home spouses (e.g., Hammer et al. 1997), or men in heterosexual marriages compared men in gay marriages (e.g., Richardson et al. 2012). There are even more complexities to understand with respect to involvement for fathers with one child, fathers with multiple children, single fathers, widowed fathers, and other increasingly complex and diverse family structures. Similarly, more research can focus on the challenges of involvement across the life cycle of parenting; while current conversations focused on paternity leave are important, we must also extend our research to understand what involved fathering means at middle and later stages of parenting.

Lastly, beyond a focus on the men themselves, more research should consider specifically what can be done within work domains to shift the narrative on what fathering means today. While organizations are seemingly more friendly to working parents today, perhaps the biggest impediment for working fathers is the informal culture in many organizations. Indeed, much research discusses the difficulty in "dislodging the norm of the ideal worker who receives backstage support of a stay-at-home wife" (Williams et al. 2013:210). One way to shift the informal culture is having managers and leaders that are "vocal, consistent, and transparent about support for men's caregiving responsibilities" (Humberd et al. 2015:264). Beyond simply support, though, research suggests that leaders need to model behavior (e.g., a CEO that enacts "involved fathering" freely and openly) that opens up the space for all employees to engage in their work and home lives (e.g., Burke and Major 2014; Litano et al. 2014). Thus, leaders who are working parents can play an important role in changing the culture by demonstrating support *and* acting as role models by utilizing family-friendly practices, talking openly about their own experiences

managing work and family demands, and encouraging others to do the same. Further, organizations that offer various levels of support for working mothers such as affinity groups and individualized coaching, should offer and encourage the same so that fathers also have the space to participate in discussions about work-family needs. Additionally, organizations may need to take further steps to enforce policies in order to shift the cultural norms: A recent Wall Street Journal article highlighted some organizations that have begun enforcing a mandatory paternity leave for fathers in their organizations (Lipman 2018). Multiple approaches will be necessary to change taken-for-granted performance expectations and cultural norms that support the view of ideal workers as those that are always present and available.

5 Concluding Thoughts

Changes in families have been precipitating changes in the workplace for decades now. While we have paid important attention to the shifts necessary to support working mothers, we owe similar focus to the shifts necessary to support working fathers. Fathers today face similar challenges in managing work and family, albeit often in unexpected or alternative ways from mothers. Without attention to the pressures on both men and women, as well as on the parental unit as a whole – in whatever complex and unique form it comes – we run the risk of reinforcing the long-standing gendered expectations that underpin both work and home domains.

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