Over the past few decades, scholarship and policy interest in fatherhood, as an institutional position with associated public meanings, and fathering, as sets of activities and emotions, has burgeoned. In research terms, it has taken a trajectory from being relatively ignored in the 1970s and 1980s, through being a “hot topic” in the 1990s, and then emerging as a relatively established subspecialty of several disciplinary fields in the early years of the twenty-first century. The breadth of research on the topic ranges across developmental, social, and cultural concerns and encompasses both fathering across Diversity and Adversity: International Perspectives and Policy Interventions

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quantitative examinations of cause and effect and qualitative explorations of discourses and practice.

The proliferation of public and scholarly interest in fathering has arisen in large part out of profound social changes in women’s and men’s lives in the last half of the twentieth century, particularly in North America and Europe. These transformations include the erosion of men’s supremacy in the labor market, accompanied by declines in traditional masculine fields of employment and in wages as well as rising male unemployment alongside sustained growth in women’s labor force participation, especially among mothers. At the same time, there has been a growing emphasis on men’s involvement in the domestic sphere, especially as fathers, with attendant problems of accommodating new expectations, as well as rising divorce rates involving household separation of biological fathers from children and the associated practice of stepfathering and nonresident fathering. In addition, a host of other issues emerge, bound up with the dramatic shifts in gender-based divisions of labor in most countries with advanced economies.

These trends have been the subject of much attention, with commentators of all political stripes turning their critical gaze on the changing nature of fatherhood and fathering. On one hand, and in some nation-states more than others, such shifts have caused much social alarm. There is widespread fear that “the family” in what is thought of as its traditional form (breadwinner father, homemaker mother, and their biological children) is giving way to less stable and conventional forms of domestic social arrangements, creating anxiety about the breakdown of society. References to “deadbeat” or “feckless” dads, for example, convey concerns about fathers’ detachment from family life as financial providers, disciplinarians, and role models for their children, especially their sons. On the other hand, some observers argue that “de-traditionalization”—the transformation occurring in the gendered division of labor—provides opportunities for more democratic and nurturing relations between fathers and their children, bolstered by attention to work–life balance. References to “new” fathers encapsulate this more positive potential.

Alongside these distinct political interpretations of the state of contemporary fatherhood, theoretical debates have used interlinked concepts such as provider and carer fathers, ascribed and achieved fatherhood, and biological and social fathering to capture the underlying dynamics of social shifts. These concepts are associated with analyses that posit different “epochs” of fathering over time, where norms about being a father are dominated by particular core motifs. Finally, the traditional gender division of labor between father-provider and mother-carer roles has been called into question materially and discursively. Rather than caring about their families through being good financial providers, good fathers are now expected actively to care for their children. Similarly, fitting with the traditionally conceived model of family life, ascribed fatherhood is rooted in the biological tie between father and child, while fatherhood as achieved is rooted in new social expectations that fathers should engage with their children as physically and emotionally involved carers. The conceptual distinction between achieved and ascribed fatherhood, however, retains an overlay between biological
fatherhood (as genitor) and fathering as a social practice (as pater). Yet, they are not necessarily coincidental. Men who are not biological fathers may act as and be fathers socially to their (adoptive, step, community) children—whether as providers and/or carers.

Another perspective, however, argues—both politically and theoretically—that ideas about shifts in the core nature of fatherhood are overdrawn, such as the extent to which financial provision is under challenge as a central motif and activity of being a father and, indeed, as a common legal requirement. A common understanding of contemporary fathering is that it is squeezed between traditional cultural and new models of what being a father is all about. From this perspective, notions of social change involving the spread of fecklessness or the rise of nurturing fathers are more rhetoric rather than reality. A key issue here, in relation to fathers being involved in their children’s lives, whether as coresident or nonresident, concerns whether this is because fathers do not want to or are unable to manifest this involvement. Do some fathers’ values not encompass active nurturing of their children, because they are focused on breadwinning or avoiding responsibility, and is this more the case for particular groups of fathers rather than others? Or are public policies reproducing specific normative models of involved fathering that some groups of fathers are more able to meet than others? Do fathers’ life conditions prevent them from enacting involved care, and do some groups of fathers face more pressures than others? Or are social policies and public law part of constraining life conditions, and is this more the case in certain national contexts than others? And if so, what sort of social policies would be more supportive?

Within the context of considerable expansion of public interest, concept development, and debate, however, father-focused research has remained largely national in preoccupation, with little cross-cultural dissemination of knowledge about fathering practices and supportive or constraining social policies. This volume of The Annals seeks to make a transatlantic contribution to such international dialogue. It highlights two themes in relation to fathering experiences and policy interventions: diversity and adversity. The first, diversity, picks up on the heterogeneity of contemporary fatherhood, whether this is regarded as representing change for good or ill. It encompasses difference across social class, race and ethnicity, age and life course, varied household formations, and so on. The second theme, that of adversity, concerns the conditions that can constrain and undermine experiences of fathering, such as paternal leave availability, income level, housing conditions, health, and so on. It often cross-cuts with diversity, so that particular groups of fathers are more likely to find themselves facing problems. Social policies and public law can be part of, create, or exacerbate adversity, or they can address and work toward overcoming it.

The volume rises out of a two-day international conference in the spring of 2008, held at the University of Pennsylvania and supported by the American Academy of Political and Social Science. It brought together leading figures in fathering research from North America, Europe, and Scandinavia. Participants took advantage of the opportunity to debate perspectives on diversity and adversity and
exchange knowledge about public policies and ideas about alternatives. Overwhelmingly, the focus was on the fathering of younger children, where provider/carer tensions in fathering are perhaps most immediately obvious. Nonetheless, fathering of older, teenage children across diversity and adversity also needs to receive such attention with what may well be its associated shifts in manifestations of “involvement” and “care.”

Within the focus and themes that characterized the conference, the diversity of fatherhood explored in this volume includes young fathers, separated and divorced fathers, fathers from minority ethnic and immigrant groups, working-class fathers, new fathers, gay fathers, and fathers of children with special needs—with some of these various positions overlapping. As noted, these diverse positions can also involve conditions of adversity. Aspects of adversity examined here include non-residence, homelessness, or poor housing; marginalization in wider society and racism; low-paying, unstable, or lack of employment; as well as difficulties in combining employment and caring involvement for fathers. There are discussions of fatherhood and fathering in individual country settings, largely the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Norway, and comparatively across nation-states in Europe and more widely.

A recurring message emerging from all the contributions is that fathers’ subjectivities and actions cannot be understood outside of their social and material contexts and that these contexts need to be understood as multilayered social processes, including family and neighborhood supports and labor market and welfare state conditions. The articles here take us through these contexts, beginning with a focus on understanding fathers’ subjectivities and capacities, especially as these are shaped by their variable social positioning. In this vein, and in a challenge to the deficit model of black fathering, Tracey Reynolds shows how nonresident British black fathers’ attempts to “be there” for their children can be constrained or facilitated by their links with the mothers of their children and their own mothers, and how they are shaped by racism. Jessica Ball maps the individual, social, and systematic ecological factors, such as childhood experience of fathering and Canadian legislative injustice or support, that interact in Indigenous fathers’ engagement in their children’s lives. Val Gillies explicitly addresses the issue of social class, arguing that British policy models of fatherhood are rooted in middle-class perspectives and publicly visible practices, thus marginalizing and obscuring working-class fathering values and more privately based experiences. A diversity of groups of Canadian fathers—immigrant, gay, young, Indigenous, separated, and divorced as well as fathers of children with special needs—are considered in Kerry Daly, Lynda Ashbourne, and Jaime Lee Brown’s discussion of the influence of having children in terms of fathers’ sense of self in relation to others and their values and expectations. The authors argue that fathers need time with their children for this influence to be positive.

The next set of articles raise considerations of fathers’ subjectivities, by highlighting the local setting as an important and relevant part of fathers’ lives in terms of collective definitions of situations, available familial and neighborhood resources, and public aspects of fathering. Focusing on new fathers in Canada,
Andrea Doucet explores the ways that a combination of social conditions and embodiment, as these are played out in domestic and community settings, magnify gender differences and divisions of labor in parenting. Jennifer Augustine, Timothy Nelson, and Kathryn Edin also address new fathers, presenting case studies of low-income young American men’s reactions to becoming fathers within the context of their local social support networks and the possibilities for access to moral conventionality available to them through fatherhood. William Marsiglio also takes account of the local “social mosaic” in his discussion of interactions between public (social, community) and private (biological, individual) trajectories and experiences of fathering for U.S. adult male youth workers, as well as their fostering of social capital for children and parents in their youth worker role.

Labor market and employment conditions, effectively experienced by fathers at local levels though shaped by wider forces, play their part in fathers’ abilities to provide, and to be active carers, for their children. David Este and Admasu Tachble look at the ways that underemployment shapes Russian immigrant and Sudanese refugee fathers’ perceptions of their abilities to engage with their children in the Canadian context. Maureen Waller elaborates the various and variable ways in which employment circumstances play a role in disadvantaged resident and nonresident fathers’ abilities to sustain caring involvement with their children and argues that U.S. policies and programs overlook men as caregivers. This call for recognition leads us into the final set of articles, which address national social policy frameworks of understanding and the effects of policies concerning fathering and work–family balance.

Berit Brandth and Elin Kvande consider how employed fathers perceive and use different care policies informed by frameworks that support distinct ideas about the gendered division of parenting: the fathers’ leave quota underpinned by a gender-aware model and the cash-for-care scheme underpinned by a gender-neutral approach. They conclude that gender neutrality in fact is understood and enacted within traditional divisions of labor. Margaret O’Brien also examines parental leave uptake, as well as paternity leave, reviewing data from Europe, Australia, and Canada to establish the potential for work–family policies that encourage care time for fathers to enhance young children’s well-being. Barbara Hobson and Susanne Fahlén similarly use cross-national data, looking across European welfare states, to understand how interactions between gendered time and financial provision (from employment or state) in policies impede or facilitate fathers’ capacities to achieve work-family balance. Continuing a focus on time and work-family policies, Oriel Sullivan, Scott Coltrane, Linda McAnnally, and Evrim Altintas round off the volume by exploring the potential of time-use survey data from Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom to throw light on the effects of a range of interconnected social policies on fathers’ active care in different national contexts.

The multilayered dynamics demonstrated by the contributions to the volume point to a diversity of fathering practices and to the way in which policy measures interact with preexisting and varying conditions, with different meanings and effects.
for fathers. Nonetheless, there are some recurrent issues in terms of enabling strategies and positive policies. On a specific level, family and community support systems are important for encouraging fathers in marginal positions to sustain involvement with their children. On a broad level, the arguments in this volume of *The Annals* point toward the need for sustainable (time and financial) policy frameworks that enable fathers to be involved in their children’s lives in ways that do not incorporate discriminatory assumptions about the demonstration of that involvement. It is also evident that policies addressing social justice and gender equality generally will have effects for fathering across diversity and adversity.