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Traditional and Developmental Conceptions of Fatherhood

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THE TRADITIONAL conception of the family holds that the father is head of the house, that the mother is entrusted with the care of the house and of the children, and that in return for the unselfish devotion of the parents to their duties, the children owe their parents honor and obedience. Today, these values are being discarded by those who are creating developmental families, based on inter-personal relations of mutual affection, companionship, and understanding, with a recognition of individual capabilities, desires and needs for the development of each member of the family, be he father, mother or child.

Many have been concerned with the changing status of women and the welfare of children in this transition, but seldom is it recognized that the conceptions of fatherhood must likewise be changing. This exploratory investigation of the conceptions of fatherhood included a study of fathers' conceptions of the roles of family members, the variety and content of their father-child activities, the satisfactions and dissatisfactions derived from the father role, and their evaluation of some of the experiences influencing their conceptions of fatherhood. The thirty-two Des Moines, Iowa, fathers interviewed were a geographical segment of a random sample of the 82,000 Iowa pre-Pearl Harbor fathers who enlisted or were inducted into service during World War II.

Because the father-child relationship does not normally exist as an isolated pair, but as one of a number of associated pairs including also father-mother, and mother-child, fathers were asked not only "What are three things a good father does?" but also "What are three things a good mother does?" and "What are three things a good child does?" The technique is based on that used by Duvall¹ in studying conceptions of motherhood, and the categories developed in that study were used to classify responses as traditional or developmental.

Briefly, the categories for traditional conceptions of parenthood include keeping house, taking care of child physically, training child to regularity, disciplining and making the child good. To this was added supporting the family, to adapt the category to include the father role. The traditional conceptions of the good child emphasize keeping clean and neat, obeying and respecting adults,

pleasing adults, respecting property, being religious, working well, and fitting into the family program.

By contrast, developmental conceptions of parenthood emphasize training for self-reliance and citizenship, seeing to emotional well-being, helping child develop socially, providing for child's mental growth, guiding with understanding and relating self lovingly to the child, and being a calm, cheerful, growing person one's self. The developmental conception of a good child emphasizes being healthy and well, sharing and cooperating with others, being happy and contented, loving and confiding in parents, being eager to learn and growing as a person.

Nearly three-fourths of the fathers interviewed gave predominantly developmental conceptions of a good father, but less than half of them had predominantly developmental conceptions of the mother role, and one-fourth had predominantly developmental conceptions of a good child. However, for analysis, total scores were used as being more indicative of the conceptions of fatherhood than the conceptions of individual roles. That is to say, the total conception of fatherhood is compounded of conceptions of the roles of father, mother, and child. On this basis, nineteen of the thirty-two fathers interviewed were classified as traditional and thirteen developmental.

Differences between traditional and developmental fathers. Fathers of two or more children were significantly² more likely to be developmentally oriented than were fathers of one or two children. Developmental fathers had a mean of 3.2 children and traditional fathers had a mean of 2.2 children.

Skilled tradesmen tended to be developmentally oriented while semi-skilled tradesmen tended to be traditionally oriented. Those who owned their own businesses and unskilled workmen, the extremes of the occupational distribution, tended to be more equally divided between traditional and developmental fathers. The four Catholic fathers interviewed all had traditional conceptions of fatherhood, but Protestant fathers and those with no religious affiliation were nearly evenly divided between traditional and developmental responses.

However, the two groups of fathers did not differ significantly in income, years of experience as a father

² Analysis of the significance of differences between the two distributions was based on a Chi-square method, and only differences greater than would occur in ninety-five percent of random samples from the same universe were considered significant.

¹ Evelyn Millis Duvall, "Conceptions of Parenthood," *The American Journal of Sociology*, November 1946, pp. 193-203.

(range from five to fourteen years), age (ranged only from 25 to 39 years), or education (over half of the fathers were high school graduates, but three had only eighth grade educations and four had attended college). Other factors not significantly related to traditional or developmental conceptions were marital adjustment scores, rural or urban childhood background, number of siblings, and whether or not the father's parents were divorced.

Variety and content of father-child activities and relations. Although differences were not great enough to be statistically significant in the group interviewed, there were indications that developmental fathers participated in more father-child activities. They listed a mean of 3 play activities with their children and traditional fathers 2.6. Likewise, they reported participating in more father-child homemaking activities (mean was 1.9 and 1.2 for developmental and traditional fathers, respectively). Yard and garden work, and house repair or construction were most frequently mentioned, but cleaning, dishes, laundry and cooking were also listed. Although the differences were not statistically significant, developmental fathers also reported more participation in helping children with school work, helping wives with child care activities, attending church with the family, and having children help plan family expenditures.

Those differences between developmental and traditional fathers which were significant statistically included more items reflecting attitudes and relationships rather than activities in and of themselves. For instance, all but one of the developmental fathers believed in frankness between father and child, while nearly half of the traditional fathers felt that there were things that children should not know. Developmental fathers made statements like these: "We even try to provide bases for her asking questions to bring out any misconceptions she may have," "They are interested in why this and why that—and that is exactly what I want," and "Once in a while they ask something that I don't know. I don't evade the question, just tell them I don't know." By contrast, traditional fathers said, "You have to answer some way to get them off your neck. I give a by-pass, not a lie. You just can't answer everything point-blank," "I usually refuse to answer. I hate to lie, but put them off in some way," and "I send her to her mother."

While the number of father-child activities away from home differed little (a mean of 2.4 activities for traditional and 2.8 for developmental fathers), traditional fathers placed significantly more emphasis on commercialized spectator events, movies and sports, and developmental fathers more emphasis on mutual activities, such as going visiting, fishing, riding, picnicking, hunting and swimming. In terms of mean number of activities, traditional fathers participated in 1.1 spectator type events and 1.3 mutual activities, while the developmental fathers par-

ticipated in 0.7 spectator type events and 2.1 mutual activities.

More than half of the fathers in this study were employed on Saturday, but among those who were not, three-fourths of the developmental fathers spent at least part of their Saturday free time with their children whereas about the same proportion of traditional fathers spent it in activities in which children were not included.

Analysis of the fathers' participation in discipline showed three significant differences. The children of traditionally oriented fathers were disciplined for a larger number of reasons, and for a greater variety of reasons, but received fewer kinds of discipline. Both traditional and developmental fathers disciplined children for failing to comply with routines, not obeying, endangering themselves, and destroying property, but only traditional fathers mentioned talking back, fighting with other children, lying, swearing, not applying self in school, using bad manners and making noise. Spanking, talking, depriving, scolding, and sitting on a chair were used by both traditional and developmental fathers, but only developmental fathers mentioned isolation and ignoring. Two traditional fathers said they "gave him the devil" but developmental fathers did not respond in this way.

There was one striking difference in the attitude of developmental and traditional fathers in regard to their children's futures. (Children ranged in age from five weeks to fourteen years, with a mean age of 6.8 years.) When asked how they felt about their children growing up and getting married, the fathers responded in three ways: about a third of them said they must accept the children's growing up and marrying, about a third said that it was natural, and the remaining third expressed an interested, expectant attitude. However, analyzing the responses of traditional and developmental fathers separately showed that traditional fathers were significantly less likely to look forward to their children's maturation. They responded with such statements as "I'd rather they'd stay little," and "I hope they marry rich men but I imagine I'll have to let them choose. But I don't want them to marry as young as I did." Developmental fathers were more likely to say, "It's a swell idea," "They should get married. Old bachelors and hermits would never make another generation," and "I want my children to get married because I wouldn't trade my marriage for anything."

Almost all developmentally oriented fathers definitely expected their child to complete high school and attend college if they should want to go, while the traditionally oriented fathers were nearly equally divided between those who absolutely wanted their children to attend college and those who would like to have the children go if they should want to. This difference was not statistically significant.

Not one of the fathers interviewed felt that he should decide what career or occupation his child should select, and only eight had any suggestions but specified that it was the child's decision. The responses included these: "I might say a nurse and three lawyers with no cab drivers, but I'd accept them being cab drivers," "He has to make the choice he likes; whether I like it or not he will do better by it because he likes it," and "No, Ma'am, choosing a job is up to them. Even if they want to run a beer joint, I wouldn't interfere. Not that I would recommend that."

Fathers' satisfactions and dissatisfactions in the father role. About a third of the fathers mentioned companionship with their children as the greatest satisfactions derived from being a father, but almost as many said that the responsibility of providing for their family was their greatest satisfaction. While the differences were not significant statistically, 31.6 per cent of the traditional fathers and 15.3 per cent of the developmental fathers considered providing their greatest satisfaction. Over half of the fathers could not mention any specific dissatisfactions arising from the father role, but five traditional fathers and no developmental fathers said that disciplining children was the major dissatisfaction. Fathers made more responses when asked what children did that was most irritating. Although differences were not significant, it is noteworthy that only traditional fathers listed asking questions as irritating. Both traditional and developmental fathers said disobedience was irritating, but only the traditionally oriented fathers had mentioned discipline as the major dissatisfaction with the father role.

Most of the fathers interviewed considered the two- or three-child family ideal, and the one-child family occurred only in the ideals of two traditionally oriented fathers. The importance of financial considerations was tested by asking the fathers whether their ideal number of children would be different if they did not have to consider finances. Significantly, three-fourths of the traditional fathers would change their ideal to a larger number of children, and three-fourths of the developmental fathers said they would not change. Twenty-one of the fathers said that they chose to have children, eight fathers accepted it as a biological consequence, and three fathers, all traditional, had children because they felt children would hold husband and wife together.

Slightly more than half of the fathers felt themselves more important for their sons, a few more important for their daughters, and a third felt that they were equally important for sons and daughters. Most fathers said that having a father was most important during adolescence, but a third of them, mostly developmental fathers, said that fathers are equally important at all ages.

When fathers were asked whether they considered motherhood or fatherhood a more enjoyable role, differ-

ences in the attitudes of traditional and developmental fathers were again strikingly significant. All but one of the developmental fathers said that motherhood and fatherhood were equally enjoyable, but only half of the traditional fathers would agree. Fathers expressed their ideas in statements such as these: "Fathers might enjoy it more when the children are older and mother has a better chance to enjoy them when they're young, but I think it is about even," "It is about equal. If happiness would kill us, we'd both be dead," "Mother is more attached because of her time with them," "It is impossible for a father to enjoy it as much. It's that way in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred if not more," "A mother enjoys it more. A man may go to Halifax but a mother will stick with her kids when a man won't," and "Maybe she doesn't enjoy it as much as I because she is with them so much. She washes them up and then sees them go outside and get dirty."

Another significant difference in attitudes was found in regard to housework. Most developmental fathers (70 per cent) said they should help regularly and the others said they should help at least part of the time. Conversely, nearly half of the traditional fathers said that "housework is woman's work," and only 20 per cent of them said that fathers should help regularly. The way their responses were stated further indicated the difference in the family relationship: "Helping with housework helps us to be together instead of me in here reading and her out in the kitchen working," "I think it is only fair for the husband to help. I always at least dry dishes and I sometimes dust and sweep. I always do the heavy cleaning," "Sometimes, as long as the wife feels it's just extra help. But when she starts to expect it, then it's out," "My wife is efficient so I don't have to help," "Helping with housework is out," and "She can do it."

Experiences influencing conceptions of fatherhood. Eighteen of the thirty-two fathers interviewed could not recall any specific experience that had influenced the kind of fathers they were; the parental family was mentioned by nine fathers and observation of undesirable homes by four.

When asked what their fathers were like and if they tried to be like them, the fathers were able to state how their fathers had influenced their conceptions of fatherhood. About a third tried to be like their fathers, another third tried to be better than their fathers, and a third tried to be different. Although not statistically significant, there was some indication that developmentally oriented fathers were more likely to have rejected the paternal pattern. The range of responses is indicated by these examples: "My father taught me lots of things and I'd like to think I am like him," "Dad was very understanding but he was quick tempered so I try to control my temper,"

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City, State and Regional Councils and Committees

At the Annual Conference in New York, December 29-31, special provisions will be made for the conferring of representatives of affiliated councils from different parts of the country. At the luncheon meeting a table will be set aside for the presidents of state and regional councils. Directors of city councils may use space in the next State and Regional Newsletter to arrange in advance for their own discussion group at the Conference. A session on Activities and Policies of Unit Councils will be held, open to all officers of state or regional councils. Suggestions as to desired reports and discussions for this session, as well as items for the Newsletter, may be sent now to:

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Coordinator, State and Regional Councils,
National Council on Family Relations
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Fatherhood

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and "He provided a home but there wasn't anything outside of that. I'm a buddy to my children."

Twice as many fathers said they tried to be the kind of parent their mother was than said they tried to be the kind of parent their father was.

Most of the fathers had read some sort of parent guidance literature, largely newspaper and magazine articles, and developmental fathers were significantly more likely to say they were valuable. A quarter of the traditional fathers considered them worthless; they said, "Too much hooey. Some of them are just old maids; they're mostly put out by people like that," and "They just seem to do a lot of talking and that doesn't work." Favorable responses included such statements as these: "I really think they are a good idea. They should be in a more prominent place in the paper so people would notice them more. They help me think," and "Sometimes they are batty, but they help you think whether they are batty or not."

Evaluations of parent-teacher meetings were significantly related to traditional-developmental scores. A fourth of the traditional fathers felt they were for mothers only; all but one of the developmental fathers considered them worthwhile for both parents and one father did not know how to evaluate them. The variation in responses is illustrated by these remarks: "Kids are with teachers more than with parents. Knowing the teacher sure helps

you understand. Children like to know that you know the teacher so you can talk to each other about school" "I believe in it; we are working for better teachers in our school," "It's better for men to find something else to do," and "I don't think it is any place for a man to be."

All the fathers interviewed were veterans of World War II but only one of them said that being in service and away from his family made it harder for him to be a good father. On the contrary, fourteen said that they appreciated their families more, twelve said service had not made any difference, and five said the experience definitely helped them to be better fathers. They made statements such as these: "I realize more what the family means and what the children mean in my life," "I was father to so many young kids in service that I feel I was educated to help adolescents," "I used to think I didn't want the responsibility of my family any more, but after seeing German kids wanting to eat scraps from my mess kit, I decided that I should accept the responsibility for my own family," and "I saw things that I didn't want to have happen to my family; it stabilized what I want and made me more sensible." Recognizing that this was a selective group of veterans, from the standpoint that they had children before wartime and that none of their homes were permanently broken by wartime experiences, the predominance of little publicized reactions should be noted.

Conclusions. The limitations of this study, the relatively small number of fathers interviewed, and the exploratory nature of its techniques must be recognized. It is hoped that further studies will be made of the traditional and developmental conceptions held by the father, mother, and children in a family group, by successive generations, and by age groups. We do not know how geographical, social, educational, and religious differences influence conceptions of family roles. This investigation is but a fragment of the research in family life necessary as we move from arm chair philosophy to descriptive tabulation and on toward scientific interpretation of causes and effects.

Family Life and Full Employment

There were about three million more marriages and about one million more divorces than the expected number from 1940 through 1947. As a net effect, the proportion of the adult population married in 1947 was the largest on record. The number of married couples without a housing unit of their own was nearly one million greater in 1947 than in 1940. Married women with jobs outside the home increased to a point where they outnumbered, for the first time, single women with such jobs. In spite of rising prices, real disposable income rose in 1946 and 1947 to a level about forty percent above that in 1939.—From article by Paul C. Glick in *The American Journal of Sociology*, May, 1949, pp. 520-29.