Through the Eyes of Children:
Youths' Perceptions and Evaluations of Maternal and Paternal Roles*

MELISSA A. MILKIE
University of Maryland

ROBIN W. SIMON
University of Iowa

BRIAN POWELL
Indiana University

Although scholars have called for greater inclusion of children's understandings in socio-logical research, most studies of family roles and relationships are still adult-centered. In this paper we explore children's perceptions and evaluations of maternal and paternal roles by content-analyzing more than 3,000 essays in which children explain why their parent is the "best" mother or father. The parental qualities and activities children value and how children frame familial relationships document the salience of gender and gender processes in families. These patterns generally complement and expand upon patterns found in studies on parenthood conducted from adults' perspective. Yet some important dif-ferences exist as well, such as the relative unimportance of labor force participation in children's appraisals of their fathers and children's greater focus on mutuality when describing relations with their fathers. To assess the degree to which children's perceptions have changed, we also compare essays from 1979-1980 with those from the early 1990s and find a clear shift in emphasis from a caretaker/provider role to a more recreational role; this shift, on closer inspection, is more applicable to fathers than to mothers. These findings underscore the need of family, gender, and social psychological research to incor-porate children's perspectives.

I nominate my mother because she is nice to me almost all of the time. She reads to me and sings to me every night. She is very special to me. My mom tucks me in at night. She loves me a lot. I like the things she does for me. One time me and my dad were going to go to Ski World, my mom gave us money to go. Those things are why I love my mom. (male, age 7, 1993)

I nominate my father because he enjoys playing with me like I was a puppy. He is very funny. I think it is fun to have a dad so intelligent like him. He is so nice to me that I love him so much. He does the dishes, helps me spell things, tickles me, helps and a lot of other things. He is like a toy I carry everywhere. He also gives me birthday toys that are fun to play with. My dad is so special to me. (female, age 7, 1992)

A decade has passed since Thorne (1987) posed the question "Where are the children?" Critiquing what she called the adult-centered orientation of sociological scholarship, Thorne called for a greater appreciation of children's agency and increased scholarly attention to children, particularly, their under-standing of social phenomena. Despite the proliferation of research on children in certain areas (Adler and Adler 1995; Ambert 1992; Corsaro 1997), sociological studies on family

roles and relationships generally have not followed this directive. This gap is doubly ironic in light of the burgeoning research on family life, particularly the gendered nature of family experiences (Bielby and Bielby 1989; Gerson 1993; Hochschild 1989), and the implicit (and sometimes explicit) requirement that social psychological theory and research examine the perspectives of *all* actors in social relationships (Corsaro and Eder 1995; Gecas and Burke 1995). In this paper we begin to fill this gap by exploring children's perceptions and evaluations of maternal and paternal roles and parent-child relationships, based on quantitative and qualitative content analyses of a unique data set of more than 3,000 children's essays.

BACKGROUND

Parental Roles from Adults' Perspective: The Importance of Gender

Scholarship on family relations, especially on parental roles and parent-child relationships, has surged in the 1980s and 1990s. A number of studies have examined, among other things, parents' allocation of time (Presser 1989), parents' commitment to work and family (Bielby and Bielby 1989; Pleck 1985), and the types of parents' interactions with children (LaRossa 1988; Nock and Kingston 1988). Research also has explored sociocultural beliefs about motherhood and fatherhood (Griswold 1993) as well as the meaning of parental roles for women and for men (Simon 1995a). Interest in these topics undoubtedly has been spurred by the pronounced increase in women's labor force participation, by the rise in single and noncustodial parenthood, and by ongoing public dialogue about men's and women's roles in general.

Reflecting these societal issues, gender as a key process inherent in the organization and meaning of families has been a dominant theme of contemporary scholarship on the family (Coltrane 1989; Thompson and Walker 1989). Berk (1985), for example, conceptualizes family life as a "gender factory": Just as it produces such services as house-

work and childcare, it also reproduces gender differences. Gender is central to parental behaviors and attitudes, to related cultural ideals of parenthood, and, as we demonstrate here, to children's evaluations of parental roles.

Recent research, based almost exclusively on self-reports by parents or on observations, has been consistently clear about the persistence of gender variation in parenting, but the degree to which gender differentiation has changed is subject to lively debate. Certainly most researchers agree that women still have greater interaction with children overall, do more caregiving, and do the great majority of household labor (Goldscheider and Waite 1991)—especially that which is repetitive and routine, unnoticed, or discounted—despite women's increased commitments to the paid labor force (Hochschild 1989) and a trend toward more egalitarian ideology within the family (Thompson and Walker 1989). In contrast, some commentators herald the arrival of the "new father," who is more sensitive to and more intimately involved with his children. Nevertheless, most scholars remain agnostic about overall increases in paternal involvement, recognize changes in fathers' participation in only limited areas, such as recreation and play, especially with sons (Lamb 1986; LaRossa 1988; Marsiglio 1991), and/or contend that the increase in "good dads" is counterbalanced by the rise in absent "bad dads," who are disconnected from their children (Furstenberg 1989).

Regardless of whether maternal and paternal behaviors have converged, diverged, or remained unchanged, cultural ideals about motherhood and especially fatherhood have changed considerably and have become more complex (Gerson 1993; Griswold 1993). On the one hand, the ideal of an all-giving mother and a breadwinning father endures (Ferree 1990; Thompson and Walker 1989). Concurrently, on the other hand, we see greater cultural acceptance of mothers participating in the labor force and fathers contributing beyond the family economy (LaRossa 1988). Indeed, fathers are expected to participate in emotional and physical caretaking of children from infancy on, starting

with their presence in the delivery room. How closely these ideals correspond to actual parental behaviors has implications for the way parents are perceived and evaluated by themselves and by others, including their children (Ferree 1990; LaRossa 1988).

Studies such as those mentioned above are important not only because they inform us about the gendered nature of families, but also because of the presumed consequences of parenting for children. Indeed, one goal of much research on parenting is to identify those family structures, behaviors, and processes which are desirable for children's development. Some scholars, for example, posit that mothers and fathers make qualitatively different contributions to child outcomes—contributions that also may differ for sons and for daughters (Wenk et al. 1984) and may have ramifications for adulthood (Amato 1994). Yet it is puzzling that even while we are beginning to discern those aspects of parenting which are valuable *for* children, we do not know which dimensions of parental behaviors and qualities are valued *by* children.

Parenting from Children's Perspective: An Empirical and Theoretical Gap

One might argue that children are simultaneously at the center and the periphery of social scientific scholarship on the family. Although a great deal of work focuses on the family's effect on children (e.g., the consequences of parents' divorce), most sociological scholarship ignores children's understandings, portrayals, and evaluations of families. This adult-centered predisposition is not unique to sociologists and is illustrated by everyday expressions about family members: For example, we acknowledge "fatherhood" and "motherhood" but not the complementary "sonhood" and "daughterhood." This is not to suggest that family research including children is nonexistent. In particular, psychologists (Intons-Peterson 1988; Kagan and Lemkin 1960) and scholars outside the United States (Alanen 1987; Ambert 1992; Qvortrup 1991; Wodak and Schulz 1985) have been sensitive to children's perspectives.[1] Studies using children, however, typi-

cally rely on limited, closed-ended questions or scales (McDonald 1982; Nevius 1984; Smith and Morgan 1994) or on adult-constructed scenarios about family life which often involve forced-choice responses (Siegal and Barclay 1985). Even these techniques are seldom used to examine what children *value* in their mothers and fathers. We suggest that children's own descriptions (with few imposed constraints) of their perspective on parents and familial relations is important because this form of children's narrative is rare and because there is reason to expect that children offer a distinctive view of families.

Sociologists' inattention to children's evaluations of familial relations also is misguided because core assumptions of social psychological frameworks on socialization and social relations, specifically role theory and symbolic interactionism, dictate that we attempt to understand the perspectives of all actors involved in role relationships. According to these social psychological frameworks, the subjective perceptions and evaluations of *all* participants in role relationships must be included because they may differ from one another in some important ways.

Central to role theory is the idea that roles are fundamentally social because they are based on relationships with role partners. In fact, role theorists argue that interdependency is inherent in role relationships and that no role can exist without a corresponding role partner (i.e., there can be no parent without a child) because role partners rely on one another to facilitate their role performances (Linton 1936). Insofar as roles exist in complementary pairs, research on parental roles and relationships must consider children's perceptions and evaluations as well as parents'.

By the same token, symbolic interactionists' emphasis on subjective interpretations and

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[1] U.S. sociologists have shown an increased interest in childhood as a stage of the life course, notably through the recently organized American Sociological Association section devoted to such scholarship. It is unclear, however, how strongly this new scholarship focuses on understanding the experiences of children as a social group (Corsaro 1997) rather than on conceptualizing children as learners of adult culture or as factors in social problems—that is, children as threats to or victims of adult society (Thorne 1987).

definitions of the situation underscores the importance of studying children's perspectives (Amato 1990). A key assumption underlying symbolic interaction is that roles are not merely scripts but are continually created and recreated in social interaction. Insofar as people respond creatively to roles, an examination of children's understandings of parental roles and relationships could provide insight into the negotiated and constructed nature (i.e., the dynamics) of parent-child relationships.

Others who incorporate a role-theoretic and/or symbolic interactionist framework have critiqued family studies that rely on only one perspective (Stryker 1968). Bernard (1972), for example, argues that there are two realities in every marriage: a "his" and a "hers." She reports that couples disagree on seemingly objective information such as the division of labor or decision making in the household. Insofar as there are "his" and "her" versions of marriage, there also may be "parents'" and "children's" (or, more specifically, "mothers'," "fathers'," "sons'," and "daughters'") versions of parenthood. Indeed, a few studies have examined the discordance between parents' and children's (usually adolescents') responses to similar questions (Tein, Roosa, and Michaels 1994). Smith and Morgan (1994), for example, show that children and their mothers differ in their assessment of children's closeness to their fathers, especially to nonresidential fathers. Demo, Small, and Savin-Williams (1987) find that adolescents' and parents' views on support, control, and communication in the parent-child relationship overlap but are independent. Similarly, technical reports on several large national data sets on adolescents, such as the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988, caution that reliance exclusively on either parents' or youths' responses may lead to different results (Kaufman et al. 1991). These reports also warn against assuming that parental responses are necessarily the "true" responses.

Recent conceptualizations of socialization emphasize how young children, like adults, are active agents who are shaped by familial experiences, but also actively co-construct them (Corsaro and Eder 1995; Peterson and Rollins 1987). Indeed, children initiate approximately half of parent-child interactions (Wright 1967) and can strongly influence parents' behaviors and attitudes (Ambert 1992; Downey, Jackson, and Powell 1994). Consequently children's understandings are crucial in negotiating and reciprocating with others in interaction.

Research Questions

Despite their integral role in familial relationships, children's own voices in describing and assessing family life have been mostly ignored in sociological research. In this paper we attempt to partially remedy this situation by examining children's perceptions and evaluations of parents. Although role theory and symbolic interactionism point to the importance of including the subjective perceptions and evaluations of all partners involved in role relationships, these social psychological frameworks do not lead to specific predictions with respect to those perceptions. Research on the gendered nature of parenting, however, discussed above, would lead us to expect that both the parent's and the child's gender, as well as the child's age, are important determinants of children's perceptions and evaluations of parental roles and relationships. Four questions guide this research:

1. What do children choose to write in their descriptions and evaluations of their mother and father?

2. How do descriptions of mothers and of fathers differ?

3. How are descriptions shaped by children's characteristics (i.e., gender and age)?

4. How have descriptions changed between 1979-1980 and the early 1990s?

In addressing these specific questions, this exploratory research assesses more broadly the extent to which children's perceptions and evaluations of parent-child relations correspond to or deviate from parents' and social scientists' perspectives. An examination of children's accounts also may enhance our understanding of gendered and generational relations in families.

DATA AND METHODS

Data

We content-analyzed 3,027 essays written by elementary school-aged children nominating their parents for a "Mother of the Year" or "Father of the Year" award. This contest has been sponsored by a midwestern newspaper since 1979. Several weeks before Mother's Day and Father's Day, the newspaper promotes the contest in advertisements that solicit letters explaining why a parent deserves to receive the award. This contest has become a tradition in local elementary schools, where teachers use the letters as a classroom activity. By the early 1990s, more than three-fourths of the letters from school-aged children were written in classrooms.[2]

The newspaper has a nine-county circulation market; its home county has a population of approximately 100,000. The county is heterogeneous in social class, although racial minorities are relatively rare. At the school in the highest-income area, 3 percent of the children receive federally subsidized meals; at the school in the lowest-income area, 67 percent do so. In this county, 76 percent of mothers and 96 percent of fathers with school-aged children are in the labor force (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990).

Approximately 85 percent of all youths' entries were submitted by children age six to 12, largely because of elementary school classrooms' participation in the contest. In supplementary analyses we also examined letters submitted under the name of children age 5 or younger and by teenagers (analyses available on request). We excluded the former group from the analysis presented here because of considerable doubt about who actually wrote the letter: These letters may have been written at least in part by an adult such as the child's other parent. We excluded the latter group because of our substantive interest in elementary school-aged children and because of the highly skewed sex composition of the entries by adolescents: More than three-fourths were written by females. Also omitted from this analysis were letters signed by more than one child, usually siblings, and those written by adults.

Half of all entries for 1990 through 1993 ($N = 2,218$) were coded by one of four coders. Although we focus here on children's perceptions from the 1990s, entries from the first two years of the contest, 1979 and 1980, also were coded ($N = 809$). Coding included the child's age ($\overline{X} = 8.3$ years) and gender,[3] the length of the entry (in number of lines of standardized newspaper type),[4] whether the letter was among the finalists/winners of the contest (approximately 1 percent of the entries), and, if indicated, the type of parent (i.e., biological parent, stepparent, other; 92 percent of the children wrote specifically about a "mother" or "father"). More letters were written about mothers (60 percent) than about fathers[5] and slightly more were written by daughters (52 percent) than by sons.[6]

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[2] An editor at the newspaper stated that all letters received from schools and individuals are published, except those not received by the deadline or the extremely rare letter that indicates abuse. Editors can easily identify letters written in classrooms because they arrive in bulk. They are distinguishable in the published essays because large numbers of letters from same-aged children appear in succession. Supplementary analyses of 1993 data showed that letters from children in classrooms did not differ from those written by other children.

[3] In a trivial number of cases, either the child's name was missing or the child's gender could not be determined through the name (e.g., Chris). Consequently our multivariate analyses include a dummy variable to reflect cases in which the child's gender is unidentifiable. Models excluding these cases do not alter the patterns presented here.

[4] The models include the length of each essay because girls and older children are more likely to write longer essays. By controlling for number of lines, we can examine the relative importance of the parental descriptors studied here.

[5] The greater number of essays about mothers might be attributable to the greater perceived importance of mothers, the greater societal emphasis on Mother's Day, the number of children living in mother-only households, and/or the timing of the contest (fewer classrooms participate in the Father's Day competition, which comes at the end of the school year).

[6] We found considerable overlap in terms of the same children writing about both their mother and their father. In 1993, for example, approximately half (55 percent) of the children wrote submitted entries about both parents. Supplementary analysis shows that the patterns would be the same if we relied solely on those who had submitted entries for both parents as on those who wrote about only one parent. As a result, these entries are pooled in the analysis.

Measures

We measured the parent-child relationship in two ways: (1) *what* the children said about the relationship, and (2) *how* they narrated it. First, each time the child mentioned a trait, an activity, or another descriptor (e.g., "smart," "plays," "cooks"), it was coded into one of 112 categories, allowing a count of the types of descriptors used for mothers or fathers. We collapsed these items into the following five broad categories: (1) *personal trait* descriptors such as smart, generous, fun, pretty; (2) *emotional* descriptors such as listens, talks with, understands; (3) *instrumental* descriptors such as paid work, cleans, cooks, provide transportation;[7] (4) *recreational* descriptors such as plays, ride bikes, movies/video/television; and 5) *educational* descriptors (broadly conceived) such as helps with homework, reads, helps with computer.[8] We analyzed the term *love* separately because it describes the existence of bonds (Turner 1970) manifested through emotional, instrumental, and other activities such as those mentioned above.[9]

Second, each descriptor mentioned by the child was coded in terms of how children's descriptions were phrased. Because the entries were composed by the child, we were able to content-analyze *how* children frame in their essays the activities and qualities that they value in their relationships with mothers and fathers. Such an analysis provides a more in-depth look into more subtle aspects of parent-child relations. The language may indicate the degree to which children view the relationship as interdependent or independent, companionate or authority-driven, and based more on receiving or more on giving support and assistance. For example, if "biking" was mentioned, we coded whether the child said the parent "takes me" biking, or the parent "allows me to ride my bike," or whether it was described in mutual terms (i.e., "we go on bike rides").

We used the following six categories to code *how* children describe the relationship: (1) the *parent's* personality, qualities, or activities *distinct from the child* (e.g., "my mother jogs" or "my father is handsome"); (2) *the parent provides/does to/for the child* (e.g., "dad cooks hamburgers [for me] in the summer" or "my mother is always there to help me"); (3) *the parent allows the child* to do things (e.g., "my father lets me ride in his car" or "she lets me go fishing, mushroom hunting, hiking, and riding a four wheeler"); (4) *the child's* personality, qualities, or activities *distinct from the parents* (e.g., "I am happy" or "I like to play sports"); (5) *the child provides/does to/for the parent* (e.g., "I love my dad" or "I help my mother cook"); and (6) *the parent and child mutually* do things, have similar qualities, or share similar emotions (e.g., "we go camping and we go to the drive-in," "we both like baseball and basketball," "we love each other," or "she plays with me").

In the development of this content analysis, we created a preliminary coding scheme for categorizing children's descriptions. Both the coders and the authors tested the coding scheme on samples of text in order to clarify ambiguities in the rules (see Weber 1990). After the researchers and coders met several times to discuss the preliminary content analysis and to test the coding of the letters as a group, we revised the coding rules. The overall intercoder reliability rate among the four coders was 86.6 percent; sections of the

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[7] Our operationalization of instrumental descriptors differs from Parsons and Bales' (1955) conceptualization. Our measure broadens the notion of instrumentality: We include not only items such as financial support and discipline but also other task-related items such as cleaning, providing transportation, yardwork, and cooking. Indeed, one criticism of the early conceptualizations of instrumental parenting is that they obscure women's instrumental contributions, especially in regard to housework and childcare, and may even underestimate men's instrumental contributions to the home (Cancian 1987; Osmond and Thorne 1993).

[8] Although we partitioned educational from instrumental terms, one could posit that the two should be merged. Additional analyses demonstrate that combining these two groups does not change the patterns for instrumental terms reported in Tables 1 and 4.

[9] The coding sheets and rules are available on request. As a check on our coding scheme, we analyzed alternative combinations of broad categories by moving more ambiguous terms (e.g., "takes to mall") into a second broad category. The overall patterns reported here are consistent even with changes in absolute frequencies that resulted from other operationalizations. Factor analysis was not possible because most of the 112 descriptors were each mentioned by only a small percentage of respondents.

codesheet ranged from 73 to 97 percent reliability.

Analytical Approach

These data are distinctive because they allow us to study children's evaluations both quantitatively and qualitatively. In the quantitative component of the content analysis, we use OLS and (when applicable) logistic regression to assess the effect of parent's gender, child's gender and age, and year in which the essay was written on the five broad and 112 specific descriptors, as well on the six categories of phrasing. The quotes selected for presentation (sometimes the complete essay and, in other instances, excerpts) illustrate various themes discerned through the qualitative analysis. We contend that the combination of statistical analysis and qualitative examination provides a more nuanced understanding of children's essays than does either approach alone.

Four caveats regarding the data and the analysis should be noted. First, because the newspaper contest does not require information about race, social class, parental participation in the labor force, household composition, or parents' marital status, we cannot estimate the effect of these potentially important factors.

Second, caution is needed in generalizing beyond any geographical area—in this case, a midwestern county. Even so, a series of ethnographic studies on childhood and adolescence (Eder 1985) and quantitative and qualitative analyses of familial roles, identities, and relations (Corsaro 1990; Thoits 1992) have been conducted in this general location.

Third, we focus on the overall gender differences in children's portrayals of parents. Therefore, we do not attend to the heterogeneity in gendered family relations, as illustrated by Risman (1987) in her study of "fathers who mother" and by Gerson (1993). Our findings should not be interpreted as suggesting an unvarying depiction of families, or of fathers and mothers.

Fourth, it is not possible to assess the degree to which children's essays reflect actual parental behaviors (and how they are valued) or mirror socially desirable cultural ideals

about parenthood. In a contest or a classroom exercise such as this, socially desirable responses, with superlative language and highly favorable assessments, are especially likely because one's relationship with a parent will be viewed publicly.[10, 11] Of course the question of social desirability of responses can be directed toward any child's or parent's description of familial relations. In fact, some observers posit that children's accounts are more credible and trustworthy than those of parents, who are even more subject to a "positivity bias" (Jessop 1981). Moreover, Kagan and Lemkin (1960) question the wisdom of attempting to disentangle cultural ideals from children's accounts because these ideals may influence *both* how children respond to research questions and how they view their parents.

It may not be possible or even desirable to scrutinize the "truth" of subjective accounts. For example, in exploring how men discuss familial and work commitments, Gerson (1993) argues that although there is reason to approach personal accounts with skepticism, examining them helps us understand more clearly how different groups make sense of the world. The children's essays undoubtedly highlight positive aspects of parent-child relations, but they also provide insight, from a child's perspective, into what is valued in parental behaviors and in family relations more generally.

RESULTS

Categories of Descriptors Used by Children

We first examine the five broad categories

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[10] In fact, the great majority of letters are positive, but not uniformly so. A small number of the entries include references to parental flaws: for example, "My dad is very nice but grumpy most of the time. You have to be pretty brave to cross his path" (male, age 11, 1992). Others may have been intended as positive but can be interpreted by others as negative: "I nominate my father because when it's my birthday he gives me $50 and don't get mad and ask for it back if he needs it for beer" (female, age 9, 1980).

[11] Even in traditional research formats such as anonymous surveys, most children, and even adolescents, seem to view their relationship with parents positively (Zill and Rogers 1988). This "happy family" bias, however, may be more common in the United States than in other countries (Wodak and Schulz 1985).

of descriptors—personal traits, emotional, instrumental, educational, and recreational—that children use in their essays. Table 1 presents five regression analyses in which the total number of descriptors within each cluster is estimated by parental and child characteristics.[12] Despite some similarities between mothers and fathers (in the number of descriptors focusing on personality traits and education) and between daughters and sons (educational descriptors), these regressions reveal clear distinctions related to both the parent's and the child's gender. Mothers are mentioned more frequently than fathers in instrumental and emotional terms; fathers are discussed more often in recreational terms. The effects of being a son or a daughter are no less pronounced: Daughters write more comments about their parents' personal traits and emotional ties than do sons, while sons focus more on instrumental and recreational relations. Interactions between child's and parent's gender are statistically nonsignificant except for recreational descriptors. The coefficient for this interaction suggests that daughters' essays about mothers (although still the child-parent dyad with the fewest recreational descriptors) and sons' essays about fathers both include more references to recreational descriptors than would be expected from a main-effects (i.e., additive) model.[13, 14]

Also of interest are the effects of the child's age. Older children use more personal trait and emotional descriptors than do their younger peers; younger children more often describe parents in instrumental, educational, and recreational terms. It is intriguing that the descriptors more frequently mentioned by older children are also those used by girls. In fact, responses made by older boys, at least in regard to the frequency of descriptors mentioned, are more similar to those made by younger girls than by girls their own age. On the basis of the coefficients in Table 1, for example, ten-year-old boys typically mention personal traits, emotional terms, and recreational items as often as do eight-year-old girls.[15]

Specific Descriptors Used by Children

As noted earlier, the five categories of descriptors are derived from 112 more specific descriptors. Clustering may obscure some important gender or age differences. Table 2 identifies the 15 most frequently cited descriptors and reports the results of logistic regression analyses estimating the effects of parent's gender and child's gender and age (controlling also for length of essay) on the likelihood of mentioning each. The coefficients for parent's and child's gender are significant for 10 of these 15 items, and coefficients for child's age are significant for eight descriptors. Letters about mothers are more likely to refer to

[12] As noted earlier, multivariate models control for each essay's length (measured in number of lines). The effect of this control variable is almost always positive and statistically significant. When the number of lines is excluded from the models, differences between sons and daughters are magnified in some cases (e.g., emotional descriptors) and lessened in others (e.g., recreational terms). Even so, the effect shifts from being significant to nonsignificant in only one case (instrumental terms).

[13] We examined not only the frequency of references to each category of descriptors, but also the likelihood of mentioning a category (using logistic regression), the percentage of comments in each entry which can be classified within each of the five clusters (using OLS regression), and the likelihood of mentioning a category as the first descriptor in the entry, arguably the most salient item for children (using logistic regression). These auxiliary analyses yielded patterns virtually identical to those in Tables 1 and 4.

[14] In supplementary analyses, we ran logistic regressions in which the dependent variable differentiated between contest winners/finalists and nonfinalists. Independent variables included child's gender and age, the number of lines, and the number of terms in each of

the five categories of descriptors. These analyses showed no significant effect of child's gender or number of lines. For mothers, emotional support (e.g., caring or understanding) was the most significant of the five clusters in predicting the winner, followed by educational, personal, instrumental, and recreational terms (the last had a negative but insignificant effect). In contrast, for fathers, personal traits (e.g., helping others or overcoming some difficulty) constituted the most important (and most positive) factor, while recreational and instrumental terms were the least predictive. In other words, the contests' judges (adults) favored essays about mothers who provide emotional support but fathers who have personal qualities that often are independent of the child and family. Moreover, judges may regard recreation as counter to the notion of the "good" or "best" mother and may not value mothers' or fathers' daily instrumental "work."

[15] We found two significant child's gender-by-age interaction effects: for instrumental and for educational descriptors. The direction of the interaction suggests that the gender difference in mentioning these two clusters is magnified among older children.

Table 1. OLS Coefficients for Regression of Number of Descriptors in Five Broad Categories on Parent's Gender, Child's Gender and Age, and Number of Lines ($N = 2.218$)

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables				
	Personal	Emotional	Instrumental	Educational	Recreational
Mother	.089	.219***	.408***	-.017	-.561***
1=mother	(.067)	(.046)	(.061)	(.033)	(.064)
0=father					
Daughter	.402***	.204***	-.150*	-.045	-.531***
1=daughter	(.068)	(.046)	(.062)	(.034)	(.065)
0=son					
Child's Age	.197***	.112***	-.158***	-.023*	-.237***
in Years	(.021)	(.015)	(.019)	(.011)	(.020)
Number of Lines	.092***	.099***	.129***	.053***	.155***
	(.008)	(.005)	(.007)	(.004)	(.008)
Constant	-1.130	-1.158	1.450	.221	2.678
R^2	.145	.206	.144	.079	.215

Notes: Unstandardized coefficients (standard errors in parentheses) reported. Models also include a dummy variable to reflect missing values in cases in which child's gender is unidentified.

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$ (two-tailed tests)

cooking, cleaning, helping with homework, helping when sick, and being "nice," a term that Osgood's semantic analysis several decades ago classified as closer to femininity (Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum 1957). In contrast, letters about fathers are more likely to emphasize paid work, playing, sports, love, and "having time for me."

Several points are of interest here. First, although it is not surprising that love is the most common descriptor or that girls are more likely than boys to refer to it, love (unexpectedly) is cited more often in letters about fathers. This seeming anomaly has several possible explanations. Perhaps love is a "filler" term that children use in the absence of alternative descriptors. Given the ambiguity in the meaning of fatherhood, the paternal role may be enigmatic. If children understand less about their fathers and about fatherhood in general, and consequently have less to write (Kagan and Lemkin 1960), *love* may be a convenient term to use in lieu of writing a shorter or "incomplete" essay. Another possibility, to which we will return, is that *any* paternal behavior in the home (i.e., not including fathers' labor force participation) may be deemed optional or a "bonus," and therefore worthy of love. Alternatively, when children use the term *love* in describing their

fathers, their "comparison referent" (Thompson 1991) may be other fathers, not their mothers.[16] Children may perceive their fathers as more active or more involved than the prototypical father or other fathers they know (e.g., a friend's father). That is, children recognize their fathers precisely because they are *different* from other fathers. In contrast, mothers may be perceived as doing what they are *supposed* to do: Meeting their maternal obligations, although more successfully than other mothers. The following quotes illustrate this distinction:

Most dads just work but my dad is not exactly ordinary. Because he cooks, irons, and does the wash, he is nice to his mother and father. (male, age 7, 1993)

I nominate my mother because she's sweet and the best mom. Roses are red, violets are blue sugar is sweet and my mom too! My mom cooks for my family. And cleans the house for us. She helps me when I need help. Moms, moms, what a wonderful thing. They

[16] This within-gender referent parallels comparisons often made by wives and husbands (Demo and Acock 1993; Simon 1995b). For example, women compare themselves with the notion of "supermom" (Ferree 1988; Hochschild 1989; Thompson 1991) but compare their husbands with other men who contribute even less to family labor (Hochschild 1989).

cook, they help, they do wonderful things. Moms, moms, what a fabulous thing. She's sweet, she's nice and she does wonderful things. She takes us out for dinner a lot. And when a friend calls and asks if I can come over she says yes! (male, age 8, 1993)

In the first quote, the father is appreciated because of his atypicality: how he differs from other fathers or, as another 11-year-old girl writes, how he does things "that not all dads do." In contrast, the second entry contains an implicit acknowledgment of what a mother does—a notion of the generalized or quintessential mom. The mother is valued because of her similarity to others or, as a six-year-old daughter writes, her being "like a good mother."

This seemingly differential standard for fathers and for mothers also may explain why children are more likely to state that fathers "have time for me," even though other portions of children's essays imply that mothers actually spend more time with their children, as do studies which ask parents about their time spent with children (Hochschild 1989; Nock and Kingston 1988):

Even with his busy schedule, he finds time for my sister and me. (female, age 10, 1993)

Despite his responsibilities elsewhere, he always has the time to spend with his other children and I. (male, age 11, 1992)

Sometimes he can't (play catch) because he's busy, but that's okay, he always finds time later. (female, age 10, 1992)

Second, although (as demonstrated in Table 1) instrumental tasks are mentioned more often in connection with mothers than with fathers, fathers are more often described in terms of labor force participation. This pattern is understandable, given men's greater labor force participation. Yet the approximate 2-to-1 ratio of mentions of fathers' to mothers' working (13 percent versus 7 percent) is greater than one would expect on the basis of actual labor force participation of fathers and mothers of school-aged children in the county (96 percent versus 76 percent). More telling, however, is the relatively low percentage of entries for fathers that mention paid work. Indeed, cooking is mentioned more frequently than paid work in essays

about fathers, as are play and sports activities jointly. Thus, although most studies that ask fathers about their parental role highlight their employment as their main contribution to the family (Hochschild 1989; Simon 1995a), children, in their essays, do *not* view their fathers' paid labor as particularly salient.

Third, even when children use the same terms to describe mothers and fathers, the meanings of these terms may differ. The phrase *having time for me* illustrates this point, although this distinction is more noticeable in children's discussions of daily tasks. For example, cooking is mentioned often for both parents (though with significantly greater frequency for mothers), but the meanings attached to mothers' and fathers' "cooking" appear to differ considerably. Children tend to focus on the fathers' specialties ("best tacos," "great macaroni," "popcorn," "blueberry muffins," or "best chicken that he grills") but on the more routine cooking by mothers ("dinner," "dinner and breakfast," "meals," "stuff to eat," "She fixes my breakfast. She fixes me lunch. She fixes my supper"). Moreover, no doubt largely because of the gendered division of family labor, fathers' cooking is described more often as a special event, a rare meal, or a case in which the father offers assistance to the mother, whose obligation to cook is assumed:

When he is off work, he sometimes makes us breakfast. (female, age 6, 1990)

Plus he even makes dinner when my mom's at work. (female, age 10, 1990)

Everytime mom's gone, he feeds me good food. (male, age 7, 1993)

In fact, one recurrent theme of the children's entries is how the father *helps* the mother in *her* domestic tasks:

He helps my mom whenever mom is tired, he helps my mom with whatever she didn't get done. (female, age 8, 1993)

If my mom doesn't want to cook dinner, he will take us out to eat. (female, age 10, 1992)

He helps my mom take me to my classes, dance, swing choir, choir, Girl Scouts, 4-H, etc. (female, age 10, 1992)

Table 2. Logistic Coefficients for Regression of Most Frequently Mentioned Descriptors on Parent's Gender, Child's Gender and Age, and Number of Lines ($N = 2,218$)

Dependent Variables	% Mentioned	Independent Variables				
		Mother	Daughter	Age	Lines	Constant
Love	49	-.338*** (.089)	.465*** (.090)	-.024 (.028)	.093*** (.012)	-.647
Nice	28	.267** (.098)	.089 (.097)	.027 (.030)	.004 (.011)	-1.391
Cooks	27	1.268*** (.116)	-.216* (.104)	-.267*** (.035)	.113*** (.013)	-.512
Takes/Transports Child Places	18	-.134 (.114)	-.276* (.116)	-.047 (.037)	.070*** (.013)	-1.541
Helps with Homework	15	.506*** (.132)	-.221 (.128)	.117** (.039)	.094*** (.013)	-3.817
Buys Things	14	.048 (.127)	-.305* (.127)	-.064 (.041)	.053*** (.014)	-1.621
Best	13	.011 (.135)	.401** (.140)	.185*** (.041)	.094*** (.014)	-4.630
Helps When Sick	12	.953*** (.156)	.077 (.139)	.057 (.042)	.100*** (.015)	-4.068
Plays (unspecified)	12	-.556*** (.134)	-.485*** (.139)	-.300*** (.049)	.094*** (.015)	.151
Has Time for Child	11	-.295* (.147)	.433** (.157)	.381*** (.045)	.096*** (.014)	-6.492
Toys	10	.027 (.146)	-.637*** (.148)	-.421*** (.057)	.076*** (.017)	.838
Caring	10	.293 (.152)	.463** (.154)	.335*** (.044)	.013 (.016)	-5.656
Paid Work	10	-.626*** (.149)	.167 (.155)	.080 (.047)	.121*** (.015)	-3.802
Sports	10	-1.493*** (.162)	-1.238*** (.165)	-.006 (.051)	.112*** (.016)	-1.941
Cleans	9	1.516*** (.204)	-.122 (.153)	-.301*** (.054)	.068*** (.018)	-1.464

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Models also include a dummy variable to reflect missing values in cases in which child's gender is unidentified.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$

Fourth, also as shown in the regressions of the five categories displayed in Table 1, items used by older children also tend to be those used by daughters. Older children and girls are more likely to discuss "having time for me," caring, and being the "best"; younger children and boys are more likely to refer to cooking, playing, and toys. Exceptions to this pattern include helping with homework (which older children report more often, but girls do not) and sports (boys mention this more often, but there is no significant age effect).[17]

[17] In further analyses we found no significant interactions between the parent's and the child's gender. Yet we identified a number of significant interactions between child's gender and age. The daughter-son difference in the likelihood of using the term nice declines with age.

Phrasing Used by Children

Another way to assess children's portrayals of their relationships with parents and parental roles is to examine their language and how they describe their parents, regardless of the types of descriptors (as shown in Tables 1 and 2). Table 3 presents six regression models in which the frequency of a particular phrasing (parent alone, parent provides/does to/for the child, parent allows, child alone, child provides to/for the parent, mutuality) is regressed on parent's and child's characteristics. Children more frequently invoke the concepts of "providing/does for/to the child" and "allowing the child" when writing about mothers than when writing about fathers. In contrast, we find "mutuality" more often in entries about fathers. Differences in children's phrasing are exemplified in their description of "stuff" (italics indicate authors' emphasis):

She *does* stuff for me. (female, age 7, 1993)

She *helps* me with all my stuff. (male, age 11, 1993)

She *lets* me do stuff. (male, age 11, 1993)

We (father and daughter) *do* a lot of stuff. (female, age 11, 1993)

The contrast in phrasing ("she does," "helps," and "lets" versus "we do") cannot be attributed solely to the dissimilarity in types of activities associated with mothers and with fathers. On the contrary, these differences in phrasing are even more striking when children write about similar categories, such as recreation. For example, in supplementary analyses in which we examine only responses about recreation, more comments are made about mothers *allowing* their children to participate in certain recreational activities than about mothers and children *mutually* engag-

ing in recreational tasks. We find a diametrically different pattern in essays about fathers:

She lets me play with Lacy, my dog. She lets me play in the sandbox. (female, age 7, 1993)

She lets me go places.... She lets me go to the movies. She lets me go places with my dad. (male, age 11, 1993)

We (father and son) do a lot of things together. We go fishing together. We play baseball together. We build things together. We play basketball. We plant flowers and bushes. We make paper bugs together. We take walks in the woods together. (male, age 7, 1992)

Together we will take rides in the car.... The best thing about my dad is that we go shopping together. (female, age 8, 1993)

These patterns, combined with those from Tables 1 and 2, suggest that fathers are valued not only for their greater (than mothers') connection to recreation, but also for their mutual or companionate participation in such activities. In addition, these patterns challenge the common portrayal of fathers as rule setters or enforcers (e.g., Rubin 1976). In the children's essays, fathers often appear to be more lenient than mothers, as in following examples:

He lets me do some things that mom won't let me do. (female, age 9, 1992)

He gives me treats that my mom does not give me when mom is not home. (male, age 8, 1992)

He lets me play with my friends before I have my homework done. My mom doesn't let me play until my work is done. My dad lets me come in and play. (female, age 8, 1990)

In another intriguing pattern, the phrasing "child providing/doing to/for the parent" is used more frequently in entries about fathers than in those about mothers. Although this pattern is present primarily because children mention "providing love" more often in essays about fathers than about mothers, it is also evident in other terms, such as the child helping "him clean the garage" (female, age 7, 1990), helping "him on the cars" (male, age 8, 1991), and helping "him patch cracks in the congregation's parking lot" (male, age 8, 1990).

The phrasing used in these essays points to gender and age differences among children

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while the difference in the odds of referring to homework, buying things, helping when sick, and playing increases with age. The only notable age-by-parent's-gender interaction pertains to paid work: The gender difference increases as children age. This difference can be attributed to two factors: (1) as children age, they develop a greater awareness of their mothers' occupational roles, and (2) older children may be more likely than their younger peers to have mothers in the labor force.

Table 3. OLS Coefficients for Regression of Number of Phrasing Types of Descriptors on Parent's Gender, Child's Gender and Age, and Number of Lines ($N = 2,218$)

Independent Variables	Parent Alone	Parent Provides/Does to/for Child	Parent Allows	Child Alone	Child Provides/Does to/for Parent	Mutuality
			Dependent Variables			
Mother 1=mother 0=father	.055 (.081)	.212* (.089)	.061* (.029)	.023 (.020)	-.077** (.027)	-.307*** (.036)
Daughter 1=daughter 0=son	.341*** (.081)	-.131 (.090)	-.102*** (.029)	.007 (.020)	.102*** (.027)	-.170*** (.036)
Child's Age in Years	.214*** (.025)	-.168*** (.028)	-.035*** (.009)	-.002 (.006)	-.018* (.009)	-.065*** (.012)
Number of Lines	.154*** (.009)	.282*** (.010)	.030*** (.003)	.019*** (.002)	.027*** (.003)	.040*** (.004)
Constant	-1.435	2.054	.326	-.020	.310	.849
R^2	.183	.248	.040	.033	.042	.080

Notes: Unstandardized coefficients (standard errors in parentheses) reported. Models also include a dummy variable to reflect missing values in cases in which child's gender is unidentified.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$ (two-tailed tests)

as well. Girls more frequently describe parents' lives apart from their own (i.e., parental actions that are not directly related to them) and mention providing to/for parents (in part because of girls' more frequent references to loving their parents). In contrast, boys more often write about parents allowing them to take part in activities and more frequently use words indicating mutuality. Also as seen in previous tables, the effects of age parallel gender differences. Older children's descriptions correspond more closely to those by girls, with one exception: Older children are less likely to write about providing to/for the parent (in this case, primarily because of the decline, with age, in references to love).[18]

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[18] In additional analyses we found a significant parent's-gender-by-child's-gender interaction effect for phrasing which implies mutuality. This interaction suggests that children's essays about their same-sex parent contain more frequent references to mutuality than would be expected from a main effects model. Even with this interaction effect, however, daughters' essays about mothers make the fewest references to mutuality. We found another significant interaction between child's gender and age for phrasing about parents' providing to/for the child. This coefficient implies that gender differences in the frequency of references to this phrase increase with age.

Differences over Time

Although the results cited above are based on entries from 1990 through 1993, we also obtained entries from 1979 and 1980, the first two years of the contest. These data allow us to compare essays from these two periods and consequently to assess the extent of change in this admittedly fairly short interval. It is possible, however, that different types of selectivity determined who submitted entries in these two periods. The contest became a part of classroom activities in the community only after several years. Thus children who wrote in the early years may have had highly positive relationships with parents or may have been strongly motivated to submit an essay for the contest. Although we should be cautious in comparing these two sets of entries, supplementary analyses of entries from 1993 examining those who submitted independently versus those who submitted as a result of classroom exercises did not reveal noticeable or significant differences. These supplementary analyses give us greater confidence in the comparisons over time.

The first five columns of Table 4 display the regressions of the broad categories of descriptors on period of time (1990s versus

1979-1980). These regressions indicate a change in three domains: References to the parent's personal traits and to instrumental tasks declined between 1979-1980 and the 1990s, whereas comments about recreation significantly increased. Additional analyses of the 112 more specific descriptors (not shown here) show that the decline in instrumental tasks is due in part to the decrease in references to discipline[19] and paid work, and that the increment in references to recreation is attributable in part to a concentration on sports and playing.[20] These results depict a shift of emphasis from a caretaker/provider to a more recreational parent, at least from the child's perspective. This portrayal is incomplete, however. When considering interaction effects, specifically the interaction between parent's gender and period (Table 4, Column 6), we observe that this shift applies only to fathers. Indeed, the parental gender difference in instrumental tasks intensified between 1979-1980 and the 1990s: In 1979-1980 there was no significant difference, but in the 1990s instrumental activities were mentioned more frequently in essays about mothers than in essays about fathers. This interaction effect remains significant even when all references to paid work are omitted from the instrumental category—which indicates that this change over time is not a function solely of

changes in the labor force participation of mothers. We find no significant interaction effects between time and child's gender.

In auxiliary analyses (not shown here), the phrasing of the essays changed between 1979-80 and the 1990s: We find a decrease in phrasing that intimates "parent alone" and "child alone" (actions of the parent or the child independent of the other) and concurrently an increase in the use of terms implying mutuality. Tests for interactions also reveal some significant changes over time in the phrases used in essays about mothers versus fathers: We find an increase in mothers (compared with fathers) "providing/doing for/to" children and an increase in children "providing/doing for/to" fathers (compared with mothers), as well as an increase in the emphasis on mutuality for fathers. No significant period-by-child's-gender effects are detected.

DISCUSSION

Although scholars have called for greater inclusion of children and their understandings in sociological research, almost all studies of family roles and relationships still are adult-centered. In this paper we explored children's perceptions and evaluations of maternal and paternal roles by content-analyzing essays in which children explain why their parent is the "best" mother or father. Drawing from role theory and symbolic interactionism, we argued that an examination of children's evaluations of parental roles and parent-child relationships provides a more balanced picture of contemporary parenthood and allows us to assess how closely children's understandings of motherhood and fatherhood correspond to findings from studies based on adults' perspective.

Complementing and expanding on studies of parenthood from adults' perspective, we find that gender and gender processes in families are fundamental to understanding children's perceptions and evaluations. Although our results show some similarities in descriptions of mothers and of fathers (e.g., approximately the same number of terms used to describe parental personality traits),

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[19] The likelihood of mentioning discipline in particular declines markedly over time. Discipline is mentioned in approximately 11 percent of the entries from 1979-1980; it is one of the 15 most frequently used items in that period. In contrast, discipline is cited in fewer than 2 percent of entries in the 1990s, 67th of the 112 items. We found a comparable pattern for references to religion, in which the likelihood of mentioning religion declines from 4 percent to less than 1 percent. Children's characterizations of parental discipline overall are positive, especially in the essays from 1979 and 1980; punishment is viewed as necessary ("Sometimes when he whips me I need it [female, age 11, 1980]) or as a sign of parental love ("He punishes me when I'm bad because he loves me and wants me to do better" [female, age 9, 1980]).

[20] References from some other items from Table 2 increased over time, including cooking, transportation, homework, buying, taking care of when sick, caring, and cleaning. Because several of these items are categorized as instrumental (e.g., cooking and transportation), these increases suggest that the overall reduction in references to instrumental descriptors is due in part to countervailing influences: a significant increase in items such as those mentioned above and an even stronger decrease in items such as paid work and discipline.

Table 4. OLS Coefficients for Regression of Number of Descriptors in Five Broad Categories on Period of Time (N=3,027)

Independent Variables	Personal	Emotional	Instrumental	Educational	Recreational	Instrumental (Interaction)
			Dependent Variables			
Mother 1=mother 0=father	.094 (.061)	.250*** (.042)	.286*** (.055)	-.059* (.030)	-.587*** (.056)	-.063 (.107)
Daughter 1=daughter 0=son	.336*** (.063)	.218*** (.043)	-.136* (.056)	-.040 (.031)	-.468*** (.057)	-.134* (.056)
Child's Age In Years	.176*** (.019)	.112*** (.013)	-.139*** (.017)	-.032*** (.009)	-.212*** (.017)	-.140*** (.017)
Number of Lines	.104*** (.007)	.096*** (.005)	.142*** (.006)	.056*** (.003)	.140*** (.006)	.141*** (.006)
Period 1=1990s 0=1979-1980	-.422*** (.070)	.006 (.048)	-.183** (.063)	-.015 (.034)	.183** (.064)	-.479*** (.100)
Period x Mother						.474*** (.124)
Constant	-.599	-1.173	1.442	.308	2.390	1.674
R^2	.179	.209	.158	.088	.195	.162

Notes: Unstandardized coefficients (standard errors in parentheses) reported. Models also include a dummy variable to reflect missing values in cases in which child's gender is unidentified.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$ (two-tailed tests)

they also suggest that children focus on different clusters of descriptors for parents: instrumental and emotional ones for mothers, and recreational ones for fathers. These patterns mirror national time-use and small-scale studies (Berk and Berk 1983; LaRossa 1988) which show that mothers spend a greater proportion of their time with children in caregiving activities, while fathers spend a greater proportion of their time in playful interactions.

In contrast to these studies, however, which also invariably show mothers spending more time overall with their children than do fathers, children in their essays are more likely to mention fathers spending time with them (also see Starrels 1994). This finding implies gender-specific standards that children employ when evaluating their parents. Our study also departs from most research, which finds that fathers perceive the provision of financial support as their main contribution to children (Hochschild 1989; Simon 1995a; but see Cohen 1993). Our findings

suggest that the paternal qualities children perceive and admire are not based on fathers' labor force participation and income, but consist largely of interaction manifested through play and some unanticipated activities such as cooking.

Perhaps even more telling is the phrasing children use when writing about their fathers and mothers. Father-child relations are more commonly phrased in terms of mutuality, as illustrated in the following comment by a nine-year-old girl: "My dad and I do lots of things together." The focus on mutuality may connote a more companionate or more peer-like relationship between father and child; as one eight-year old boy explains, "He is my buddy." But this focus also speaks to the unidimensionality of the father-child activities, one based on recreation and "fun." Such activity may be appreciated especially by children because it is done *with* children on *their level.*

In contrast, children tend to describe mothers as "allowing," "helping," and "pro-

viding." In the words of one eight-year-old girl, "She does everything for me." This phrasing, in addition to illustrating the multifaceted nature of maternal activities, may indicate that *to children* mothers are more powerful—at least in regard to parent-child interactions. This, however, does not preclude the possibility that children also perceive the fathers as more powerful in the marital relationship. Moreover, the more peerlike relationship expressed in children's essays about their fathers may not be long-lived. Indeed, some observers believe that mother-child relations become more symmetrical and father-child relations more asymmetrical when children reach adolescence (Youniss and Smollar 1985).

The combination of terms and phrasing used by children to describe parents provides a complex picture of parent-child relations. Children notice that mothers do more for them in multidimensional ways, and children discuss maternal-child relations that are based on key dimensions of emotional and instrumental support. The greater multidimensionality expressed in these essays suggests close ties with mothers and an appreciation of mothers' encompassing everyday activities. Yet this should not be interpreted to suggest that fathers do not nurture their children. On the contrary, children appear to perceive their fathers, for whom they mention love more frequently than for mothers, as caring for them, although in different ways than mothers do. Mothers' nurturance is expressed through caregiving and domestic "work," whereas fathers' nurturance is shown through shared recreational activities and "fun." Of course these alternative forms of nurturance are not equivalent and may have dissimilar effects on (among other things) the parent-child bond: When sons and daughters reach adulthood, they may feel more obligated to mothers than to fathers, and may provide them with more support (Rossi and Rossi 1990). Nevertheless, these findings should encourage us to rethink sociological conceptualizations of parental nurturance so as to incorporate fathers' actions, just as Cancian (1987) recommends a more inclusive, more androgynous definition of spousal love that acknowledges masculine styles.

In addition, our analysis points to the centrality of gender processes *across generations*; children's gender influences how they experience familial relations. Girls more frequently mention parents' personal traits and emotional ties to them, while boys more often refer to instrumental and recreational activities. Girls also are more likely than boys to describe parents' lives apart from their own and, perhaps more important, to note that they provide support to their parents. In contrast, boys stress (among other things) mutual participation in activities, particularly those which are "fun." These differences are consistent with studies finding that girls are more empathic and more other-directed than boys (Lott 1987) and that girls do more household labor than boys (Bianchi and Robinson forthcoming; Goldscheider and Waite 1991). These differences also may represent, to some degree, anticipatory socialization for the parental roles that boys and girls expect to assume in adulthood. Overall, children's essays suggest not only gendered parental roles but also sex-typed offspring roles that both reflect and maintain gender inequalities.

As for the children's age, we find that older children make greater use of personal and emotional descriptors, while younger children more often describe their parents in instrumental, educational, and recreational terms. These patterns corroborate developmental work which contends that as children mature, they are more able to recognize their parents as separate entities and are more likely to value "selfless" components about their relationship (Piaget 1926). Again, it is unclear whether these age differences are attributable more to changes in actual activities (e.g., because older children have become more self-sufficient and more peer-oriented, they engage in fewer recreational activities with their parents) or simply to children's moving from egocentrism to sociocentrism and from physical, concrete understandings of the relationship to more abstract cognitive and emotional understandings. That the descriptors commonly used by older children are also used more frequently by girls may reflect different developmental trajectories along gender lines.

Finally, to assess the degree to which children's perceptions and evaluations have changed over a relatively short period, we compared essays written in 1990 through 1993 with those written in 1979 and 1980, and found a clear shift in emphasis from a caretaker/provider role to a more recreational role. This shift, on closer inspection, is applicable to fathers only. The overall increase in recreational activities parallels Cherlin and Furstenberg's (1986) study of historical changes in grandparenthood; that study documents a shift in generational relations, in recent years, toward a greater emphasis on recreation and companionship. Despite these changes, we see no evidence of a "new father" who participates fully (i.e., equally) in traditional day-to-day caregiving tasks. If anything, we find that the gender differences in such tasks *increased* between 1979-80 and the early 1990s.

As in narrative analysis and survey research, it is difficult to determine how fully the children's essays reflect the parents' actual behaviors and their relationships with the children, as opposed to descriptions of cultural conceptions of "good" fathers and mothers, which are especially likely in a contest. We cannot disentangle whether these essays reflect parents' actual behavior, children's selective perceptions of their parents' behavior, children's perceptions of cultural representations of "good" mothers and fathers, and/or their perceptions of qualities deemed favorable by teachers and contest judges. It is likely that the essays analyzed here represent some complex admixture of all these factors.

Nevertheless, at the very least, these analyses underscore the need for family and social psychological research to incorporate children's perspectives. Our results are consistent with the tenets of symbolic interactionism in illustrating how the value and meaning of "parent" and even "mother" and "father" are fluid and subjective. They also draw on role theory by showing how perceptions and evaluations are derived in part from other actors' position in the relationship. Children's age and gender are key factors in interpreting this "objective" relationship: It is crucial to understand children's perspectives

because their actions are based largely on the meaning of this significant other. Moreover, children's perceptions and evaluations of parental roles may profoundly color parental identities and interactions with their offspring and may be more influential than other actors' views. Our study intimates (although we cannot test this point) that children, by interacting with and interpreting their parents' behavior, as role partners, co-construct parental roles and parent-child relations in collaboration with their parents. Our study thus provides a glimpse into reciprocal socialization processes and suggests that by noticing, valuing, and perhaps eliciting different behaviors and qualities for mothers and for fathers, sons and daughters actively participate in creating and re-creating the gendered nature of parental roles and relationships. Scholars studying parenthood, then, should take seriously the directive of role theorists to ignore no role partner (e.g., children), and the symbolic interactionists' claims that responses of others (in this case, children) may shape self and identity (in this case, of parents).

This study also warns us of the methodological limitations inherent in adult-based surveys and observations when children are studied. The gendered patterns in children's phrasing suggest that such methodological approaches may mask important perceptual differences. In surveys, for example, a large percentage of mothers and fathers may report spending time with their children in a park or some other public setting; similarly, observational studies might find mother-child or father-child dyads at a park with equal regularity, or more regularly, for mothers and children (Mackey 1985). Children, however, may perceive mothers as doing something qualitatively different (e.g., "taking" them to the park or "letting" them go to the park) from fathers (e.g., "going" to the park "together"). These differences should attune researchers to the possibility of perceptual differences that might be obscured by relying solely on an adult-centered perspective.

Although our exploratory study fills some gaps in the literature, it also raises several additional questions for future inquiries.

For example, why do children value different qualities and activities for mothers than for fathers? Do children's perceptions and evaluations of maternal and paternal roles reflect their parents' actual behavior or their selective perceptions of those behaviors—both of which are shaped by cultural beliefs about motherhood and fatherhood? How does family structure (e.g., number of siblings, birth order, single-parent versus two-parent households) affect sons' and daughters' perceptions and evaluations of mothers and fathers? How do gender processes within the family relate to perceptions and evaluations of parents as children enter adulthood? Finally, how do children's perceptions and evaluations of maternal and paternal roles vary by race and social class? Our research cannot answer these questions, but by examining children's understandings of parental roles and parent-child relationships, we "bring children more fully into knowledge" (Thorne 1987: 85) and can take an additional step toward addressing the question Thorne asked a decade ago.

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Melissa A. Milkie *is an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Maryland, College Park. Her research interests include relationships among culture, social identities, and well-being in familial and among peer contexts. Currently she is examining how adolescent girls interpret depictions of females in mass media.*

Robin W. Simon *is an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Iowa. Most of her research focuses on the relationships among gender, role identities, meaning, and mental health. Currently she is examining marital status contingencies in sex differences in vulnerability to work and family stress, and the role of marital beliefs in the impact of marital transitions on depression and substance abuse (with Kristen Marcussen).*

Brian Powell *is an associate professor of sociology at Indiana University. His research focuses on the consequences of familial structure, educational systems, and gender for life chances. He currently is examining the relationship between parental age and social, intellectual, and economic investments in children (with Lala Carr Steelman and Robert Carini); whether recent claims about effects of birth order on innovative thinking are applicable in the contemporary United States (with Jeremy Freese and Lala Carr Steelman); and the influence of gender and race on public views of mental illness (with Jason Schnittker).*