

Changes in Newspaper Coverage of Fatherhood on Father's Day from 1990 to 1995

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Executive Summary of Media Survey:

Changes in Newspaper Coverage of Fatherhood on Father's Day, 1990 to 1995

I. Principal Findings

This survey of 25 large newspapers on Father's Day reveals that newspaper coverage of fatherhood issues changed dramatically between 1990 and 1995. This study shows that between 1990 and 1995:

- The total number of articles on fatherhood increased by 75%, from 85 to 149;
- There were five times the number of articles about father absence in 1995 (40) as there were in 1990 (8), a 400% increase;
- Over one quarter (40 of 149, or 27%) of all 1995 Father's Day articles discussed the problem of father absence;
- Articles about the changing role of the father nearly quadrupled from 1990 to 1995 -- jumping from 6 to 22, a 266% increase.

(Tables I through V of Appendix A, annexed hereto, show in graphic form the main findings of the survey.)

Hence, on Father's Day 1995, father absence became the most prevalent fatherhood topic. 1995 media attention to this topic not only dwarfed 1990's coverage, but it far exceeded the overall increase in attention to fatherhood topics in 1995.

In addition to the sheer numbers of Father Absence articles, the types of stories

which ran and the appearance of editorial page "father absence" cartoons further magnified the impact of the father absence story. (Most of the cartoons ironically juxtaposed the celebration of "Father's Day" with the social dimensions of father absence. Cartoons, though, are not included in the survey numbers herein.) Editorial page editorials concerning father absence and related social problems were published in nine of the twenty-five papers in 1995.

The shift in media focus in the area of fatherhood could further be seen in the appearance of articles with such names as "Disappearing dads disruptive to society," "Where have all the fathers gone," "Happy Fatherless Day," and "Save the Fathers." By and large, the message of these stories was that father absence is a crisis that is responsible for a myriad of social problems, including crime, drug use, poverty, and teen suicide.

The elevation of father absence as a nationally recognized issue also generated vigorous discussion as to the nature and extent of the problem, its causes, and what, if anything, should be done about it. Naturally, a small number of journalists disagreed that father absence was a crisis -- or even necessarily harmful.

Several articles even suggested that increasing numbers of "new fathers" is a sign that fatherhood in America is actually improving. Due largely to the increasing numbers of articles focussing on the "new father" role, the Changing Role of the Father category grew by 266%, the largest percentage change among categories during the survey period after Father Absence. (See, Appendix A, Tables IV and V, for percentage comparison of articles by category, 1990-1995.)

II. Summary of Principal Findings

In sum, on Father's Day 1995, the subject of fathers and fatherhood catapulted in print media visibility. Overall newspaper coverage of fatherhood on Father's Day increased by 75% from 1990 to 1995. Most significantly, coverage of father absence was expanded by 400%, thus far surpassing not only 1990's coverage, but 1995's overall increase as well.

Consequently, articles focusing on father absence as a harmful demographic trend comprised more than a quarter of all fatherhood articles in 1995. Most all of these articles viewed this trend as a social problem of epidemic proportions -- and the root cause of society's most intractable problems.

Another significant change in 1995 concerned the increased discussion of the changing role of the father in society. Most of these emphasized the greater involvement of fathers in child care and domestic activities.

III. Overview of Purpose and Scope of Survey

This survey examines newspaper coverage of fathers and fatherhood on Father's Day in 1990 and 1995. The survey sample is comprised of 25 large circulation newspapers from different U.S. cities. While geographically diverse, most of the newspapers are from relatively large population urban centers. (The surveyed newspapers, with their daily circulations, are set forth in Table I on page 7.)

This study seeks to understand the changes in the print media's perception of the state of fatherhood in the U.S. from 1990 to 1995. The survey seeks to do this in two ways. First, it reveals the total number of fatherhood related articles in each of the surveyed years, thereby reflecting changes in overall media attention to fathers and fatherhood. Secondly, all fatherhood articles have been categorized by subject. Consequently, a change in the quantity of articles within the same category from 1990 to 1995 will reflect a shift in media interest in a particular fatherhood subject.

The six categories of fatherhood articles and a brief description of each are as follows:

1. **Father Reflections** - Often the first-person perspective of fathers, these stories seek to capture the essence of fatherhood, usually by recounting its joys, trials, and sacrifices. In most of these pieces, there is an implicitly expressed ideal of the "good father."
2. **Distant Fathers** - These articles concern families in which the father is either physically absent or emotionally detached. They look at the experiences of these separated fathers and children on a personal level, without discussion of the broader social repercussions of father absence.
3. **Father Memories** - These stories are remembrances of fathers, most often by their (now grown) children.
4. **Father Profiles** - These stories examine the lives and fatherhood styles of different modern day fathers from the perspective of a third-party journalist.
5. **Changing Role of the Father** - These pieces address changes in the way men are fulfilling the role of the father, and/or discuss evolving cultural perceptions and expectations of fatherhood. Many of these articles discuss the "new father," i.e. those fathers who are more involved in child care-giving, nurturing, and domestic activities than were their own fathers.

6. Father Absence - This category of articles specifically identifies the separation of fathers from their biological children as a demographic trend and/or connects it to major social problems in America.

7. Miscellaneous - These are articles that do not fit into the above categories; for example, pieces about "T.V. Dads," or news items about father-son outings.

Introduction

On Father's Day, print media coverage of fatherhood is at its apex, crossing a broad spectrum of father-related topics. Stories that extol "super dads," bittersweet memoirs of imperfect but faithful fathers, personal testimonies of the struggles and joys of fatherhood, and stories of children who live without the presence of any father in their life -- all of these types of stories find their way into newsprint on Father's Day.

The content and quantity of these articles provide insight into media perceptions of fatherhood. And importantly, they serve as an interesting window into the culture at large, revealing the changing ideals and practices of fatherhood in America.

Father's Day print coverage is also a societal "Report Card" of sorts: it tells us where fathers are succeeding, and where they are failing. Newspaper articles may do this directly, by forthrightly identifying deficient fatherhood, or indirectly, by favorably portraying the practitioners of a particular fatherhood style.

These articles further reveal the expectations our culture places on fathers and show how today's fathers fare as measured by these cultural standards. And significantly, they often examine the impact on individuals and society when fathers fall short of these standards.

This study¹ seeks to understand changes in the print media's perception of the state of fatherhood in America in a five year period, between 1990 to 1995. For the purposes of this study, all father-related articles² appearing in 25 large metropolitan newspapers on Father's Day 1990 and 1995 have been surveyed. The articles have been categorized by subject, and the number of articles in each category calculated for survey years 1990 and 1995. Consequently, a change in the quantity of articles in the same category from 1990 to 1995 will reflect a shift in media interest in that category's subject matter during the survey period. Ultimately, these changes may also reflect changes in the culture's attitudes about fatherhood.

The newspapers included in the survey represent a geographically diverse range of cities; most all, though, are densely populated urban centers. The surveyed newspapers, along with their daily circulation, appear in Table 1 below.

1 This survey was prepared by David Brenner, Associate Director of the Institute for American Values, as part of Mr. Brenner's Institute-paid employment. The Institute has an active program in the area of fatherhood, and the Institute's President, David Blankenhorn, frequently speaks and writes on fatherhood issues. In preparing this study, the author has striven for impartiality and objectivity.

2 Excluding advice columns, letters to the editor, and cartoons.

Table 1

Daily Circulation of Newspapers in Media Survey
Source: 1994 World Almanac
(circulation as of September 30, 1993; m=morning, e=evening)

1. <i>New York Times</i> (m)	1,141,366
2. <i>Los Angeles Times</i>(m)	1,089,690
3. <i>Washington Post</i> (m)	813,908
4. <i>Chicago Tribune</i> (m)	690,842
5. <i>Boston Globe</i>(m)	507,647
6. <i>Philadelphia Inquirer</i>(m)	486,586
7. <i>Houston Chronicle</i>(all day)	413,448
8. <i>Minneapolis Star Tribune</i>(m)	410,754
9. <i>Miami Herald</i>(m)	403,555
10. <i>Cleveland Plain-Dealer</i>(m)	395,791
11. <i>San Diego Union-Tribune</i>(all day)	383,827
12. <i>Detroit News</i> (e)	366,988
13. <i>Arizona Republic</i>(m)	347,839
14. <i>Baltimore Sun</i>(m)	338,322
15. <i>Portland Oregonian</i> (all day)	332,652
16. <i>Indianapolis Star</i> (m)	325,283
17. <i>Atlanta Journal and Constitution</i> . (m)	299,699
18. <i>Louisville Courier-Journal</i> . . (m)	236,008
19. <i>Charlotte Observer</i> (m)	233,398
20. <i>Seattle Times</i> (e)	228,562
21. <i>Cincinnati Enquirer</i> (m)	201,415
22. <i>Providence Journal</i> (R.I.) . . . (all day)	190,876
23. <i>Birmingham News</i> (e)	157,656
24. <i>Bergen Record</i> (N.J.) (m)	155,849
25. <i>Clarion-Ledger</i> (Jackson, Ms.) ³ . . (m)	111,291

³ 1994 daily circulation provided by Clarion-Ledger staff.

The articles surveyed have been arranged into the six categories: "Father Memories," "Father Reflections," "Father Profiles," "Distant Fathers," "Changing Role of the Father," and "Father Absence."⁴ The meaning of each of these classifications will be discussed in the body of this survey. It should be noted, though, that where an article can be classified into more than one category (because it addresses multiple topics) it has been numbered into each relevant category. Consequently, the total number of articles surveyed is less than the sum of articles in all categories.

In addition, articles that cannot properly be classified into any of the six categories above have been designated as "Miscellaneous." The Miscellaneous category includes reviews of books about fathers and fatherhood, stories about fictional "TV Dads," pieces that discuss Father's Day gift buying and gifts, and other non-classifiable stories.

Further, it is noted that this study will focus more attention on "Distant Fathers," "The Changing Role of the Father," and "Father Absence," and "Father Reflections," due to their greater demographic and cultural significance. In these categories, close scrutiny will be given to changes in the content of these articles, as well as their quantity. Accordingly, there is less analysis in this study of "Father Memories" and "Father Profiles," as they are less apt to shed light on cognizable cultural trends.

⁴ Complete bibliographies of all the articles surveyed, arranged by year and category, appear as Appendices A and B herein.

Father's Day 1990: Media Survey Results and Analysis

I. Father Reflections

The predominant subgroup of articles in the 1990 sample fall under the heading of "Father Reflections." Of the 85 articles surveyed, 26 fell into to this category. These articles, usually from a father's perspective, seek to capture the essence of fatherhood; often by recounting its joys and tribulations. Usually, these pieces implicitly express an ideal of successful fatherhood -- usually in the form of attributes or qualities to be embraced and cultivated. Less frequently, they gently dispense some hard-earned fathering advice. Fatherhood, it seems, is an antidote to bombast.

One of the themes in the Father Reflections category is the enormity of parenthood. Two survey articles on this theme were noticeably gender neutral: mothers and fathers relate equally well to their premise. One, a *Charlotte Observer* editorial, opined:

There is no experience that so expands your capacity to love, fear and endure as parenthood. If you were never sure there was anything or anyone you would die for, parenthood will remove any doubt. If you have never realized how uncertain, frightening and tragic the world can be, parenthood may teach you. And if you have never known the sheer delight that can come from the simplest of human interaction, parenthood can show you -- with a baby's grasp, a toddler's hug, a teenager's admiration.

A more common approach in the Father Reflections category, however, was one that understood fatherhood as a distinctly male role. Within this context several themes emerged. For example, syndicated columnist Cal Thomas incorporated marital fidelity into his definition of truly masculine fatherhood:

To me, fatherhood is accepting responsibility for all it means to be a man in the classical sense. It means that if one is married, he keeps his vow to love his wife until death parts them. There can be no greater lesson for a child than to see a father and mother committed in that way.

Second, being a father means letting our children know they are more important than anything else we do. It means being inconvenienced without becoming upset. It means quantity time, not "quality" time, whatever that is. It means generosity, not just with money but with our attention so that our

children know that what they are saying is important.

Similarly, columnist Stan Awtrey of the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* humorously considered the sacrifices and rewards of fatherhood from a decidedly male perspective. Inspired by a family trip to the Magic Kingdom, a bemused Awtrey recalled innumerable trips on the "Small World" ride with his daughter, and confided:

Being a dad means riding the merry-go-round instead of the bumper cars. Being a dad means taking the family on vacation to Disney World instead of going on that midwestern tour where it would have been possible to see the White Sox, Cubs, Brewers, Cardinals and Reds on the same trip.

Thirdly, articles in the Father Reflections category discussed the strengths and weaknesses of fathers from the perspective of their grown sons and daughters. A popular device used by journalists for this approach was the readers' poll. For one Father's Day story, the *Cincinnati Enquirer* queried, "What makes a good dad?" and incorporated reader responses, such as these:

Diana Davenport Sharp of Mount Healthy wrote that her dad: "had time to listen, time to play, time to correct, time to encourage, and time to lend a strong shoulder to cry on or a hand to lift me up when I was down."

Judi Deatheridge of Villa Hills, Ky., wrote of her 79-year-old dad, Curtis Ely, who recently died: "He taught me to love family and friends. He told me to love God and respect his teachings. He also taught me about commitment. I'm sure during the 56 years he and Mom had been married, there were rough times. But they stayed together."

The most commonly mentioned paternal "strength" in this poll was the unselfish expenditure of time on behalf of his children. Conversely,

Young Enquirer readers were very specific about what puts dad on the bottom of the popularity poll. Dads who don't spend enough time with their children are the least popular.

One seven year old wrote that he wouldn't mind his father playing golf so much, if Dad would just take him along once in while.

And readers in this poll apparently didn't shy away from describing "bad" fatherhood traits:

Some bad dads are just plain rude. They walk into the den and change the channel on the TV in the middle of the kids' favorite show. They also hog

the Nintendo. One reader writes that a really obnoxious dad "smokes, yells, and eats things in front of you without offering you any."

One last theme in *Father Reflections* was the role a father plays in the life of his children. Again, informal polls are a favorite source for stories on this topic. The Minneapolis-St. Paul *Star Tribune's* "Tender Years" columnist, Pat Gardner, gathered the responses of elementary school children who were asked why they needed their dad. Summarizing the results of the poll, Gardner wrote:

Many of the seven year olds recognized that Dad has different rules than Mom and sometimes this is an advantage. They need the break. Some of them understood the biological link between themselves and their fathers. They needed his input. All of them seemed to feel the need to have their fathers involved with them, either as replacement for moms, or for their dad's own unique qualities, or simply for the pleasure of the relationship.

Another readers' poll in the *Seattle Times* also explored a father's role -- but through the eyes of his grown children. Readers were asked to tell what they wish their fathers had told them, but never did. One typical letter read:

I wish my father had been capable of telling my brother and me that he deeply loved us and thought that we were the most wonderful and important boys in all the world.

The experts' advice in this article generally reflect the feelings and desires expressed by the readers in the various Father's Day readers' polls. Moreover, it is consistent with the fatherhood models upheld by the majority of the *Father Reflections's* articles: fathers who are genuinely interested in their children, who accord them love and respect, who are willing to forsake their own wants in preference to the needs of their families. These articles, which celebrate fatherhood and in some way articulate a fatherhood "ideal," were quite prevalent. They stand in stark relief to the images of father absence and family disruption that were also prevalent.

II. Father Memories/Father Profiles

The second largest categories of articles in 1990, with seventeen articles each, were "Father Memories" and "Father Profiles." Father memories view the lives of dads past and present, good and not so good, usually through the eyes of their adult children. Most of these stories fondly recall good dads.

Father Profiles are similar to Family Memories, except that the featured fathers are seen from the point of view of a third party -- a journalist. In Father Profiles, dad

diversity is on display. Here, we find Dads over fifty with newborns, adoptive dads, the dad of triplets, famous musician dads, and "Robo Dad" -- the hard-driving father of a famous athlete. Notwithstanding their iconoclasm, the men portrayed in these articles do provide some useful insight into the different attitudes and styles of real-life fathers.

As human interest stories, "Father Memories" and "Father Profiles" often tug at the heart, but they are not specifically evocative of the present state of fatherhood in America. In addition, no clear patterns or noteworthy emphases were discerned within these categories of Father's Day stories.

III. Distant Fathers

Many readers, while leisurely perusing the paper on Father's Day afternoon, now find bleak and traumatic personal tales of father absence and family dissolution. In 1990, the "Distant Father" subgroup of articles was comprised of 13 stories. These stories concern families where the father is either physically absent (due largely to divorce or unwed childbearing) or emotionally detached.

Significantly, articles in this category do not identify father absence as a demographic or social trend, thereby distinguishing this category from the "Father Absence" subgroup. Instead, Distant Father articles examine on a personal level the experiences of fathers and children who are geographically or relationally separate. Therefore, in these articles, father absence is not so much the cause of social pathology as it is of personal suffering.

The first theme in this category is that of children searching for biological fathers whom they have never known. For example, the *Cleveland Plain-Dealer* told the story of private investigator Gary Swilik, who specializes in finding "lost" fathers. Not lost in the traditional sense; mostly, they have been separated from their offspring through divorce. Now, the grown sons and daughters of these men seek to reconnect with their biological fathers but have no idea of their whereabouts. Although "lost" fathers have been a boon to his career, the *Plain-Dealer* reports that investigator Swilik is concerned about broader consequences:

..... Future business looks brisk, which is good and bad, Swilik said. Noting that the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that every fourth child now lives in a one-parent household, nearly 90% of those with the mother, he remarked, 'It seems inevitable that many more adults will be searching for fathers. But you can't have that many people lose a father and not have an effect on society in general.'

Alongside its profile of Swilik, the *Plain-Dealer* ran four case histories of children

in search of their biological fathers, introduced with this teaser: "Finding out who Dad is would make for the best Father's Day imaginable, say some people who are looking for their fathers." Not all of the children, though, were enamored at the prospect of meeting their real father. In one of the stories, Darian Taylor, whose father abandoned him as an infant, spoke to the *Plain-Dealer* with unconcealed anger about his father:

..... I would like to meet him . . . for a minute ...I'd only want to know one thing -- Why? That's all. After that he can go on with the rest of his life and I'll go on with mine, because I've done just fine without him.

..... I don't really like the man, OK? Because of what he did. I have no respect for the man because he has no respect for what he's done.

A second, related theme covered in "Distant Fathers," was the loss, grief and anger felt by men who grew up in fatherless homes. These articles show that the psychic wounds of fatherless men are long lasting. One man, writing in the *New York Times*, discussed his feelings about being separated from his father at an early age:

..... What I try to do is not to be bitter about having no male role model, no man to show me the ropes of being male. It would have been less lonely and much easier for me if he had helped me as I grew up. There was only me, though....

..... Am I better off for the struggle? am I stronger because I found my identity as a man without the support and influence of a loving father? Is the man who loves his father better off than me? Stronger, more secure, psychologically than me? Who knows? But I know that the man who loves his father, who carries no grief for a dead relationship, is able to find peace where I cannot....

..... I am compassionate for men with fathers like mine, and even more so for men like for men with fathers much worse than mine. As sons, were missing a piece of our souls.

A third Distant Father theme garnering media attention in 1990 was the men's "movement," being fueled by the books and seminars of poet Robert Bly and Harvard psychologist Samuel Osherson. The *Philadelphia Inquirer Sunday Magazine* featured a story on this movement, titled "Fathers and other strangers," in which Osherson was quoted to say:

..... the psychological and physical absence of fathers is one of the great underestimated tragedies of our times.

Elaborating on the objectives and methods of the movement, Osherson told the Inquirer:

..... All sons need to heal the wounded fathers within their own hearts, on their own. The process involves exploring not just the past but the present and future -- ways of being male that reflect a richer, fuller sense of self than the narrow images that dominated the past. In truth, that is the task of all men today: to explore the masculine nurturer and caretaker within, to test out and evolve a strong manly sense of oneself as father, in relation to a wife, children, and peers.

The author of this piece, William Ecenbarger, was reluctant to call this growing phenomenon of organized male introspection a "men's movement." He notes: "A few are calling this a men's movement, but that seems a little strong. There are no marches, rallies, or legislative agendas to erase injustice."

A fourth theme of the Distant Fathers category was the determination of fatherless fathers to insulate their own children from similar deprivation. In the *Los Angeles Times*, one such father shared his struggle to break from his family's history of paternal unfaithfulness:

..... The task is tough and the stakes are high. I've seen how a father can devastate a family. I've felt the hurt of abandonment. I can never claim ignorance if I fail as a father. And I want nothing more than to be a good one.

Darian, the angry young man featured in the *Cleveland Plain-Dealer's* story about people searching for their biological dads, also vowed not to follow the example of his father:

..... I've thought about what it'd be like to be father ... I know that when I get married and have my children, I'm going to be old enough to support my wife and kids. I'm not going to be the one who walks out on my kids ... I'm not going to let somebody else suffer for what I did.

A final prominent theme in the Distant Fathers subgroup explored the lives of divorced and unwed fathers who have been denied custody of, or access to, their biological children. These were often emotionally jarring pieces.

One dramatic story with this theme was the *Arizona Republic's* "Father's Day Intrigue," about a father's transatlantic trip to recover custody of his kidnapped infant daughter. Steve Meredith's ex-wife absconded to England with their daughter Christina after he had been awarded custody of the child. For Meredith, Father's Day 1990 is special because of the recent and successful recapture of his Christina, during which:

..... he traveled more than 10,000 miles under a ruse set up by a private investigator from San Francisco, grabbed Christina from his ex-wife's arms in England and fled with the little girl aboard a ferry, evading the British authorities.

But Meredith also informed *The Republic* that he has reason to believe that his ex-wife, Claire, will attempt another kidnapping:

..... Christina is so happy to see her grandparents again that I'll let my parents watch her for the time being. Also, its a safety factor. I don't know what Claire is planning. In her present state of mind, that might not be rational. Besides, it would be too easy for someone to take her from a day-care center.

Another *Arizona Republic* piece with the same theme, "Divorce: Dark Side of Father's Day," chronicled the experiences and emotions of non-custodial divorced men on Father's Day. One divorced father of an eight year old boy had this to say: "Father's Day is one of the saddest days of the year for me." And Dr. Joseph Mayercheck, a fathers' rights advocate, was quoted as follows:

..... Father's day is sad day because it brings to the surface all of the bad feelings they have during the rest of the year....They will be crying on Father's Day, but they won't let anyone see them crying. People expect fathers to accept not seeing their kids. But believe me, you feel it 365 days a year.

The *Republic* story also reported that a father's advocacy group called "Arizona Fathers" was operating a hotline for fathers who are getting divorced and want information about custody rights. The organization's president, Tom Farley, told the *Republic*:

..... We get guys calling up crying, guys threatening suicide....We get a lot of depression calls on Father's Day, birthdays, and Christmas . . . All we ever hear about are deadbeats who don't make their child support payments . . . But these are special guys. They really want to be with their children.

Stories involving Distant Fathers comprised 15% of the total number of articles in 1990. These stories frequently depict the havoc wreaked in the lives of fathers and their children when they are geographically or emotionally separated. They do not blare the cacophony of societal ills stemming from fatherlessness. Rather, their sound is the tearing of individual strands in the social fabric.

IV. Father Absence

The "Father Absence" category is comprised of articles that identify fatherlessness as a demographic trend or connect it to social problems in America. In 1990, eight of these articles appeared in the newspapers surveyed. Among these, four pertained exclusively to father absence in the African-American community.

Despite the relative paucity of articles, father absence was giving rise to some journalistic cynicism about Father's Day. For instance, Mike Barnacle's *Boston Globe* column satirized father absence:

..... Reality is, Father's Day 1990 could easily be called, "Best Friend of My Mom" day, "Guy Mom Met Once" day, "Fellow Who Fled" day, or "Man Who Calls On the Phone and Visits Every Other Weekend" day. The soft, vague permanence of relationships has gotten to the point where they too often resemble the feeling involved in shopping for a car.

The first of the major themes within the Father Absence category considered the social consequences of fatherlessness. David Reinhard's editorial in *The Oregonian* was one of only a few articles in 1990 which identified fatherlessness as a social problem of national urgency. Exclaimed Reinhard:

..... the evidence of social science now suggests this: The increasing absence of fathers in the American home may be responsible for our society's increasing ills -- drugs, crime, poverty and educational standards.

Drawing on an article by Nicholas Davidson that appeared in *Policy Review* magazine, Reinhard expounded upon the relationship between social ills and fatherlessness:

..... One 1988 study of urban crime statistics found that the proportion of single-parent households was a better predictor of violent crime and burglary rates than a community's poverty levels or racial composition.

Reinhard's main conclusion was underscored with this quoted excerpt from Davidson's article:

..... The evidence on father absence renders obsolete the notion that men's contribution to family life is exclusively monetary ... Fathers play crucial, gender-specific roles in the intellectual and emotional development of their children ... Dollars can't replace daddies."

Another 1990 Father Absence article confronted the same theme and also postulated on the causes of fatherlessness. Citing a myriad of social reasons, from the welfare system to the feminist movement, Jim Lenfesty in the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* theorized that:

..... All of these forces have sent men into a crisis of obsolescence.

Lenfesty argued that male obsolescence breeds low self-esteem, resulting in a litany of social problems. He posited:

..... The rising tide of materialism, drugs, violence, and the desperate underclass are all strongly propelled by the lack of male self-esteem. Government and social services agencies are finally recognizing this connection. They see the effects of the epidemic of fatherlessness.

Thirdly, as noted, a prominent theme in the 1990 Father Absence subcategory was fatherlessness in the African-American community and its deleterious social effects. Two op-ed pieces tackled this subject in 1990. In the *Seattle Times'* "Where have all the black fathers gone," African-American father Frank Harris lamented the negative image of African-American fathers, but conceded:

..... many of the negative conditions that exist in America's predominantly black neighborhoods can be attributed to the lack of the effective presence of black males as fathers and husbands.

Moreover, said Harris,

..... Despite the image of the ebony willed black women successfully raising families in the face of adversity, the reality of black America's present quality of life is a poignant indicator of the importance of having a father, if not in the home, then as an involved person in their child's development. Fathers do make a difference.

A similar *Indianapolis Star* editorial by Mitchell Daniels, Jr. held that by virtue of sheer numbers, fatherlessness' greatest devastation is taking place in the African-American community:

..... Though divorce and illegitimacy are skyrocketing among all races -- in 1989 we passed the atrocious milestone of one million unwed births -- black children suffer the worst.

Daniels further argued that the destructive values generated in a fatherless culture stacks the deck against black fathers and children:

..... Taking on the job of fatherhood has never been easy, but to be a young black father today takes an additional ration of responsibility, guts, and individuality. In the underclass community, production of children has replaced provision and protection of children as the definition of manhood.

..... Most young black men, almost 60 percent, are growing up with no fathers to emulate. They will receive no pro-fatherhood messages from peers and or from the surrounding culture.

Daniels was not optimistic about the task of persuading African-American men to fulfill a fatherhood role beyond that of procreation:

..... In this war, we can't draft him. He has to volunteer, take on the risks and the tough jobs. And like all lowly privates, he never gets recognition when their handing out the medals at civil rights banquets.

Another article on the same theme was written by Calvin Forbes for the *Washington Post*. Forbes emphasized that fathers are irreplaceable conduits for African-American boys entering manhood:

..... Boys need men to guide them into adulthood. Too many of our young African-American men are killing each other because no adult male has been able to hold him in the comfort of a love that only another man can give to a man-child.

A fourth theme in this "Father Absence" category focused on the relationship between children and biological fathers who live apart from one other. In "Dad disappeared: A new reality for American families", the *Miami Herald* reported the findings of a research paper by Frank Furstenburg and Kathleen Mullan Harris of the University of Pennsylvania. Some of the findings of the Furstenberg-Harris study, as recited by the *Herald*, were as follows:

..... Over all, more than half the children whose fathers did not live with them had never been in the father's home, the study found, and 42 percent had not seen their fathers at all in the previous year.

..... The *Herald* also reported that:

..... The study found surprisingly little difference between fathers who had divorced the mothers and those who were never married. For both groups, contact with the children dropped off sharply the longer the father had been gone.

The *Herald* noted Furstenerg's explanation for this apparent anomaly:

..... Men regard marriage as a package deal, said Furstenburg, a sociologist who studies families. They cannot separate their relations with their children from their relations to their former spouse, he said.

..... When the relationship ends, the paternal bond usually withers within a few years, too.

For its story on the Furstenberg-Harris study, the *Herald* also spoke to single mothers to find out how their children were handling life without father. Reported the *Herald*:

..... Many mothers report they have heard from the father of their children only rarely since he left, have no contact with his family, and little sense of his whereabouts, a state of affairs the children often find bewildering.

..... Frances Snyder of New Carrollton, Md., never married the father of her daughter, Chelesea, and he moved across the country before the baby was born five years ago.

..... He called when she was 18 months old to ask what I'd had," she said. And then I didn't hear from him again until last year. Chelesea asks where he is, and why he doesn't love her or come visit, and I don't know all the answers.

The final theme found in the "Father Absence" subcategory involved the competing child custody rights of unmarried parents. Letty Cottin Pogrebin, writing for the *New York Times*, addressed widespread father absence in the context of her opposition to men's groups vying for more favorable child custody rights. Although Pogrebin blamed father absence for causing problems for women and children, she did not tie it to broader social ills. Further, Pogrebin excoriated men for failing to be responsible fathers:

..... Millions of men "father" babies and are rarely seen again. Millions more are shadow figures in so-called intact families, or pathological bullies who abuse their children....

..... Since biological fatherhood has never been enough to guarantee children a loving male care-giver -- or women a child-rearing partner -- men should not be permitted to claim legal standing as father only when it suits them. A father's rights cannot be demanded: they must be earned.

Among the 1990 Father Absence articles, Pogrebin's is unique, for two reasons: first, she does not correlate fatherlessness to broader social problems; and secondly,

she heavily implies that children are better off without a father who lives with them.

In sum, relatively few articles in 1990 addressed fatherlessness as either a growing demographic trend or as a destructive social phenomenon. As a nationally recognized issue, fatherlessness had yet to arrive.

V. The Changing Role of the Father

The "Changing Role of the Father" subcategory is comprised of articles that in some way address changes in the way men fulfill the role of father, or that discuss changes in cultural perceptions and expectations of fatherhood.

Debate and even confusion over a father's role undoubtedly reflects the larger conflict over values in our culture. Naturally, on Father's Day, the print media is somewhat of a battlefield in the struggle to define fatherhood. Combatants line up to declare what fathers were, what they have become, and most importantly, what they should be.

In 1990, however, only six articles in the survey fell into the "Changing Role of the Father" category.

One type of article in this category simply acknowledged or described the changes in fathers' roles. An *Indianapolis Star* editorial, appropriately titled "Dad, poor Dad," humorously conveyed this message:

The ideal father should be strong, masculine, virile, manly, outdoorsy, a sportsman, fighter, protector, breadwinner, tough guy, independent thinker, supportive, yielding, sensitive, nurturing, a homemaker, helper, diaper-changer, cook, launderer, babysitter, sort of a Herculean Mr. Mom.

A second theme within the "Changing Role of the Father" subgroup more specifically addressed the "new" father role. ("New" fathers are more involved in child caregiving, nurturing, and domestic activities.) For example, both *New York Times'* pieces in this category considered whether "new" fathers are more myth than reality.

In the Times' "Fathers Can Be Parents, If They Try", writer Kathy Hayes argued that there is a wide chasm between the image and practice of "new" fathers:

Although Father's Day cards have remained remarkably the same, today we herald the New Age father, a supersensitive domestically competent kind of guy who competes - or replaces - mother as the keeper of the hearth....

The image is different, but its utter disregard of reality remains the same. Once again, I can't help wondering whose father is really like this. Still, I envy the New Age father. He has carved a niche for himself, spending the bulk of his time enthusing about the wonders of parenthood while managing to avoid much of the work.

Further, Hayes bemoans the old sex role definitions of parenthood, which are "at best, limiting," and propounds her own much more genderless concept of parenting:

For me, "parent" includes the understanding that taking care of children, while undeniably worthwhile and satisfying, entails an incredible amount of grunt work. Good parents look out for the interests of their children whether or not their in the mood. They know that for every hour of bliss, there are several hours of self-sacrifice.

Hayes further reported that her own husband has transcended mere fatherhood:

"Instead of being just a father, he signed on for parenthood." Consequently, her son "is growing up in a world where moms and dads work, where no one person is the 'boss of the house.'" Hence, her son does not live with "a mother who does the grunt work, and father who plays with him, but with two parents who try to do both."

Susan Jacoby's *New York Times* piece, "A Good Dad in Any Age," essentially concurred with the view that the domestic contributions of "new" dads have been grossly exaggerated. She further sought to debunk the "postfeminist stereotype of Dour Old Dad" -- as regards fathers who raised children in the 40's, 50's, and 60's. Said Jacoby:

The current desire to cast our all-too-fallible fathers in the role of awe-inspiring paterfamilias may well be rooted in a need to bolster our very different domestic choices by recasting the past in a more negative light.

Citing a sociological study which found that today's fathers in two career marriages still resembled "Dour Old Dad" in their approach to domestic work, Jacoby commented:

The division of labor was certainly less unjust in an era when few mothers worked outside their homes.

Moreover, Jacoby said, the practice of finding fault with "old" fathers diverts attention from what she contends is the real issue:

Denigrating Dour Old Dad becomes a way of asserting superior sensitivity while avoiding the fundamental issue of what men's responsibilities ought to be in a radically altered, two-earner domestic economy.

One last "Changing Role of the Father" theme concerned stay-at-home dads. The *Atlanta Constitution's* article, "More single fathers on the daddy track," reported the

following:

In 1988, about 1.2 million divorced and widowed fathers were raising their children, compared with 8.1 million single parent mothers, the Census Bureau said.

Hence, for each dad who stayed at home, there were nearly seven homes where no dad stayed.

In sum, the "Changing Role of the Father" category represents a small percentage of the overall number of articles in the 1990 survey. Further, two of these seven articles came from the New York Times. Hence, media coverage of this topic was geographically narrow, too.

Father's Day 1995: Media Survey Results and Analysis

A dramatic shift in media coverage occurred on Father's Day 1995. First, the volume of articles on fatherhood increased substantially, from 85 to 149. Secondly, there was a change in the percentage of articles appearing in each of the respective categories. Significantly, fatherlessness became the predominant fatherhood theme on Father's Day 1995: in 40 articles, father absence was addressed as a demographically significant and/or dangerous social trend. This is exactly five times the number of such articles that appeared in 1990.

The elevation of father absence to a level of national recognition also generated vigorous discussion as to the nature and extent of the problem, its causes, and what, if anything, should be done about it. Accordingly, 1995 survey articles in the Father Absence category have been arranged in thematic subgroups, in order to facilitate overall assessment of media coverage on this topic.

I. Father Absence

A. Father Absence: A social problem of epidemic proportions.

On Father's Day 1995, father absence was granted a media "promotion." Suddenly, it became the subject of editorials and feature stories in newspapers across the country. As a result, 1995 print media attention to father absence far surpassed the same coverage in 1990.

Pursuant to the heightened media awareness on father absence, articles appeared with titles such as, "Disappearing dads disruptive to society," "Where have all the fathers gone," "Happy Fatherless Day," and "Save the Fathers."

In addition, editorial page cartoons pointedly illustrated the social dimensions of father absence. For instance, this cartoon appeared in the *Seattle Times*:

A similar cartoon appearing in the *Indianapolis Star* implied that father absence crosses boundaries of age, race, and economic class:

In contrast, no "father absence" cartoons appeared in the 1990 newspapers surveyed -- a sure sign that this issue had catapulted to the forefront of media concerns in 1995.

The newsprint stories on father absence usually enumerated the demographics of father absence, along with a litany of associated social problems. A *Los Angeles Times* editorial, for instance, had this to say:

Fathers are missing in action in millions of homes. Four out of every ten American children live in a home without a father. In California, nearly half of all children will spend time in a fatherless home before the age of 18.

Does it matter? Ask mothers. The majority of divorced and never-married moms receive no financial support for their children. Does it matter? Ask experts. Children who grow up in single-parent homes are more likely to live in poverty, to be on welfare, drop out of school, and get into trouble. Even the children who beat those odds typically want to know who their father is, to get some moral as well as financial support.

Similarly, on its front page, the Cleveland *Plain-Dealer* featured a story titled "Disappearing dads disruptive to society," the first in a six-part series on "Fatherhood in America." In it, the *Plain-Dealer* quoted Ken Canfield, a prominent expert on fatherhood, who said:

Fatherlessness is a national epidemic . . . It will take a national call to arms for us to see real social change and healing.

Included in the *Plain-Dealer's* story were two bar graphs based on U.S. Census Bureau statistics showing dramatic increases in out of wedlock births and the number of children involved in divorce since 1960.

The *Plain-Dealer* feature additionally profiled a number of leaders in an incipient fatherhood movement devoted to mobilizing public opinion on father absence and encouraging men to be better fathers. One such leader was Charles Ballard, the founder of the Cleveland-based Institute for Responsible Fatherhood, who was also the subject of a separate *Plain-Dealer* editorial commending him for his work with inner-city fathers.

The Philadelphia *Inquirer* also ran a long feature story on father absence. The *Inquirer* presented relevant statistical information on father absence in the following bullet form:

- Never before in American History have so many children grown up

without fathers.

- The United States is now the world leader in fatherless families.
- Tonight, almost 40 percent of America's children will go to sleep in a house where their biological father does not live.
- Forty percent of children who live in fatherless homes have not seen their fathers in at least a year.

So prolific was coverage of the father absence issue on Father's Day 1995 that even an *Atlanta Constitution* movie review columnist, doing a story on "movie dads," introduced her subject with reference to the issue:

A controversy du jour is the problem of a Fatherless America. One survey estimates that 40 percent of American families are mom-only propositions.

Given Hollywood's climate of add-a-bead families and second wives the age of eldest daughters, absent dads are not a big deal in the movies. For instance, anybody know what happened to Forrest Gump's dad? And was there ever a Mr. Bates at "Psycho's" Bates Motel?

Finally, there appeared to be a slight media backlash against the volume of stories and publicity about deficient fatherhood. *Seattle Times'* columnist Thomas Shapley, for example, acknowledged that there are many rotten fathers, but felt obliged, on Father's Day, to extol the good ones:

I'll not ask you to lament all the low-lifes and losers out there who happen also to have sired offspring. I'll ask you to laud the other kinds of dads getting some attention today. They are the dads who work the overtime and the two jobs to keep their kids in clothes and give them a nice place to live. They are the dads who nurse along a single pair of work shoes for a couple of years so that their kids can have new shoes every time they grow out of them, or go out for baseball or soccer or basketball.

B. Father Absence: The Causes

Print media stories on father absence varied widely in their attempts to identify its cause. *Birmingham News* "Parenting" columnist John Rosemond blamed liberalized divorce laws in part for the problem:

Today, the once-sacrament of marriage is nothing more than a flimsy contract which any partner can walk away from at the slightest whim, "I'm not happy" being the usual pretext.

A *Washington Post* essay singled out less visible government policies for fostering fatherlessness:

...our society has developed a deeply imbedded, government sponsored legacy of fatherlessness. Politicians can complain all they want about "deadbeat dads" who abandon their families, but hidden in their policies is a flagrant bias that says quite plainly: Dads are not important to American families.

Alternatively, some of the 1995 Father Absence articles blamed outmoded male role expectations for fatherlessness. A *San Diego Union-Tribune* editorial attributed fatherlessness to a societal bias that values men only for their earning capacity. In support of this view, the *Union-Tribune* quoted Eloise Anderson, director of the California Department of Social Services, who stated,

...we've got to quit looking at fathers as breadwinners, so that when men are not employed, we don't drive them out of the household.

In a similar vein, Neil Chethik, author of "The Men's Column" in the *Cleveland Plain-Dealer*, wrote:

To convince men to stick around, most cultures created for us the roles of protector and provider. Our sense of self-esteem came to depend on our ability to keep our families housed, fed, and safe.

For nearly two centuries, American culture has operated on this principle. But then the late 20th century arrived. Women have discovered that they can protect and provide for themselves.

Suddenly, men's traditional role in the family no longer applies, and we're looking for other ways to be of use.

Finally, some in the media faulted the economy for the widespread absence of men from families. One such observer was *Washington Post* columnist Carl Rowan, who asserted:

It is well established that high black unemployment underlies the tragic rate of separation and divorce . . .

Consequently, added Rowan,

An overriding issue in America is fathers and what they earn...

The diversity of proposed causes above mirrored the heterogeneous discussion of proposed solutions for father absence in the next subgroup of articles.

C. Father Absence: The Solutions

A reliable sign that father absence had entered the national media "consciousness" in 1995 was the flurry of remedies offered on Father's Day. Proposed remedies ranged from the governmental to the spiritual. And, a growing fatherhood movement, dedicated to catalyzing action on father absence, was drawing media attention. Noted the *Cleveland Plain-Dealer*:

As the problem has grown, so has a burgeoning industry of daddy-boosting institutes and programs. They practice varying methods, but preach the same message: Children need fathers, and fathers need their children, whether they live in the same home or not.

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* profiled a number of the leaders in this fatherhood movement, such as David Blankenhorn, Don Eberly, and Wade Horn, all part of the "National Fatherhood Initiative," an organization devoted to "saving fatherhood." In the *Inquirer* piece, Blankenhorn and Eberly both stressed that fatherlessness is a non-partisan cultural problem that defies purely political solutions. Eberly, the President of the National Fatherhood Institute, said:

...whether you look at it from a Democratic perspective or a Republican perspective, there's no correlation between partisan control of government and the continued fraying of the social order.

The approach of these pro-fatherhood leaders prompted the *Inquirer's* Art Carey to write:

A renewal of fatherhood is a solution that requires nothing less (and perhaps nothing less utopian) than a rekindling of civic virtue, a fresh embrace of an idea and an ideal -- fatherhood -- that's fallen into disrepute in recent years, owing to a wide variety of factors.

The National Fatherhood Initiative and its three leaders were frequently mentioned in the

1995 survey. Resuscitating fatherhood they argued, is the key to solving the myriad of social problems afflicting the nation. The *Arizona Republic* used this quote from Eberly for its "Eavesdropping" section:

Committed Fatherhood would do more to restore a normal childhood to every child -- and dramatically reduce our nation's most costly social problems -- than all the pending legislation in America combined.

Like many of the leaders of the emerging fatherhood movement, the *Detroit News* advocated virtue and personal accountability as the solution to fatherlessness. In its editorial, it urged the following:

...ultimately, every man must make his own commitment to responsible fatherhood. On this day of either silly or mawkish greeting cards and bad neckties, it should be remembered that fathers are an essential part of the intact family, the best social welfare program this country has going for it.

Other non-governmental solutions appearing in print concentrated less on personal responsibility and more on cultural sex role expectations. In accordance with its diagnosis of the cause of fatherlessness, the *San Diego Union-Tribune* prescribed the following:

Society has to change its mind about men and fathers. A man's importance in a household is much more than bringing home a paycheck and taking out the garbage.

Some of solutions to fatherlessness not involving government were promoted by people in government. The Cleveland *Plain-Dealer* reported that several prominent elected officials were now exploring the issue of fatherhood in America:

Vice President Al Gore held a fathering conference Tuesday at the White House; the same day, Pete Wilson, the Republican presidential hopeful and California governor, convened a fatherhood summit in Los Angeles, four national fatherhood groups met last week in Washington, D.C., to announce new programs, examine research data and launch advertising campaigns.

And an editorial by Vice President Gore on fatherhood appeared in two separate newspapers, the Louisville, Kentucky *Courier-Journal* and Jackson, Mississippi's *Clarion-Ledger*. Vice President Gore noted that "Forty percent of America's children will remember living in a home without any their biological children," and even admonished fathers who support their children financially for emotional deprivation. In response to this state of affairs, Gore exhorted:

We must find ways to change our culture so that men are encouraged to spend more time with their children and we must support men in their resolve to be more involved in their children's lives.

Toward this goal, Gore promoted his "Father to Father" program, which he described as a "non-governmental initiative to unite men with one another in the task of becoming better fathers."

The editors of the *Chicago Tribune*, however, specifically endorsed a governmental response to father absence. Said the *Tribune*:

And while government can't legislate morality, it can encourage responsibility. Legislators should make that a priority by providing tax incentives for couples to marry and by requiring every woman to name her child's father on the birth certificate. Law enforcement officers can, (and are beginning to) go after the fathers for child support.

And Mike McManus's column in the Birmingham News proposed this non-governmental remedy for father absence: marriage. To support his view that the restoration of marriage is the answer to missing fathers, syndicated columnist McManus directly quoted a report by the Council on Families in America⁵, stating that

The divorce revolution -- the steady displacement of a marriage culture by a culture of divorce and unwed parenthood -- has failed. It has created terrible hardships for children, incurred unsupportable social costs, and failed to deliver on its promise of greater adult happiness.

The time has come to shift the focus of national attention from divorce to marriage and rebuild a culture based on enduring marital relationships.

Lastly, a religious solution to father absence appeared in the 1995 survey. Several newspapers carried stories on the evangelical Christian "Promise Keeper's" movement, which promotes a spiritual approach to fatherhood. The *Cincinnati Enquirer's* piece noted that Promise Keepers and David Blankenhorn of the National Father Initiative commonly advocate "pledging" as a solution to fatherlessness:

In his recent book, *Fatherless America*, David Blankenhorn argues that fatherlessness is the engine that is driving America's social woes. First among his suggested remedies is the idea that each American man be asked to take a pledge on his belief in fatherhood and marriage. Promise keepers is proof that such pledging can be popular. With its combination of masculine camaraderie and moral certainty, it offers a potent antidote to modern male bewilderment.

Three rank and file members of Promise Keepers also shared their experiences in *Enquirer*

⁵ The Council on Families, which is composed of 17 leading experts on the family, is sponsored by the Institute of American Values, and its report on marriage is an Institute publication.

guest columns. All three Promise Keepers was enthusiastic about the movement's impact on their lives. One Promise Keeper, Billie Lee, wrote:

I'm learning my value to my wife and family through God's eyes. I'm learning how to love God and my wife all over again. I'm learning to how to forgive. I'm learning to deal with the rejection I had as a child. I stress that I'm learning. PromiseKeepers is not a quick fix; it's a long process that starts when you get home from a conference.

D. Father Absence: The Controversy

Although 1995 Father Absence articles overwhelmingly portrayed father absence as an undesirable social phenomenon, print media coverage of the issue also cited critics who dispute assertions about the importance of fathers and of dire social consequences when they are absent. Much of the dissent about fatherlessness came from those who perceive advocacy of fatherhood as an affront to single moms and single parenthood. The *Houston Chronicle's* Father's Day editorial contained a microcosm of the clash of values underlying the debate about fathers:

I know its not politically correct, said Michael O'Donnell, executive director of the center [The Southwest Center for Fathering at Abilene Christian University] "It feels sanctimonious to say that one form of family is better. But research backs it up...The two parent home is still the best social institution ever invented to rear children. We don't want to burden single moms, but we shouldn't hold them up as the ideal.

But Nancy Duff Campbell, co-president of the Washington, D.C.-based National Women's Law Center, told the Associated Press that that's not necessarily so, emphasizing that good families need not be a Norman Rockwell vision.

"We do take issue with the assertion that a two-parent family is always better than a single-parent family, or anything in any way that would demonize single-parent families that are doing a good job," she said.

Another dissenter, director Andrea Engber of the National Organization of Single Mothers in North Carolina, offered this counter-argument in her interview with the *Cleveland Plain-Dealer*:

I really think the whole fatherhood movement is an offshoot of the fundamentalist Christian movement -- this whole angry white male thing... These guys stereotype single mothers...Not having a father at home is not necessarily bad; it's not getting support that hurts. It can be good to have two parents. It can be good to have one parent. What's abnormal is the mean-spiritedness of this country. We always need someone to blame. And now, its lets bash single mothers.

The Plain-Dealer also quoted Wade Horn, a leader of the National Fatherhood Initiative, who rejected the notion that raising the issue of absent fathers is equivalent to bashing single moms:

Single mothers are working hard every day to raise their children ... They need our support ... But we have this picture today. and the person who is missing from that picture, nine times out of ten, is the dad.

In newspaper articles where father absence was presented as controversial, the argument most always concerned the value of the two-parent home. One, an *Indianapolis Star* editorial, conditionally weighed in on the side of the two-parent family:

From Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan to Ann Landers, from Pope John Paul II to Oprah Winfrey, it is conceded that families with dads who are not hopeless alcoholics, drug addicts or psychos are usually a lot better off than families without them.

Columnist Pythia Peay, however, in an essay appearing in the *Cleveland Plain-Dealer*, strongly disagreed. Peay contends that the dissolution of the two-parent home hasn't

necessarily diminished effective fatherhood:

Although it is true that more children are being raised in fatherless homes, there is much evidence that men remain committed to the task of raising children.

Devoted stepfathers care for the children of the women they love. Single men are mentors to fatherless children in the inner city. And both single and married fathers are beginning to do "women's work" -- laundry, housework, and grocery shopping."

Hence, in Peay's view, fatherlessness not only is not a disaster, it may actually enhance fatherhood. Another proponent of this view was Jennifer James of the *Seattle Times*. In her piece, James swam against the tide of pessimism in 1995 about fatherhood in America:

The old patriarchy is crumbling, but a new model is rising from the debris of lost respect and tradition. There were always men who were wonderful fathers, but now there are many more.

James' personal experience may be a factor in her view of fatherhood. Recalling her own childhood, she wrote:

My father gave to everyone in the community. He was president of civic organizations, active in charity, and helped people in need, but he was distant and unavailable to his children.

E. Father Absence: The Social Problem with Personal Ramifications.

On Father's Day 1995, some journalists who shared their own stories of growing up fatherless also addressed themselves to the larger social issue. For example, Kenneth Cole, a reporter for the *Detroit News*, cited the negative social effects of fatherlessness, but also emphasized its personal toll:

According to data from the U.S. Commission on Interstate Child Support, 33 percent of all high school dropouts and 75 percent of male juvenile offenders hail from fatherless homes.

Yet, I suspect -- nah, I know -- the personal ramifications for the children of absentee fathers are greater still.

Jane Daugherty, also writing in the *Detroit News*, reported the statistics of father absence and explored the death of her father at the age of eleven:

Not having a dad hurts just about every day, as best I can recall. I was seriously

angry about it until I was about 25 and slowed down enough to figure some of it out....

So I can imagine the pain of kids whose fathers split because they "need space," or "have to find themselves," or just "can't do the parent thing."

On Father's Day 1995, father absence was thrust into the spotlight of national media attention. What accounts for the 400% increase in the number of articles on father absence in from 1990 to 1995?

Plainly, the demographics of father absence had attracted the attention of social theorists and other non-media opinion leaders, in turn drawing the media. In addition, the publication of books on father absence and the publicity generated by an emerging fatherhood movement obviously boosted media awareness.

Further, it seems likely that growing public recognition of a correlation between father absence and social disorder resulted in heightened media attention. Lastly, political and cultural events, like the "Murphy Brown" debate and President Clinton's numerous speeches about the corrosive effects of family breakdown, undoubtedly helped raise media interest in the subject. As a result of these factors, and perhaps others, father absence as a social issue was elevated to a heretofore unreached level of public visibility.

II. Father Reflections

Articles in the "Father Reflections" category grew from 26 in 1990 to 34 in 1995. The substance of the articles, though, was basically unchanged from 1990 to 1995. Attributes of good fathers were again culled from the lives of real fathers -- attributes that are esteemed by writers of the "Father Reflection's" articles.

The varying father traits upheld in these articles reflect the different personalities of their subjects. Yet the unifying theme of the father reflection's pieces is love, a virtue acknowledged by all the of writers -- dads and non-dads alike. The irony in these essays often is that the love fathers feel for their children is the cause of both the joy and misery of fatherhood. This irony is evident in contributor Syl Jones' piece for the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, where, "playing" the role of "dad-spokesman," he tells kids:

Life hasn't been a picnic with you, either. You see, he loves you so much that he'd like to control your fate, take away your pain, steer you around the million catastrophes waiting to happen. He wants to tell you not to smoke because it's bad for you. But that advice may come out as a command and prompt you to rebel.

A second "Father Reflection's" theme stressed that the joys of being a father outweigh the hardships. For instance, Ross Anderson, *Seattle Times* editorial columnist, wrote this about raising his son, which he did alone for eight years:

I don't recall any pain or sacrifices. Maybe I could've gone to a better newspaper, a better-paying job, tried management. But being a dad is the job I wanted. Raising that kid from diapers to college loans has been the single greatest pleasure of my life. He is not my gift to the world, but the world's gift to me. I won the lottery.

And Stan Awtrey of the *Atlanta Constitution*, who contributed a 1990 piece to this category, is obviously one happy dad. In his 1995 Father's Day column, he shared this:

My son likes to pat his dad on the face and say, "your my best friend." Those moments are worth a million cards or neckties. Those moments are priceless treasures that are sometimes afforded to a few very lucky fathers.

These "Father Reflections" essays send a message that may be obscured amidst all the news of father absence in 1995. They say: despite the sacrifice and anxiety, fatherhood is not only worthwhile, it may well be the most satisfying experience of one's life.

Another theme that recurs in the "Father Reflections" category is the connection between being a good father and a good husband. As its "quote for the day," the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* ran this from Theodore Hesburgh: "The most important thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother." And, in its piece titled "Gems from Dad," the *Star Tribune* included this "gem" from Minneapolis lawyer Joel Friedburg:

The most memorable advice my father gave me? The morning I was getting married he took me to his barber and said to me, 'You're getting married. A real man takes these vows very seriously, remains honest and never cheats on this wife. I know in today's society, it may be fashionable to do otherwise, but that's how I feel.' I've never forgotten his words.

This theme recurred in the *Seattle Times'* essay "Celebrating a Father who wasn't confined by roles," by columnist Shelby Gilje. Gilje reflected on her late father's monogamy:

A believer in the institution of marriage, he was married for a total of 61 years, first to my mother for nearly 19 years before her death at an early age, then to a woman who, like himself, was rearing two children alone.

One last theme in the 1995 Father Reflections category is notable simply because it was less visible in the 1990 sample. Two separate pieces in 1995 placed great value on a father's communication of religious values to his children. In the *Birmingham News'*, "Fathers know best," a former University of Alabama quarterback shared what he considered to be his father's best advice:

You'll never find happiness in money; you'll never find happiness in all the things you have, and you'll never find happiness in trying to be successful, ... The only thing that's going to make you truly happy in life is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

In the *Houston Chronicle*, guest Columnist Anita Grace Lie Carman also emphasized her husband Bob's efforts to teach their children religious values:

So much can happen in life, and my husband knows that as much as he wants to be

here, a day will come when his time with the boys is over. So, he gives his children the best gift he can, a foundation of trust through which they will learn to trust in a heavenly father. Only he can walk with them into the rest of their lives. And Bob prays that when that time comes, his boys will turn to their heavenly father and say as they do now, "If I can just get to my dad, then everything will be all right."

More so that in 1990, 1995 "Father Reflections" articles emphasized the paternal transmission of religious faith to one's children as part of the "good father" ideal.

Overall, "Father Reflections" remained a relatively stable category, apart from a slight percentage drop in the number of articles compared to 1990.

III. Father Memories/Father Profiles

"Father Profile" articles decreased slightly from 17 in 1990 to 16 in 1995, and was therefore the only category that shrunk in 1995, other than "Miscellaneous." Father Memories, on the other hand, nearly doubled its total, going from 17 in 1990 to 30 in 1995.

One "Father Profile" theme is especially prevalent; four of these stories concerned fathers who on a daily basis provided care for their disabled or sick children. Among these four, three involved mentally disabled adult children who will require their fathers' care throughout their lifetimes.

In "Father Memories," there is one unexpected emphasis. Three "Father Memories" pieces fondly recalled "traditional" fathers. Given the number of articles that extolled "new" fathers in 1995, praise for "old" style fathers was something of an anomaly.

In remembrance of her traditional father, *The Atlanta Constitution and Journal's* Cynthia Tucker wrote:

I cannot imagine my childhood without the constant presence of the man who helped anchor my world. He was there to keep away the monsters that might come in the night; he was there to mend my broken toys; he was there to take the training wheels off my bike.

He was there to intimidate my dates and remind them that I had a 10 p.m. curfew. He was there to insult one unfortunate suitor who neglected to take off his hat when he entered the house. He was there to help me with my algebra and teach me to drive a car with manual transmission.

Although she clearly admires him greatly now, Tucker admitted that appreciation for her father's qualities was belated:

My father was not my best friend or my favorite confidant. He was a 1950's kind of guy: square, traditional, authoritarian. He did not share his feelings and did not believe his children should be consulted about the rules of the house.

Another traditional father was lovingly recalled by his daughter in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Dr. Yvonne Thornton, an orthopedic surgeon, and one of five daughters of "Daddy" Thornton, authored the book *The Ditchdiggers Daughters: A Black Family's Astonishing Success Story*. Thornton shared her father's child-rearing philosophy with the *Inquirer*:

Most parents today would rather be loved than respected. And as a result, we're having a generation of young people so selfish and marginally ethical ... something has to change. My parents didn't care about that. They had no problem not being loved ... they wanted to be respected. And we did love them.

Traditional fathers like Thornton's and Tucker's, often ignored or castigated in the "Changing Role of Father" category of stories, surprisingly were the recipients of approbation in several "Father Memories" stories.

It is hard to determine the reasons for the numerical changes occurring in these categories between 1990 and 1995. "Father Memories" and "Father Profiles" pieces are usually intensely personal: they do not easily unveil particular journalistic biases or emphases and they furnish little insight into the ebbs and flows of cultural trends. Of course, these articles do show that fathers powerfully shape their children's view of fatherhood.

IV. The Changing Role of Father

The category which experienced the second largest increase in coverage from 1990 to 1995 was the "Changing Role of the Father." This category grew from 6 articles in 1990 to 22 articles in 1995 -- a 266% increase.

One of the themes receiving increased attention was that of "stay-at-home-dads." Three 1995 articles addressed this topic. The *Arizona Republic's* story reported that:

In 1991, 20 percent of preschoolers whose mothers work were cared for by their fathers, a five percent increase over the previous three years.

Further, according to the *Republic*, an "estimated 2 million American fathers . . . call themselves at-home dads." The *Republic* sought to explain the reason for the increased number of stay-at-home-dads:

Many of the men become full-time fathers after a job loss, but for the Phoenix-area dads, the biggest motivation was the desire to have one parent at home with the kids during their most formative years. All are committed to being full-time fathers as long as possible, hopefully until the younger child enters kindergarten.

A second theme in this "Changing Role of the Father" subcategory was one that praised the new, nurturing dads of the nineties. Typically, these articles were written by the wives of "new" fathers. For instance, expressing her admiration for "new" fathers, the author of the North Jersey *Bergen Record's* "The Pressured Parent" column, Mary Amaroso, wrote:

...after years of watching styles of fatherhood, I have to salute many of the fathers I know. They step up to the plate and perform for their families and children when life and love and schedules call upon them. They make dinner if they're the first to get home (or they get takeout). They talk to their executive friends about the best source of a nanny. They pick up at day care.

Syndicated columnist Donna Britt also exalted the "new father." Moreover, Britt argued that contrary to all the bad news concerning fathers (particularly regarding African-American fathers), the prevalence of the new fathering style demonstrated that fatherhood, regardless of race, was flourishing. Britt, whose column appeared in, among other newspapers, the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, wrote:

In some ways, black men have never been better fathers. Actually, fathers of every hue today seem involved in their children's lives in ways their own dads were not.

For these print journalists, the advent of the "new" father signals a renaissance for fatherhood. Optimism about the new fatherhood model is nowhere stronger than in the *Seattle Times'* piece by Jennifer James. Said James:

It may be hard being a guy in the 1995, but being a father has far more possibilities and rewards than it did only a generation ago. Fathering is getting better, and someday it will get easier. This generation of fathers will live longer, give more, and feel more than any generation before them. Fewer fathers will be unloved, uninterested, or unavailable.

The father as king is dead, long live the father as a loving and loved parent.

Consonant with the enthusiasm for "new" fathers, another 1995 "Changing Role" theme posited that "new" fathers and their children are better adjusted and happier. An *Arizona Republic* editorial, while lamenting the denigration of traditional dads, embraced this idea:

The pop psychologists have turned the guys who worked long hours to pay the mortgage into mean men who denied their children quality time. . . .

Today's dad does more than take out the garbage. He deals with diapers and understands the intricacies of spitting up. His children will have richer lives because today's dad tries to do it all, too.

A fourth theme which appeared in the "Changing Role" category strongly rejected the 1990's model of the nurturing dad. The *Detroit News*' essay titled "Bad fathering breeds national decline," examined the counter-cultural perspective of Reuven Bar-Levav, the author of the book, "*Every Family Needs a C.E.O.*" The author of the essay, John Attarian, set forth Bar-Levav's fathering philosophy as follows:

Instead of an indulgent, yielding, undemanding daddy, children need a father to protect and provide; act as a firm but fair authority, rule-maker and enforcer; be a "representative of reality;" and set an example.

Bar-Levav attributes social breakdown in America to the poor fathering, not just the absence of fathers. Attarian, enumerating Bar-Levav's position, wrote:

Fathered well, children turn out strong, responsible, rational, self-controlled, more respectful of themselves and others. Fathered poorly, they are weak, confused and irresponsible. Self-centered, undisciplined and thoughtless, they are prone to the destructive acts that add up to social breakdown: substance abuse, crime, widespread divorce, spouse abuse, irresponsible and/or predatory sex, poor job performance.

Hence, contrary to the optimism about new fathers expressed by Britt and James, Bar-Levav's views project a future of social regression rooted in "new," but weak fathering. Attarian, noting the connection between bad fathering and civil society, concurred with Bar-Levav:

Civilization presupposes civilized people -- and their not born. They have to be made.

Bar-Levav's views on fatherhood were not the norm among the 1995 "Changing Role" subgroup.

A fifth theme in the "Changing Role of Father" subgroup discussed the subject in terms of men's liberation. The editors of the *Arizona Republic* had this to say regarding the new domesticity of fathers:

These days, a man's home is less a castle and more a boarding house, where schedules are coordinated and chores are divided. The spread of two-income families changed more than just the role of women. It liberated men. . . .

However, not all agreed in 1995 that men have truly been adequately liberated from cultural sex role expectations. Commentator Armin Brott, in an essay published in several of the surveyed papers, argued that society still confines men to stereotypical sex roles:

...today's fathers are fully aware that the traditional measures of success are not all they're cracked up to be and are committed to being a major presence in our children's lives -- physically and emotionally. The hitch is that society (and by this I mean men and women) not only won't support us, but actively discourages us.

One last "Changing Role" theme demonstrated the print media's elastic view of fatherhood. In the *New York Times*' "Looking for a Donor to Call Dad," writer Peggy Orenstein looked at the industry of donor insemination and the lives of a number of "donor" children. Most of the grown donor children portrayed shared a common, often obsessive, purpose:

...like many adoptees who harbor fantasies about their birth parents, a growing number of adult donor-inseminated offspring are undertaking intensive searches for their biological fathers.

One grown donor child explained her curiosity this way:

Do you know your father? ... Well, why shouldn't I know mine?

Surely, "donor dads" are outside of mainstream cultural attitudes regarding acceptable fatherhood. Nonetheless, the *Times*' article on donor insemination is illustrative of very real cultural tensions over what it means to be a father.

The 266% increase in the number of "Changing Role of the Father" articles in 1995 is not easily explained. For example, it cannot be attributed simply to the increased attention to fatherhood issues generally in 1995: the increase in this category far exceeds the 75% overall increase in fatherhood stories in 1995.

Possibly, the increase of this type of story signifies greater cultural diversity, disagreement, and confusion over the role fathers do and should play.

Additionally, the higher number of articles extolling "new fathers" may reflect concerns by some observers that efforts to promote fatherhood in America are really aimed at reinstalling the domineering "patriarchal" father of earlier periods in America.

V. Distant Fathers

In 1995, the "Distant Fathers" category had the same number of articles as in 1990, which translates into a substantial decrease as a percentage of total articles compared to 1990. One noteworthy development in this category in 1995 is the expanded coverage of "reunion" stories (5 of the 13), involving fathers and sons brought together after long separations.

One of these reunion stories was distributed by the Associated Press item and was therefore carried in three separate newspapers. It told the story of Bill Kennedy, whose ex-wife kidnapped their three year old child after Kennedy prevailed in their battle for custody. Fourteen years later, Kennedy was reunited with his son after investigators found him and Kennedy's ex-wife living under an alias in California.

On its front page, the *Washington Post* also ran a reunion piece. It told the remarkable story of Neal Kendall Jr., who found his father by chance 50 years after Neal Kendall Sr. walked out on his family. Surprisingly, the *Post* reported that Neal, Jr. is not bitter towards his 83 year old father:

The son has forgiven the father. 'It is just something that happened,' he said.

Until his son showed up, the older man had no visitors. But now there is a large family to get to know that includes his daughter-in-law, three grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

The *Post's* reunion story also contained a sub-theme, identical to the one which appeared frequently in 1990: the determination of fatherless men to be different than their own fathers. Reported the *Post*:

Kendall Jr. has been a different kind of father. He married more than 30 years ago and has three adult children. 'I wanted to be a good father, someone who would stick around,' he said.

A third theme of the 1995 "Distant Fathers" category also sounded a familiar refrain: the deprivation experienced by the children of distant fathers. *Indianapolis Star* columnist Lynn Ford, for example, recalled that even before his parents divorced when he was six, his father

...never took time for one-on-one, father-and-son things like playing catch, going to ball games or flying a kite . . . he never seemed interested in me -- who I was, who I might become and what I needed to learn from a man.

Another Distant Father theme emphasized the economic losses incurred by father absence. For example, the Boston *Globe* described the financial struggles of the wife and children of one absent father:

Tracey Rezenndes of New Bedford, a mother of three, said she threw her husband out five years ago because of his drug abuse. She has been on welfare ever since.

She is now attending school and hopes to find a job that pays enough to cover all the bills. But she said if her husband had been responsible, having a two-income family would have made things easier.

A fourth and quite different perspective on "Distant Fathers" was published in the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, under the title, "One non-traditional family, two very special fathers." It concerned two generations of fathers who do not reside with their children; the elder father due to divorce, and his son, because of out of wedlock childbirth. Both, however, received praise from the *Enquirer* for their involvement with their children. Bernie Young, the divorced father of two sons, has never missed a child-support payment and is close to both his sons. Consequently,

...when [his] oldest son, Brian Young, unexpectedly became a father two years ago, he had a positive example to follow.

The *Enquirer* additionally noted:

On Father's Day, men such as Bernie and Brian Young might feel like the most under-appreciated dads around. They are among the divorced or never-married dads who faithfully pay what they're supposed to, spend time with their children and do their best to be good parents.

But the *Enquirer's* story is an exception. Most Distant Father pieces convey the idea that the separation of fathers and their children at best makes effective fatherhood difficult and unlikely, and at worst, is a highly undesirable and negative situation for all concerned.

Why did we see there proportionally less Distant Father articles in 1995 than in 1990, given the increasing numbers of children living apart from their biological fathers? At least partly, this decrease is likely attributable to the increased attention given to father absence as a demographic trend and social problem, resulting in less attention to the personal experiences of distant fatherhood.

Conclusion

In 1995, ordinary newspaper coverage on Father's Day was eclipsed by more pressing and serious news -- the disappearance of fathers from the homes of their children. Consequently, the usual Father's Day stories about fathers and fatherhood were displaced in many cases with analysis and commentary on a social issue: father absence.

Why, in 1995, was there an awakening, at least among print journalists, that father absence was an issue deserving of such intense attention -- attention that translated into a fivefold increase over the same coverage in 1990? Certainly, the problem of father absence did not spring up overnight; yet stories identifying father absence as a social problem were relatively uncommon in 1990, apart from those focusing solely on the African-American community.

A number of quite practical reasons for the explosion in coverage have been put forward in the body of this survey: the work of fatherhood movement activists and writers, speeches and policy initiatives by government leaders, and growing body of social science evidence linking undesirable behavior with fatherlessness. While these factors are important, they are probably secondary explanations.

What then, is the primary cause of the widespread publicization of a fatherhood crisis in 1995?

Obviously, the flight of males from family life is enormously significant -- it is transforming our culture's most basic social institution, the family, and in so doing, transforming our culture. This momentous cultural change has inevitably led to a crisis of the meaning of fatherhood and a growing recognition, including media recognition, of the very real and compelling social harm flowing from father absence.

Hence, it is no surprise that two principal findings of this survey reflect precisely these two topics. The near quadrupling of articles in the "Changing Role of the Father" category between 1990 and 1995 reveals the current clash over what it means to be a father. And similarly, the fivefold increase in articles on father absence in the survey points to its emergence onto the national scene as a full-blown social crisis.

It seems clear that in 1995, fatherlessness as a social problem was driving and shaping the

discussion about fatherhood as a social role. However, if we as a society are to resolve these crises in the years ahead, this process may need to be reversed. That is, any cure for the social regression caused by father absence must probably be preceded by, and rooted in, a broad understanding of the meaning of fatherhood.

Appendix A: Main Findings of Survey in Graph Form

Appendix B: Bibliography of 1990 Survey Articles

Father's Day 1990 Articles

Father Reflections

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